

The Myth of the 'Manger Scene'

Stephen T. Crye

December 25, 2007

Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 3
What's the big deal? Why so anti-Christmas?!?	p. 4
<u>Who are the real bigots?</u>	p. 4
<u>The United States was NOT founded as a "Christian Nation"</u>	p. 6
Was Jesus a real person or just a legend invented by early Christians?	p. 8
Origins of the Jesus myth	p. 9
<u>Jewish roots of the Jesus myth</u>	p. 9
<u>Pagan and astrological roots of the Jesus myth</u>	p. 10
The Bible (and related documents) does not represent an accurate historical account of Jesus' life	p. 15
<u>Gospels</u>	p. 15
<u>Epistles</u>	p. 16
<u>The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles</u>	p. 18
<u>Jewish Antiquities</u>	p. 18
<u>Tacitus</u>	p. 18
<u>Pliny The Younger</u>	p. 19
<u>Lives of the Caesars</u>	p. 19
Lost Scriptures and Heresies	p. 21
Why December 25th?	p. 24
<u>Julius Caesar and the Modern Calendar</u>	p. 25
<u>Constantine the Great</u>	p. 25
<u>Modern Celebrations</u>	p. 26
The Synoptic Gospels:	p. 27
<u>Matthew:</u>	p. 27
<u>Mark:</u>	p. 29
<u>Luke:</u>	p. 30
<u>John:</u>	p. 32
Conclusion: "Jesus" was not born in Bethlehem on December 25th	p. 33
Sources	p. 34

December 25, 2007

The Christmas season each year spawns a noticeable increase in comments such as "men need faith", "sacrifice is good" and "we should remember the true meaning of Christmas", often alliterated as "Jesus is the reason for the season". Mixed in with these sentiments are a clamor for more religious displays, grumbles about prohibitions of the use of tax-dollars for Nativity (a.k.a. 'Manger') scenes on public property, and the insistence that everyone, both Christian and non-Christian, greet others with the phrase "Merry Christmas" instead of the more neutral "Happy Holidays".

Sadly, the most rabid pro-Christmas pundits are either unaware of or choose to ignore many facts:

- * There is no evidence outside the Bible that Jesus was a real person who actually existed
- * Even the mythical Jesus not "born" on December 25 in Bethlehem
- * The Bible contains nothing to require or encourage birthday celebrations
- * People celebrated the Winter Solstice thousands of years before Christians adopted the holiday.

Despite the ever-mounting volume of evidence against this myth, its popularity is on the rise, as evidenced by the December 2006 movie "The Nativity Story", History Channel specials on the life of Jesus (filled with inaccuracies and making no effort to present the skeptical viewpoint), live coverage of the Christmas Mass at the Vatican and more. Wikipedia listed 112 Christmas television specials as of 12.25.07.

This essay makes the case that the popular tale of Jesus' birth on December 25, in Bethlehem, in a manger, as described in the New Testament by "Mathew" and "Luke", *is a complete fabrication.*

What's the big deal? Why so anti-Christmas?!?

Anyone who challenges the Christmas myth is usually attacked as being un-American, bigoted or worse. Bill O'Reilly and other conservative talk-radio personalities huff and puff when anyone has the temerity to say "Happy Holidays" instead of "merry Christmas". During his radio talk show on 12.23.07 Mike McConnell called for all pro-Christmas people to accuse as *bigots* anyone who objects to displays of Christmas trees or Nativity scenes on public tax-funded property.

People are certainly free to worship any mythical gods they choose, and are free to believe any and all false history regarding those imaginary gods. If churches or businesses want to fund and celebrate ChristMyth, no problem. That's what religious freedom is all about in the United States. However, when they use my money to pay for displays touting false beliefs and subject my child to such nonsense in school or government settings as if it were fact, I have no choice but to speak up. They need to be reminded about the establishment clause in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and presented with historical facts.

Non-Christians are not the only ones who object to Christmas celebrations and Manger Scenes. Many smaller Christian sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses, The Unity Church of God and Puritans don't observe Christmas, claiming that a literal interpretation of the Bible requires them to abstain because Christmas is based on pagan celebrations – which it is. As recently as the 17th century, celebrating Christmas was actually illegal in parts of colonial New England. Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Methodists and Congregationalists either ignored or actively discouraged Christmas celebrations until the late 1800's.

I find it interesting that Christmas advocates become so incensed when their beliefs are questioned. They argue that publicly funded Christmas displays are OK because "we were founded as a Christian Nation" and "85% of Americans are Christian, and the rest celebrate it as a secular holiday". Methinks they doth protest too much - possibly because deep down, they know that their religion was built on a shaky foundation and can't withstand illumination by the clear light of reason.

Who are the real bigots?

Before accusing Christmas objectors of bigotry, I recommend they first consult a dictionary, do some Bible-reading and have a look in the mirror. What does the word bigot mean? Here's a sampling of various dictionaries including Dictionary.com, American Heritage and the Oxford English:

bigot (big'ət)
noun

- * a person who holds blindly and intolerantly to a particular creed, opinion, etc.
- * one who is strongly partial to one's own group, religion, race, or politics and is intolerant of those who differ.
- * a narrow-minded, prejudiced person

[Origin: 1590–1600; < MF (OF: derogatory name applied by the French to the Normans), perh. < OE bī God by God]

Hmmm. Seems to apply more to theists, particularly Christians and Muslims, than to someone who just wants his tax dollars used in a manner consistent with the U.S. Constitution. After all, the Bible is filled with insular language and commandments to reject, punish and even kill all who disagree. Here's a small sample:

Exodus 20

3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Not very tolerant when it comes to other religions, eh?

Deuteronomy 13

6 If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, 7 gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), 8 do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. 9 You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. 10 Stone him to death, because he tried to turn you away from the LORD your God...

Stoning disbelievers to death can't be misconstrued as "tolerant"

If Christians try to wiggle out by claiming that this is just Old Testament fire and brimstone, sorry, that won't work; "Jesus" made it clear that **all** of the Bible is valid and to be obeyed. Here are a few passages that claim to directly quote him:

Matthew 15

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven..."

2 Timothy 3

16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

2 Thessalonians 1

6 "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power..."

John 15

6 "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned."

It sure seems that non-Christians are S.O.L when it comes to salvation. For all but the most liberal Protestant sects, Christians believe that only those who have accepted Christ as their personal savior can expect to avoid either an eternity of torture in hell, or the lesser punishment of no life-after-death. All of this sounds pretty bigoted to me, and is part of why I object to Christians using my tax dollars and my government as a tool for their evangelizing

Most Christians have not taken the time to read the Bible, as I have. If they did, they would be shocked to discover that it is far from an ideal guide to morality, as they have been conditioned to believe. If one would actually follow the tenets of the Bible, one would be a criminal. If you claim to be a Christian but pick and choose the parts of the Bible you want to follow, you are a hypocrite.

I know it seems that I am just picking on Christians, but this essay deals specifically with ChristMyth, not with religious mythology in general. Many other religions suffer from the same problem.

The United States was NOT founded as a "Christian Nation"

Contrary to popular right-wing pro-Christmas opinion, the United States was founded as a *secular* nation, not as a Christian nation. Here's a few quotes from our founders, most of whom were not clergy (as Mike Huckabee recently falsely claimed), few of whom were Christian, and many of whom were Deists – a safe way to conceal one's atheism in those days:

"Lighthouses are more useful than churches"
– Benjamin Franklin

An excerpt from the "Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbaray", drafted under the administration of George Washington, sent to the floor of the Senate, June 7, 1797, where it was read aloud in its entirety and unanimously approved. John Adams, having seen the treaty, signed it and proudly proclaimed it to the Nation:

...

Art. 11. As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

"Christianity is the most perverted system that ever shone on man"
– Thomas Jefferson

"What is it the Bible teaches us? - raping, cruelty, and murder. What is it the New Testament teaches us? - to believe that the Almighty committed debauchery with a woman engaged to be married, and the belief of this debauchery is called faith."

--Thomas Paine, Letter to William Duane, April 23, 1806

"If they are good workmen, they may be from Asia, Africa or Europe; they may be Mahometans, Jews, Christians of any sect, or they may be Atheists...."

George Washington, to Tench Tighman, March 24, 1784

"I wish it were more productive of good works ... I mean real good works ... not holy-day keeping, sermon-hearing ... or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments despised by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity."

- Benjamin Franklin on Christianity, Works, Vol. VII, p. 75

"The declaration which says that God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children is contrary to every principle of moral justice."

--Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason

"Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything that is cruel."

--Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason

"During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."

--- James Madison, "A Memorial and Remonstrance", 1785

"I cannot conceive otherwise than that He, the Infinite Father, expects or requires no worship or praise from us, but that He is even infinitely above it."

- Benjamin Franklin from "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion", Nov. 20, 1728

"Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid or produces only atheists or fanatics. As an engine of power, it serves the purpose of despotism, and as a means of wealth, the avarice of priests, but so far as respects the good of man in general it leads to nothing here or hereafter."

--Thomas Paine, The Age of Reason

Was Jesus a real person or just a legend invented by early Christians?

Christianity is one of a class of religions known as Historical religions, meaning that the beliefs are directly tied to presumed historical events, and the reality and accurate description of those events are critical to the religion. Religions such as Hinduism or Animism (practiced by most American Indians) are examples of non-Historical religions. In the specific case of Christianity, if Jesus were not a real, historical figure that actually lived, the entire religion is invalid. So, it is not only permissible, it is essential for believers and non-believers to look to history to support or reject Christianity.

If Jesus never lived, then obviously the Manger Scene is a myth. This section makes the case that Jesus was a legend invented by early Christians; other sections refute the Manger Scene even if Jesus was a real historical person. Much of the material in this section is highly technical and detailed and will probably be boring if you are not a total Bible history geek. If you are not such a geek, you can skip ahead to the section: Lost Scriptures and Heresies, where the essay resumes the Manger Scene refutation even if Jesus was an actual historical figure.

Many non-Christians are taught something similar to this seemingly reasonable story:

"Jesus was a famous first century holy man. His father was a carpenter named Joseph and his mother's name was Mary. Mary became pregnant before she married Joseph. Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem during a Roman census. Jesus grew up in Nazareth and was brought up as a Jew; he studied the Jewish faith and became an expert; some say he was a rabbi. He traveled far, preaching that people should love one another, cooperate with the worldly authorities, and hope for salvation after death. Some people thought that he was the Messiah and he did not deny this, which made many Jewish authorities angry. He caused so much controversy that the Roman governor Pontius Pilate had him crucified. He was buried in a tomb and later his body was found to be missing. His followers started the story that he had risen from the dead, but it had probably been removed by his disciples."

Unfortunately for Christians, this tale is pure conjecture and is not supported by any legitimate non-Biblical source.

It is only in Western Civilization that the existence of Jesus goes unquestioned. The existence of historical figures such as Julius Caesar, Aristotle, Buddha or Confucius is accepted worldwide. Mohammed fathered children and authored texts. Julius Caesar posed for sculptures. None of this is true of Jesus. In parts of the world dominated by religions such as Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism and Confucianism, Jesus is considered to be just another character in Western religious mythology, similar to Thor, Zeus and Osiris. The minorities of Hindus who do believe in Jesus regard him to be one of the many avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. There is no story of Jesus that is uniformly accepted worldwide in the same way that legitimate historical accounts of so-called god-men such as Nebkheperure Tutankhamun (King Tut) are accepted.

Origins of the Jesus myth

Jewish roots of the Jesus myth

Evidence that the story of Jesus is mythical can be found in the Tosefta, Mishnah and Baraita. The Tosefta is the name of a collection of baraitot, which treat, in a more complete form than does the Mishnah, the subject of traditional Jewish law. "Mishnah" is a word frequently used to designate the law, which was transmitted orally, in contrast to "Mikra," the law that is written and read. The term includes also the halakic Midrashim, as well as the Tosefta (explanatory additions to the Mishnah). Baraita is an Aramaic word designating a tannaite tradition not incorporated in the Mishnah; in the Babylonian Talmud it designates the most varied kinds of tannaite traditions not contained in the Mishnah, such as Sifra, Sifre, Mekilta, and Tosefta.

Despite claims to the contrary, Christianity started well before the purported time of Jesus, possibly as long ago as 100 BCE. The Hebrew name for Christians has always been Notzrim. This name is derived from the Hebrew word neitzer, which means a shoot or sprout--an obvious Messianic symbol. There were already people called Notzrim at the time of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachyah (c. 100 BCE). The first century Christians in Israel considered themselves to be a continuation of the Notzri movement, which had been in existence for about 150 years.

There are a number of historical Notzrim figures that contribute to the Jesus myth, although none of them qualify as a historical Jesus. One was Yeishu Ben Pandeira, a.k.a Yeishu ha-Notzri. The Hebrew name for Jesus has always been Yeishu and the Hebrew for "Jesus the Nazarene" has always been "Yeishu ha-Notzri.", Yeishu being a shortened form of the name Yeishua, not Yehoshua.

The evidence in the Baraitas and Tosefta concerning Yeishu can be traced back directly to Yehoshua Ben Perachyah, Shimon Ben Shetach and Yehuda Ben Tabbai and their disciples who were contemporaries of Yeishu, while the evidence in the Baraitas and Tosefta concerning Ben Stada can be traced to Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus and his disciples who were Ben Stada's contemporaries. Scholars widely regard the evidence to be historically accurate.

When one reads the accounts of Yeishu from the Baraita, it's easy to understand how it contributed to the Jesus myth. Here's a summary: Around 100 BCE Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachyah once repelled Yeishu with both hands. People believed that Yeishu was a sorcerer and they considered him to be a person who had led the Jews astray. As a result of charges brought against him (the details of which are not known, but which probably involved high treason) Yeishu was stoned and his body hung up on the eve of Passover. Before this he was paraded for forty days preceded by a herald announcing that he would be stoned and calling for people to come forward to plead for him, but nothing was brought forward in his favor. Yeishu had five disciples: Mattai, Naqai, Neitzer, Buni, and Todah.

Mattai and Todah, the names of two of Yeishu's disciples, are the original Hebrew forms of Matthew and Thaddaeus, the Biblical names of two of Jesus' disciples.

The origin of Joseph as the name for the stepfather of Jesus can also be found in the Tosefta, Mishnah and Baraita. The Notzri movement was popular with the Samaritan Jews. The Jews as a whole were waiting for a Messiah (they are still waiting, and will continue to wait...), but the Jews were and are not a monolithic group. The Pharisees expected the Messiah would be a descendant of David, but the Samaritans hoped for a Messiah who would restore the northern kingdom of Israel. The Samaritans emphasized their partial descent from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who were descended from the Joseph of the Torah. The Samaritans considered themselves to be "Bnei Yoseph" i.e. "sons of Joseph," and because they believed that Jesus had been their Messiah, they would have assumed that he was a "son of Joseph." The Greek speaking population, who had little knowledge of Hebrew and true Jewish traditions, would have easily misunderstood this term and assumed that Joseph was the actual name of Jesus' father. The Gospel of Matthew names Joseph's father as Jacob, as does the Torah. Subsequent Christians who followed the idea that the Messiah was to be descended from David tried to trace Joseph back to David. This resulted in two contradictory genealogies, one recorded in Matthew and the other in Luke. After the myth that Mary was a virgin surfaced, the mythical Joseph was relegated to the position of simply being her husband and the stepfather of Jesus.

Ben Stada was another historical character that contributed to the Jesus myth. The Tosefta and the Baraitas contain a small amount of sketchy information on him, even less than about Yeishu. Some believed that he had brought spells out of Egypt in a cut in his flesh, others regarded him as a madman. He was a beguiler who was busted by concealed witnesses and subsequently stoned in Lod. The Tosefta refers to him as Ben Sotera or Ben Sitera. Sotera is the Hebrew-Aramaic form of the Greek name Soterios. The forms "Sitera" and "Stada" might have arisen as misreadings and/or spelling errors (yod replacing vav and dalet replacing reish).

Speculation about Ben Stada abounds. It is known from the Gemara (another name for the Talmud) that he was confused with Yeishu, perhaps because both were executed for treasonous teachings and were associated with sorcery. Those who confused Ben Stada with Yeishu had to explain why he was also called Ben Pandeira. Because the name "Stada" resembles the Aramaic expression "stat da," meaning "she went astray" it was thought that "Stada" referred to the mother of Yeishu and that she was an adulteress. So, people began to think that Yeishu was the bastard son of Pandeira. These concepts from Gemara are probably much older. Because Ben Stada lived in Roman times and the name Pandeira resembled the name Pantheras found among Roman soldiers, it was assumed that Pandeira had been a Roman soldier stationed in Israel.

The Tosefta describes a woman named Miriam bat Bilgah marrying a Roman soldier. The idea that Yeishu had been born to a Jewish woman who had had an affair with a Roman soldier could have resulted in Yeishu's mother being confused with this Miriam. The name "Miriam" is the original form of the name "Mary." The Gemara recounts that some of the people who confused Yeishu with Ben Stada believed that Yeishu's mother was "Miriam the women's hairdresser."

That Mary (Miriam) the mother of Jesus was an adulteress surely bugged the early Christians. The virgin birth story might have been invented to clear Mary's name.

Tales of Mary's adultery persisted and contributed to the character being split into two: Mary the mother of Jesus, believed to be a virgin, and Mary Magdalene, believed to be a woman of ill repute. The name "Magdalene" resembles the Aramaic term "mgadla nshaya," meaning "woman's' hairdresser." There was a belief that Yeishu's mother was "Miriam the women's hairdresser." Because the Christians did not know what the name "Magdalene" meant, they later conjectured that it meant that she had come from a place called Magdala on the west of Lake Kinneret. This corroborates that the character of Mary Magdalene is derived from Miriam the mythical mother of Yeishu. The concept of "two Marys" is strongly reminiscent of Dionysus being followed by Demeter and Persephone.

The Tosefta, Mishnah and Baraita describe Yeishu fleeing to Egypt to escape being killed by a cruel king. This appears to be the origin of the Christian belief that Jesus and his family fled to Egypt to escape King Herod. Because the early Christians believed that Jesus had lived in Roman times it is natural that they would have confused the evil king who wanted to kill Jesus with Herod, since there were no other suitable evil kings during the Roman period.

Early Christians expected the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, probably based on a misunderstanding of Micah 5.2 that names Bethlehem as the town where the Davidic lineage began. Jesus was the Messiah, so he was born in Bethlehem. The confusion about living in Nazareth is a bit more complex. The early Greek-speaking Christians did not know what the word "Nazarene" meant. The earliest Greek form of this word is "Nazoraios," which is derived from "Natzoriya," the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew "Notzri." (Recall that "Yeishu ha-Notzri" is the original Hebrew for "Jesus the Nazarene.") The early Christians thought that "Nazarene" meant a person from Nazareth and so it was assumed that Jesus lived in Nazareth. Even today, most people confuse the Hebrew words "Notzri" (Nazarene, Christian), "Natzrati" (Nazarethite) and "nazir" (nazarite), all of which have completely different meanings. This is the primary source of the Biblical error that still confuses people today regarding the town of Nazareth where Jesus purportedly grew up; the town of Nazareth did not exist during the time when Jesus would have been a child.

There were three historical characters during the Roman period believed to be Messiahs and whom the Romans crucified: Yehuda of Galilee (6 CE), Theudas (44 CE), and Benjamin the Egyptian (60 CE). All were thought to be the Messiah, and therefore confused with Yeishu and Ben Stada. Yehuda of Galilee had preached in Galilee and garnered many followers before his crucifixion by the Romans. The story of Jesus' ministry in Galilee is suspiciously similar to the life of Yehuda of Galilee. This story and the belief that Jesus lived in Nazareth in Galilee reinforced each other. The belief that Agrippa killed some of Jesus' disciples in ~44 CE appears to be based the fate of Theudas' disciples. Since Ben Stada came from Egypt he might have been confused with his contemporary Benjamin the Egyptian. Although some modern authors have suggested that they were the same person, that is impossible because the stories of their deaths are completely different. The New Testament book of Acts refers to Josephus's book Jewish Antiquities (93 - 94 CE). The author of Acts considered Jesus, Yehuda of Galilee, Theudas and Benjamin the Egyptian, to be four different people. However,

by that time it was too late to undo the pre-New Testament confusion, and Jesus' crucifixion had become an integral part of the myth.

The information in the Talmud concerning Yeishu and Ben Stada is so damaging to Christianity that Christians have long taken measures to suppress it. When the Christians first discovered the information they tried to wipe it out by censoring the Talmud. The passages relating to Yeishu and Ben Stada were deleted from the Basle edition of the Talmud (~1578 - 1580), and are missing from many modern editions. For centuries Christians have argued unsuccessfully against the Talmudic accounts trying to confuse the issue by disputing pronunciation and other Hebrew language constructs. The arguments fail because they are not based on sound etymology.

Pagan and astrological roots of the Jesus myth

Virgin birth stories are common in pagan myths, and include the demi-gods Romulus and Remus, Perseus, Zoroaster, Mithras, Osiris-Aion, Agdistis, Attis, Tammuz, Adonis, Korybas and Dionysus. The Christian belief that Jesus was the Son of God born to a virgin is consistent with Greco-Roman superstition.

Pagans in northern Israel believed their god Tammuz was born to the virgin Myrrha. The name "Myrrha" could have been confused with "Mary/Miriam" and so this virgin birth story might have particularly influenced the Mary story. Jesus and Tammuz were both often called Adon, meaning "Lord." (The character Adonis in Greek mythology is based on Tammuz.)

The theme of a divine or semi-divine child who is feared by an evil king is very common in pagan mythology. Typically, the king receives a prophecy about the pending birth of a child usurper to his throne. The child is often a demi-god born to a virgin. Mom tries to hide the kid. The king orders mass infanticide. Some examples include Romulus and Remus, Perseus, Krishna, Zeus, and Oedipus. The story of Moses' birth also resembles these myths. The myth of the slaughter of the innocents by Herod is the Christian version of this theme.

Temptation by demons is common in pagan mythology. The story of Jesus' temptation by Satan resembles the Egyptian myth of the temptation of Osiris by the devil-god.

Similarities exist between Jesus and the pagan demi-god Dionysus. Dionysus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger; could turn water into wine; rode on an ass and fed a multitude in the wilderness; suffered and was mocked. Some early Christians claimed that Jesus had actually been born, not in a stable, but in a cave--just like Dionysus.

That Jesus had been executed on the eve of Passover is one element of the myth that is apparently based on Yeishu's execution. Passover occurs at the time of the Vernal Equinox, an event considered important by astrologers during the Roman Empire. Astrologers regard the equinox as the crossing of two astrological celestial circles, symbolized by a cross. Thus there was a belief that Jesus had died on "the cross." The misunderstanding of this term by those not familiar with astrology contributed to the belief that Jesus was crucified. In one of the earliest Christian documents (the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles) there is no mention of

Jesus being crucified, but the sign of a cross in the sky is used to represent Jesus' arrival. The center of astrological superstition in the Roman Empire was Paul's home city of Tarsus in Asia Minor. The idea that a special star had heralded the birth of Jesus, and that a solar eclipse occurred at his death, is typical of Tarsian astrological superstition.

The theme of a demi-god being sacrificed against a tree, pole or cross and then being resurrected is common in the pagan mythologies of all western civilizations from Ireland to India. (Jehovah's Witnesses reject the story of the crucifixion because of its pagan roots) In the mythology of Osiris, his arms were stretched out on a tree like Jesus on the cross. This tree was sometimes shown as a pole with outstretched arms - the same shape as the Christian cross. In the worship of Serapis (a composite of Osiris and Apis) the cross was a religious symbol. Indeed, the Christian "Latin cross" symbol seems to be based directly on the cross symbol of Osiris and Serapis. The Romans never used this traditional Christian cross for crucifixions; they used crosses shaped either like an X or a T. (Jehovah's Witnesses claim that Jesus was executed on a torture stake.) The hieroglyph of a cross on a hill was associated with Osiris. This hieroglyph stood for the "Good One," in Greek "Chrestos," a name applied to Osiris and other pagan gods. The confusion of this name with "Christos" (Messiah, Christ) strengthened the confusion between Jesus and the pagan gods.

The myth of the resurrection of Jesus also has pagan roots. At the Vernal Equinox, pagans in northern Israel would celebrate the death and resurrection of the virgin-born Tammuz-Osiris. In Asia Minor (where the earliest Christian churches were established) a similar celebration was held for the virgin-born Attis. Attis was shown as dying against a tree, being buried in a cave and then being resurrected on the third day. In the worship of Baal, it was believed that Baal cheated Mavet (the god of death) at the time of the Vernal Equinox. He pretended to be dead but later appeared alive. He accomplished this ruse by giving his only son as a sacrifice.

The occurrence of Passover at the same time of year as the pagan "Easter" festivals is not coincidental. Many of the Pessach customs were designed as Jewish alternatives to pagan customs. The pagans believed that when their nature god (such as Tammuz, Osiris or Attis) died and was resurrected, his life went into the plants used by man as food. The matza made from the spring harvest was his new body and the wine from the grapes was his new blood. In Judaism, matza was not used to represent the body of a god but the poor man's bread that the Jews ate before leaving Egypt. The pagans used the paschal sacrifice to represent the sacrifice of a god or his only son, but Judaism used it to represent the meal eaten before leaving Egypt. Instead of telling stories about Baal sacrificing his first-born son to Mavet, the Jews told how mal'ach ha-mavet (the angel of death) slew the first-born sons of the Egyptians. The pagans ate eggs to represent the resurrection and rebirth of their nature god, but the egg on the Seder plate represents the rebirth of the Jewish people escaping captivity in Egypt. When the early Christians noticed the similarities between Pessach customs and pagan customs, they came full circle and converted the Pessach customs back to their old pagan interpretations.

The Seder became the last supper of Jesus, similar to the last supper of Osiris commemorated at the Vernal Equinox. The matza and wine once again became the body and blood of a false god, this time Jesus. Easter eggs are again eaten to commemorate the resurrection of a "god"

and also the "rebirth" obtained by accepting his sacrifice on the cross.

In the Christian account of the Last Supper Jesus dines with his twelve apostles. The twelve apostles are first mentioned in the document known as the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a sectarian Jewish manuscript written in the first century CE, later adopted by Christians who altered it substantially and embellished it with Christian concepts. Jewish scholars agree that in the earliest versions of the document the "twelve apostles" are the twelve sons of Jacob representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The Christians later considered the "twelve apostles" to be allegorical disciples of Jesus.

In Egyptian mythology, Osiris was betrayed at his last supper by the evil god Set, equated with Typhon by the Greeks – very similar to the idea that Jesus' betrayer was present at his last supper. The idea that this betrayer was named "Judas" hearkens to the time when the twelve apostles were still understood to be the sons of Jacob. The concept of Judas (Judah, Yehuda) betraying Jesus (the "son" of Joseph) matches the account in the Torah of Joseph betrayed by his brothers with Yehuda as the ringleader. This allegory would have appealed to the Samaritan Notzrim who considered themselves to be sons of Joseph betrayed by mainstream Jews (represented by Judas/Yehuda).

As time went on, the original allegorical interpretation of the last supper story faded and Christians came to think that the "twelve apostles" were twelve real people who followed Jesus, resulting in attempts to name the twelve apostles. Matthew and Thaddaeus are based on Mattai and Todah, two of Yeishu's disciples. One or both of the apostles named Jacobus (James) are possibly based on Jacob of Kfar Sekanya, an early Christian known to Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus. The character of Judas is mostly based on the Judah of the Torah but there might also be a connection with Yeishu's contemporary, Yehuda Ben Tabbai, the disciple of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachyah. Set-Typhon (betrayer of Osiris in Egyptian mythology) had red hair, a likely origin of the claim that Judas had red hair. (This led to the Christian stereotypical portrayal of Jews as having red hair even though red hair is more common in non-Jews such as Aryans and Celts.)

According to Christians, Jesus chose the apostle Peter to be the "keeper of the keys to the kingdom of heaven." This story is suspiciously close to the Egyptian pagan deity, Petra, the doorkeeper of heaven and the afterlife under the rule of Osiris. (Note: Petra was not a major Egyptian god, and the word Petra is a Greek reference to the Egyptian gatekeeper god(s), which had various names.)

Although Luke "the good healer" (a purported friend of Paul) was a common Greek name, it is also quite possible that the character of Luke came from Greek mythology. The original Greek for "Luke" is "Lykos" which was another name for Apollo, the god of healing.

The resurrection of Demi-gods is a common theme in pagan (also Jewish) myths and legends. In Roman mythology, the virgin born Romulus appeared to his friend on the road before rising to heaven. Apollonius of Tyana (an actual well-documented historical figure) was claimed to have appeared to his disciples after having been resurrected. Apollonius was born approximately at the time claimed for the mythical Jesus. Legends describe Apollonius

performing many miracles identical to those also ascribed to Jesus, such as exorcisms of demons and the raising to life of a dead girl.

The Bible (and related documents) does not represent an accurate historical account of Jesus' life

Gospels

Christians assert that the Bible and its associated documents are "historical evidence" for the existence of Jesus. They claim that the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are "eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus made by his disciples." What is generally not understood is that the Gospels are pseudepigraphic, meaning that they are works whose authors used pen names of legendary characters from the past. (From the American Heritage Dictionary: pseudepigrapha 1.] Spurious writings, especially writings falsely attributed to biblical characters or times. 2.] A body of texts written between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200 and spuriously ascribed to various prophets and kings of Hebrew Scriptures.) Pseudepigraphic writing was particularly popular among the Jews during Hashmonean and Roman periods and this style of writing was adopted by the early Christians.

In the rest of this essay, for simplicity, I will often refer to pseudepigraphic authors as if they were the real authors.

The canonical (a.k.a Synoptic) gospels are not the only gospels; there are also gospels of Mary, Peter, Thomas, Judas and Philip. (Additional information about these other gospels will be provided in the next section of this essay) The gospels of Mary, Peter, Thomas and Philip are recognized as being pseudepigraphic by both Christian and non-Christian scholars. Based on rumors, they provide no legitimate historical information. The existence of these obviously pseudepigraphic gospels makes it reasonable to suspect that the canonical gospels might also be pseudepigraphic. That early Christians wrote pseudepigraphic gospels suggests that this was the norm. Thus, Christian claims that the canonical gospels are *not* pseudepigraphic require substantiation.

The Synoptic Gospels reference either each other or a collection of teachings referred to as the Second Source (or the Q Document). The Second Source has not survived as a separate document, but its full contents are found in Matthew and Luke. All the teachings contained in Q can be found in mainstream or sectarian Judaism. Nothing in Q supposes the existence of a real historical Jesus. Although Matthew and Luke attribute the teachings in Q to Jesus, the Epistle of James attributes them to James.

The "testimony of Papias" does not provide evidence that the Gospels were accurate accounts of a real historical Jesus. Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis (near Ephesus) during the middle of the second century CE. None of his writings have survived but the Christian historian Eusebius (~260 - 339 CE) in his book, Ecclesiastical History (written ~311 - 324 CE) paraphrased certain passages from Papias's book Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord (written ~140 - 160 CE). In these passages, Papias made many claims, often inaccurate, about people he met that knew people who actually knew Jesus or Jesus' disciples. Papias was a name-dropper and it is by no means certain that he was honest when he claimed that he had

met these people. Most of the dates surrounding Papias' accounts are inaccurate and contradictory, and he had a vested interest in perpetuating the Jesus myth.

Epistles

Christians claim the epistles are proof of the Jesus' existence. They maintain the epistles are letters written by Jesus' disciples and/or followers. The etymology of epistle is Greek; *epistol* meaning message or order. Epistles are books, written in the form of letters (typically from legendary characters) that expound religious doctrine. There are many Christian epistles not contained in the New Testament which both Christian and non-Christian scholars agree are pseudepigraphic and of no historical value because they describe beliefs, not history. The existence of so many pseudepigraphic epistles suggests that they were normally pseudepigraphic. Like the gospels, proof is required that the Biblical epistles are *not* pseudepigraphic.

The Epistle of Jude is written in the name of Jude (Judas) the brother of James. According to Mark and Matthew, Jesus had brothers named Judas and James. Comparison with other writings shows that the Epistle of Jude was written in c. 130 CE and is therefore pseudepigraphic. There is no evidence that its author used any legitimate historical sources regarding Jesus.

Two of the canonical epistles are written in the name of Peter. Because Peter was not a real person but an adaptation of the Egyptian deity Petra, he did not write these epistles. The style and character of the First Epistle of Peter shows that was written no earlier than ~80 CE. Christians claim that Peter died following the persecutions instigated by Nero in ~64 CE so "he" could not have written the epistle. Scholars agree the author of Luke and Acts used all available written sources; no mention is made there of any epistles by Peter. Thus, the First Epistle of Peter was probably written after Luke and Acts (~100 CE). References to Jesus in the First Epistle of Peter reflect only hearsay and superstition. The Second Epistle of Peter speaks out against the Marcionists and therefore must have been written later than about 150 CE, making it pseudepigraphic even if one accepts that Peter was a real person. The Second Epistle of Peter uses Mark, Matthew, Luke, the Apocalypse of Peter and the Epistle of Jude as sources. The non-canonical Apocalypse of Peter (written some time in the first quarter of the second century CE) is recognized as being non-historical even by fundamentalist Christians.

The First Epistle of Paul to Timothy warns against the Marcionist work known as the Antithesis. Marcion was expelled from the Church of Rome in ~144 CE and the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy was written shortly afterwards - evidence of pseudepigraphy. The Second Epistle of Paul to Timothy and the Epistle of Paul to Titus were written by the same author and date to about the same period. These three epistles are known as the "pastoral epistles." Marcion knew the ten remaining "non-pastoral" epistles written in the name of Paul by ~140 CE. Some of them were not written in Paul's name alone but are in the form of letters written by Paul in collaboration with various friends such as Sosthenes, Timothy, and Silas. The author of Luke and Acts, went out of his way to obtain all sources available and tended to use them indiscriminately, but did not refer to the Pauline epistles. It therefore seems likely that the non-pastoral epistles were written after Luke and Acts in the period ~100 - 140 CE. The non-

canonical First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians (written ~125 CE) uses the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians as a source and so we can narrow down the date for that epistle to ~100 - 125 CE. It would then seem that *all* Pauline epistles are pseudepigraphic. (The semi-mythical Paul was supposed to have died during the persecutions instigated by Nero in ~64 CE.) Some of the Pauline epistles appear to have been altered and edited numerous times before reaching their modern forms. They are self-referential and also refer to Acts, the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke and the First Epistle of Peter. None of them represent any non-Biblical basis for a historical Jesus.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is not pseudepigraphic; it is completely anonymous. Its author does not reveal his name or write in the name of a Christian mythological character. Some Christians claim it is another epistle by Paul, calling it the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews. Not all Christians accept this hypothesis, which originated during the last part of the fourth century CE. It uses material common to Mark, Matthew and Luke and does not cite extra-Biblical sources. The author of the First Epistle of Clement used it as a source and was therefore written before that epistle (~125 CE) and after the Gospel of Mark (~75 – 100 CE).

The Epistle of James was written in the name of a servant of Jesus called James (or Jacobus). Because there were two apostles named James and Jesus also had a brother named James, it is uncertain which James was the "author". It quotes from the Second Source but unlike Matthew and Luke attributes the quotes to James, not Jesus. This Epistle contains an important argument against the doctrine of "salvation through faith" found in Romans, leading to the conclusion that it was written during the first half of the second century, after Romans but before the time that Matthew and Luke were accepted. So regardless of which James is intended, the Epistle of James is pseudepigraphic. It says almost nothing about Jesus and there is no evidence that the author had any historical sources for him.

There are three epistles named after the apostle John, but none were written in the name of John and were probably credited to him after they had been written. The First Epistle of John is completely anonymous and used the Gospel of John as a source. The other two epistles named after John are written by a single author who called himself "the Elder." The idea that these two epistles were written by John stems from beliefs that "the Elder" referred to John the Elder, presumed to be the same person as the apostle John. In the case of the Second Epistle of John this belief was reinforced because that epistle also uses the Gospel of John as a source. Therefore the first two epistles ascribed to John were written after the Gospel of John (~110 – 120 CE), which means none of the three epistles could have been written by the apostle John. It is possible that the pseudonym "the Elder" does refer to the person named John the Elder, but that person is not the apostle John. The first two John epistles do not use any extra-Biblical sources. The Third Epistle of John barely mentions "Christ" and there is no evidence that it used any non-Biblical sources.

The New Testament also includes a book known as the Revelation to John, which combines two forms of religious writing: epistle and apocalypse. (Apocalypses are religious works written in the form of revelations about the future made by a famous character from the past.) We are uncertain about the extent to which the Revelation to John was edited; it is difficult to date precisely. Because it mentions the persecutions of Nero, it was written after 64 CE so the

"real" John the Apostle, executed by Agrippa in ~ 44 CE, was not the author. Nor could the author have been John the Baptist, if one accepts the Bible story (Matthew 14:6-12) that John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas. The first few verses comprise an introduction that seems unintended by the original author and seems to admit that the book is pseudepigraphic, even though the author feels that God inspires his message. The style of writing and the references to the practice of kriobolium (baptism in sheep's blood) suggests that the author was one of those people of Jewish descent who mixed Judaism with pagan practices. There were many such "pagan Jews" during Roman times who become the first converts to Christianity, established the first churches, and who were also responsible for introducing pagan myths into the story of Jesus. Few References to Jesus are found the Book of Revelations.

The epistles written in the name of Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp can also be easily shown to be pseudepigraphic. The Epistles as a whole are of no greater historical value than any of the Gospels.

The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles

Apart from the books of the New Testament and the epistles, there is only one additional Christian religious work claimed as historical evidence of Jesus: the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, also known as the *Didache*. All other early Christian religious works are either wholly rejected by modern Christians or are not primary sources.

The *Didache* began as a sectarian Jewish document, probably written during the period of turmoil in ~70 CE. Its earliest form consisted of moral teachings and predictions of the destruction of the current world order. Christians who edited and altered it to suit their own purposes, adding a story of Jesus and rules of worship for early Christian communities, borrowed this earliest version, which did not mention Jesus. The earliest Christian version of the *Didache* could not have been written later than 95 CE and reached its final form about 120 CE. It appears to have served an isolated Christian community in Syria as a "Church Order" during the period ~100 -130 CE The *Didache*, far from being an extra-Biblical proof of the historical Jesus, instead provides evidence that the myth of Jesus grew gradually. Like the *Gospel of Mark* and the early versions of *Gospel of Matthew*, the Jesus story in the *Didache* makes no mention of a virgin birth, nor does it mention of the fantastic miracles were later attributed to Jesus. Although Jesus is referred to as a "son" of God, it appears that this term is being used figuratively. The *Didache* makes no mention of Jesus being crucified, but does mentions a cross in the sky as a sign of Jesus. The twelve apostles in the full title of the *Didache* do not appear as twelve real disciples of Jesus and the term seems to refer to the twelve sons of Jacob representing the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jewish Antiquities

Christians claim that the Jewish historian Josephus recorded information about Jesus in his book *Jewish Antiquities* (published ~93 - 94 CE) However, the original Jewish version of this book only contains information about the three false Messiahs, Yehuda of Galilee, Theudas

and Benjamin the Egyptian; none of them can be regarded as the historical Jesus. Also, in the book of *Acts*, the three are mentioned as being different from Jesus and therefore modern Christians must either disbelieve *Acts* or reject the connection between them and Jesus.

In the Christian edited versions of the *Jewish Antiquities* there are two passages dealing with Jesus as he is typically portrayed. Neither of these passages is found in the original version of the *Jewish Antiquities* that was preserved by the Jews. The first passage (XVII, 3, 3) was quoted by Eusebius writing in c. 320 C.E., so it must have been between the time Christians usurped the *Jewish Antiquities* and c. 320 CE. It is not known when the other passage (XX, 9, 1) was added. Neither passage is based on any reliable sources. The passages were not written by Josephus; they were written by Christian redactors and thus can't be used as extra-Biblical evidence of a real Jesus.

Tacitus

Some Christians cite the *Annals* by Tacitus as providing evidence of a historical Jesus. In the *Annals* XV, 44, Tacitus describes how Nero blamed the Christians for the fire of Rome in 64 CE. He mentions that the name "Christians" originated from a person named Christus who had been executed by Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. The term "Christians" is derived from Christ or Christus (Messiah), but Tacitus' claim that Pilate executed him during the reign of Tiberius is derived from the claims of the Christians from the gospels of *Mark*, *Matthew* and *Luke*, already in circulation when the *Annals* were written. (The *Annals* were published after 115 CE and were not written before 110 CE) It is somewhat ironic that modern Christians cite Tacitus - he was among the least accurate of Roman historians and justifies hatred of Christians by claiming they committed abominations. The *Annals* also speaks of various pagan gods as if they really exist. His summary of Middle East history *The Histories* is quite distorted. All of this leads to the conclusion that a single mention of Christus in the *Annals* cannot be taken as reliable evidence of an historical Jesus.

Pliny The Younger

Christians claim that one of the younger Pliny's letters to the emperor Trajan provides evidence of an historical Jesus. (*Letters* X, 96.) However, the letter in question simply mentions that certain Christians had cursed "Christ" to avoid being punished, and does not claim that this Christ person really existed. The letter in question was written before Pliny's death in c. 114 CE but after he was sent to Bithynia in 111 CE, probably in the year 112 CE. It provides no more than confirmation that around the beginning of the twelfth decade CE. Christians did not normally curse something called "Christ" although some had done it to avoid punishment – no evidence of an historical Jesus.

Lives of the Caesars

Christians believe that Suetonius recorded evidence of Jesus in his book *Lives of the Caesars* (also known as *The Twelve Caesars*). The passage in question is *Claudius* 25, where he mentions that the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE because they caused continual disturbances at the instigation of a certain Chrestus. If one assumes that

"Chrestus" refers to Jesus then the passage contradicts the Christian story of Jesus. Jesus was supposed to have been crucified when Pontius Pilate was procurator (26 - 36 CE) during the reign of Tiberius and was never in Rome! Suetonius lived during the period c. 75 - 150 CE and his book, *Lives of the Caesars*, was published during the period 119 - 120 CE, having been written some time after Dalmatian's death in 96 CE. The event described occurred at least 45 years before he was writing about it and so we cannot be certain of its accuracy. The name Chrestus is derived from the Greek *Chrestos* meaning "good one" and it is not the same as Christ or Christus which are derived from the Greek *Christos* meaning "anointed one/Messiah." If we take the passage at face value it refers to a person named Chrestus who was in Rome and who had nothing to do with Jesus or any other "Christ." The term Chrestos was often applied to pagan gods and many of the people in Rome called "Jews" were actually people who mixed Jewish beliefs with pagan beliefs and who were not necessarily of Jewish descent. Thus it is also possible that the passage refers to conflicts involving these pagan "Jews" who worshipped a pagan god (such as Sebazio) titled Chrestos. On the other hand, the words Chrestos and Christos were often confused and so the passage might even be referring to some conflict involving Jews who believed that some person was the Messiah. This person may or may not have actually been in Rome and may not have been a real historical person. Bear in mind that the described event took place just a few years after the crucifixion of the false Messiah Theudas in 44 CE, and the passage may be referring to his followers in Rome. Christians claim that the passage refers to Jesus and the conflicts that occurred after Paul brought news of Jesus to Rome; Suetonius was only mistaken about Jesus himself being in Rome. However, this interpretation is circular regarding Jesus and the myths about Paul; there is nothing to suggest that it is the correct interpretation. So, Suetonius also fails to provide any reliable evidence of an historical Jesus.

All other writers who mention Jesus, from Justin Martyr in the second century CE to the latest expounders of Christian mythology in the twentieth century, have based their references to Jesus on the above discredited sources. There is no reliable and acceptable historical evidence of Jesus. All references to Jesus are derived from the superstitious beliefs and myths of the early Christian community. The majority of these beliefs only came into existence after the persecution by Nero and the tragedy of 70 CE. Many of these beliefs are based on the pagan legends about the gods Tammuz, Osiris, Attis, Dionysus and the sun god Mithras. Other myths about Jesus seem to be based on various different historical people such as the convicted criminals Yeishu Ben Pandeira and Ben Stada, and the crucified false Messiahs Yehuda, Theudas and Benjamin. None of them can be regarded as an historical Jesus.

Many "easy to understand" translations of the New Testament are distorted so as to remove the ambiguity found in the original Greek. If one is not familiar with the original Greek texts, it is difficult to discern the correct historical picture.

In the rest of this essay, keep in mind that references to Jesus mean the mythical, legendary Jesus, not a real, historical figure.

Lost Scriptures and Heresies

Christians are taught that the Bible is the inspired word of God, penned by men who were acting as a direct conduit from God. Most Christians are unaware of the vigorous debate that raged for centuries before the New Testament in its present form of 27 books was finalized in 326 CE, the result of Emperor Constantine's convening of the Council of Nicea. Numerous non-orthodox proto-Christian sects, particularly the Marcionites and Gnostics, offered very different accounts and interpretations of Jesus' life and teachings, would be expected for a mythical figurehead.

Early Christian groups' accounts of Jesus differ dramatically from contemporary opinions. Modern, orthodox Christians such as Catholics and Methodists trivialize these disagreements and somewhat correctly classify the Marcionites and the Gnostics as being fringe groups, similar today to Jehovah's Witnesses or Christian Scientists. Nonetheless, it is important to note that even among those who call themselves devout Christians, disagreements over important details of Jesus' life have persisted for over 2000 years. When government entities condone Nativity scenes, they are in effect promoting the viewpoints of some, but not all, Christians. Even if one accepts theists' arguments that the Constitutional prohibition against an "establishment of religion" was not intended to prohibit all religious expression but instead to prevent the governmental endorsement of one type of religion over another, displaying a Nativity scene *does* imply that Catholics are correct and non orthodox Christianity is wrong.

In addition to the four Gospels of the New Testament, several other gospels were also authored pseudepigraphically and attributed to the apostles Philip, Judas and Thomas, James the brother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and others. There are Acts originally ascribed to John and to Thecla, Paul's female companion. There are Epistles allegedly written by Paul to the Roman philosopher Seneca. 'Mark' was reported to have based his writing on a lost gospel by an unknown author, sometimes referred to as the 'Q' gospel. An apocalypse pseudepigraphically written by Peter described the details of the afterlife, to include the endless pleasures afforded the saints and the endless tormenting of the damned. An Epistle by Titus (Paul's companion) argues at length against sex, even with one's wife, because it leads to damnation. James' gospel describes Mary receiving a postpartum inspection to verify her virginity, but God is so irritated by this that he burns off the hand of examiner, Salome. From Ronald F. Hock's *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*:

"(18) And the midwife departed from the cave and met Salome and said to her, "Salome, Salome, I have to describe this new miracle for you. A virgin has given birth, although her body does not allow it."

(19) And Salome said, "As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger and investigate her, I will not believe that a virgin has given birth."

Chapter 20

(1) And the midwife went in and said, "Mary, position yourself, for not a small test concerning you is about to take place."

(2) When Mary heard these things, she positioned herself. And Salome inserted her finger into her body.
(3) And Salome cried out and said, "Woe for my lawlessness and the unbelief that made me test the living God. Look, my hand is falling away from me and being consumed in fire."

Thomas' Gospel describes a young Jesus willing to use his power in "Harry Potter" fashion to transform his childhood chums into barnyard animals (or kill them outright!), bring mud to life in the form of sparrows and assist his Dad's carpentry business by fixing mistakes in lengths of cut wood. From the Greek "Text A" Translation:

"II. 1 This little child Jesus when he was five years old was playing at the ford of a brook: and he gathered together the waters that flowed there into pools, and made them straightway clean, and commanded them by his word alone. 2 And having made soft clay, he fashioned thereof twelve sparrows. And it was the Sabbath when he did these things (or made them). And there were also many other little children playing with him.

3 And a certain Jew when he saw what Jesus did, playing upon the Sabbath day, departed straightway and told his father Joseph: Lo, thy child is at the brook, and he hath taken clay and fashioned twelve little birds, and hath polluted the Sabbath day. 4 And Joseph came to the place and saw: and cried out to him, saying: Wherefore doest thou these things on the Sabbath, which it is not lawful to do? But Jesus clapped his hands together and cried out to the sparrows and said to them: Go! And the sparrows took their flight and went away chirping. 5 And when the Jews saw it they were amazed, and departed and told their chief men that which they had seen Jesus do.

III. 1 But the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph; and he took a branch of a willow and dispersed the waters which Jesus had gathered together. 2 And when Jesus saw what was done, he was wroth and said unto him: O evil, ungodly, and foolish one, what hurt did the pools and the waters do thee? Behold, now also thou shalt be withered like a tree, and shalt not bear leaves, neither root, nor fruit. 3 And straightway that lad withered up wholly, but Jesus departed and went unto Joseph's house. But the parents of him that was withered took him up, bewailing his youth, and brought him to Joseph, and accused him 'for that thou hast such a child which doeth such deeds. ...

... XIII. 1 Now his father was a carpenter and made at that time ploughs and yokes. And there was required of him a bed by a certain rich man, that he should make it for him. And whereas one beam, that which is called the shifting one was too short and Joseph knew not what to do, the young child Jesus said to his father Joseph: Lay down the two pieces of wood and make them even at the end next unto thee (MSS. at the middle part). And Joseph did as the young child said unto him. And Jesus stood at the other end and took hold upon the shorter beam and stretched it and made it equal with the other. And his father Joseph saw it and marveled: and he embraced the young child and kissed him, saying: Happy am I for that God hath given me this young child."

Different proto-Christian groups had beliefs that not only differed from modern ones in the details but also were fundamentally opposite and incompatible with each other. For centuries, they argued about which view was correct. One sect held that Jesus was never born from a human mother but instead came down from heaven as a fully-grown adult. Another sect, the Gnostics, insisted that Jesus was born a human, but that God then entered his body, possessing, controlling and providing for him. According to them, Jesus' anguished cry before his death of "God, why have you forsaken me?" was the cry of the human Jesus after God

suddenly abandoned the body before it was killed. Still other sects (the ones that were closest to the traditional Jewish religion) maintained that Jesus was 100% human but divinely inspired. It was not until many centuries after his death that the modern concept of the Trinity was invented. Some proto-Christians claimed that Jesus never died and was never crucified. The Ebionites maintained that no salvation was possible for individual souls and no heaven existed, but that someday people would exist on a “paradise Earth”, similar to what Jehovah’s Witnesses believe. Gnostics thought there were three “classes” of souls – those similar to animals (no afterlife at all), those possessed by the masses of good people of faith, who would be treated to an OK, vacation-like afterlife, and those of the top level highly enlightened Gnostics, who would get the full-blown angelic afterlife in heaven.

Centuries of debate led to the formation of increasing numbers of splinter sects that drifted away from the proto-Catholic orthodoxy. Finally, in 326 CE, the First Council of Nicaea established the 27 books New Testament as we know it today, but not without bitter arguments and dissention. Books were rejected, then accepted, and then rejected again. The Gospels of Peter and Thomas were excluded. The Book of Revelations was included at the last minute, after having been very unpopular early on. The earliest known copy of the New Testament in its present form dates from Alexandria in 367 CE. Although Rome went through a seesaw period in the 4th and 5th centuries where paganism competed with Catholicism for a while, the trend toward orthodoxy and the modern church significantly accelerated after Pope Julius’ term in the mid-4th century.

Why December 25th?

The New Testament's treatment of the historical period near 1 BCE is so confused and contradictory as to be useless for pinpointing the birth date of the mythical Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus is described as being born during the reign of Herod the Great and was said to be about two years old during the slaughter of the first born sons. However, Herod died sometime during April in 4 BCE – problem. Various Christian scholars have tried without success to place the date somewhere in the range from 17 BCE to 4 BCE. The New Testament mentions that Jesus was baptized sometime after the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (28-29 CE), when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (26-36 CE). This was supposed to have happened when Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene - except that Lysanias ruled Abilene from about 40 BCE until Mark Antony executed him in 36 BCE! These chronological errors are probably due to misreadings and misunderstandings of Josephus's book Jewish Antiquities, which was used as reference by the author of Luke and Acts.

There is no reference in the Bible, and none in any historical text that does not stem from Biblical sources, regarding the time of year or the exact date of the birth of Jesus. Scholars in the first millennium tried to pinpoint the date, with some concluding Jesus was born in November and others concluding he was born in March; there is little information available as to how the dates were arrived at. The reference to shepherds watching over flocks of sheep at night points away from the birth occurring in the winter. Even foil in Luke of the Roman census and forced travel would seem more plausible if it did not happen in the dead of winter. However, it is unnecessary and pointless to use the content of the Synoptic Gospels to challenge December 25th as the birth date of Jesus.

To understand why December 25th was chosen as the date, all one must do is look at the history of the early Romans and the tradition of the celebration of Saturnalia, the festival of the Winter Solstice. In the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Christianity had to compete with many popular religions such as Mithraism, a form of sun worship that had its roots in Persia. The custom of celebrating a significant birth during the winter solstice festival is very ancient. Egyptians believed the god Osiris was born on the winter solstice and held ceremonies greeting the newborn Sun. Celebrating with lights, fir trees and presents goes back at least to the time of Nimrod – the supposed grandson of Noah and King of Babel - 2300 years before the birth of Jesus.

The celebration of the winter solstice could have been a stumbling block for early Christianity, but the leaders of the church, with Judo-like skill, turned it to their advantage. Had Christian authorities insisted that Saturnalia and the Birth of the Sun were purely pagan and must not be celebrated, many potential converts would have been discouraged. (The requirement of circumcision (ouch!) was already an obstacle). After converts abandoned Mithraism and the Roman gods, they still wanted the pleasure of a winter holiday. Because there were no explicit references to the exact date of Jesus' birth in the Bible, the early Christian church was free to choose any day and selected the Winter Solstice – celebrating the "Birth of the Son" instead of the "Birth of the Sun".

Julius Caesar and the Modern Calendar

The tradition of celebrating Christmas must have been established after ~45 BCE, because Christmas falls on an exact date (December 25), not a shifting date like "the fourth Thursday in December". Prior to the time of Julius Caesar (who in 45 BCE adopted the Alexandrian astronomer Sosigenes' recommendations about calendar reform), the Roman calendar was poor and erratic. Julius wanted to start the year on the Spring Equinox or the Winter Solstice, but the Senate, which traditionally took office on January 1st, the start of the Roman civil calendar year, wanted to keep January 1st as the start of the year, and Caesar yielded in a political compromise. The practice of inserting leap days every four years started at this time, but it was not fully stable in its modern form until 4 CE.

Although the modern calendar in its current form started in 4 CE, failure to correct for the 11.23 minute difference between the length of the Julian calendar year (365.25 days) and the length of the real solar year (365.2422 days) caused the calendar to drift by about 1 day every 113 years. This was one reason that in 274 CE, the Roman Emperor Aurelian decreed that winter solstice fell on Dec. 25 - the day of the "Birth of the Invincible Sun". Modern Christian apologists make the unsubstantiated claim that Aurelian's designation of December 25th was a response to the widespread popularity of Pre-Constantine Christmas celebrations in the empire, but the fact is that in the 3rd century, Christians constituted less than 2% of the Roman population, whereas pagan celebrations of the Solstice has been popular for thousands of years.

Constantine the Great

In 318 CE, emperor Constantine, who ruled from 306 CE to 337 CE, declared December 25th to be the birth date of Jesus. Constantine, in the first part of his reign, was an Apollonian sun-worshiper, which was reflected in his coinage and his designation of Sunday as a dual-purpose day of pagan sun-worship and Catholic holy-day. A shrewd politician, after his conversion to Christianity around 311 CE, he not only realized the importance of working with the Catholic church, he was convinced that the Christian God was directly responsible for two of his key victories; the defeat of Maxentius at the bridge of Milvian in 312 CE, and his victory over Licinius in 324 CE. By choosing the date of the celebration of the birth of Mithras as the date of the birth of Christ, Constantine was able to accelerate Christianity's displacement of paganism. In 349 CE, during the reign of Constantius II, Pope Julius reinforced this with an official decree requiring that Christmas be celebrated on December 25th. Constantine, who had an Empire to govern and battles to win, regarded Jesus' death by crucifixion as an embarrassing humiliation and downplayed that aspect of Christianity; he went so far as to abolish crucifixion as a punishment.

The Basilica of St. Anastasia was built around CE 327, and was probably where Christmas was first marked on December 25th. It was a few feet from a grotto known as "Lupercal", a pagan shrine revered by Romans as the site where Romulus (the legendary founder of Rome) was nursed with his twin brother Remus by a wolf. A team of archaeologists headed by Professor Andrea Carandini of La Sapienza University discovered Lupercal in September 2007.

Modern Celebrations

Modern-style Christmas celebrations are largely of American origin, growing sharply in popularity after Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" became widely read in the 1800s. Christmas was not important to the early settlers of America – Congress did not even get a day off for Christmas until 1828! Birthdays simply were not important to European settlers in America. Early pre-Dickens Christmas celebrations in Europe were essentially drunken bashes with very little gift giving and no tree decorating, sort of a second Halloween celebration.

Early Christians would be puzzled over the contemporary position – stated but not practiced – that the evolution of Christmas into a gift-buying frenzy that drives our economy is materialistic and immoral. The altruistic error that regards wealth as inherently evil was not a Jewish tradition; the Jews did not believe in a system of Theistic justice where rewards or punishment were handed out in the hereafter and in fact held the belief that virtue was rewarded in the form of wealth here on Earth. Christians eventually adopted a philosophical system that called for suffering on Earth followed by reward in the afterlife, which led to the "you cannot serve God and Mammon" tripe. Amusingly, this philosophical flaw eventually caused them embarrassing problems as Christians gained stature and wealth. The idea of "tithing" was developed to handle it – this allowed Christians to assuage their guilt; they could be rich and virtuous at the same time, as long as they kept the Church coffers full.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, Catholics continued the consolidation of their power and strengthened the hierarchy of Priests, Bishops, Cardinals and the Pope. Bishops burned every "heretical" manuscript they could get their hands on, and suppressed those they were unsuccessful in destroying. Despite their efforts, disagreements within Christianity continue to this day, over critical issues such as baptism, the Divinity of Christ, the Apocalypse, and if Christmas should be celebrated at all, or if it is (as Jehovah's Witnesses and others maintain) a pagan ritual to be avoided by True Christians.

Fresh proto-Christian writings continue to be discovered in modern times, for example the Coptic manuscript uncovered in the Egyptian museum in Berlin by Paul Mirecki, associate professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, in 1991. This manuscript has been referred to as the "Gospel of the Savior", and purports to contain quotes from Jesus, though many dispute this claim, saying that it is one of a class of Coptic manuscripts from the 4th century that were authored by Gnostics in order to undermine the orthodoxy of that time. Other recent examples include the Lost Gospel Of Judas, the discovery and restoration of which is documented in the April 2006 issue of National Geographic Magazine.

The Synoptic Gospels:

Turning now to the orthodox cannon: the first four books of the New Testament are known as "The gospel according to:" Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Gospel is a word with Anglo-Saxon roots that originally was pronounced "God's Spell" which loosely translated into "Good News" The sequence of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John does not represent the chronological order that those books were written in, and it is generally agreed today that Mark's account came first, followed by Matthew, Luke and then John. (The term *synoptic* comes from the combination of the Greek words *συν* (*syn* = together) and *opsis* (*opsis* = seeing). The contents of these Gospels are intended to be taken together.)

The actual identities of the authors of the Gospels are indeterminate because they are pseudepigraphic. For example, many Christians maintain that the Matthew of the gospel was one of the Disciples, but there is no evidence one way or another as to the identity of Matthew. If Matthew the Disciple wrote it, he would have been over 100 years old at the time of the writing – unlikely, but not impossible. The reality is that all of the Gospels originated as short tracts and were, over time, embellished, edited and fleshed-out until they were frozen in their current form in 326 CE. For a wealth of information on the writing of the Synoptic Gospels, please refer to E. P. Sanders' "The Historical Figure of Jesus". In this essay, I use the common convention of referring to the authors by name as if they were actual individuals.

The birth narratives in Luke and Matthew are completely different and irreconcilable. Both authors felt compelled to show that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem (to satisfy the prophecy of Davidic Descent), and concocted incompatible schemes to place Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew (1.18- 2.23) has Jesus' parents living in Bethlehem, only to flee to Egypt after his birth to escape Herod's murder of all first-born sons, eventually returning to Bethlehem and subsequently moving to Nazareth. Luke (2.1 – 39) depicts Joseph and Mary as living in Nazareth, forced to travel to Bethlehem for a census, and then returning to their home in Nazareth.

Matthew:

The apostle Matthew did not write the Gospel of Matthew. The character of Matthew is based on the historical person named Mattai who was a disciple of Yeishu Ben Pandeira. The Gospel of Matthew was originally anonymous and was only assigned the name Matthew around the first half of the second century CE. The earliest form was probably written around the same time as the Gospel of Luke because neither seems to know of the other. Matthew was altered and edited until about 150 CE. The first two chapters, dealing with the virgin birth, were not in the original version, which was preferred by Christians in Israel of Jewish descent.

References in the book of Matthew to the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, which did not occur until around 70 CE, indicate that Matthew had to have been written after 70 CE. Matthew (and also Luke) was trying to reinforce the Old Testament prophecy that calls for the Messiah to be a direct descendant of David. Matthew tries his best to show that Jesus was a direct descendant of David, using a highly artificial scheme that tried to break up the generations from David to Jesus into three sets of 14 generations. This account is inconsistent

with other parts of the Bible. One example can be found in *Matthew 1:11* "...and Josias beget Jechonias..."; But, the Old Testament (1 Chronicles 3:15) states that Josias was the grandfather of Jechonias, not his father.

Another puzzler is the entire idea of the Virgin Birth. On a common-sense level, why bother showing that Jesus was a direct descendant of David if God, not Joseph, was the father of Jesus? Virgin births, although a common theme in the pagan mythology that form the basis for the Jesus myth, were not part of established Jewish tradition, and the only reference in the Old Testament is in *Isaiah 7:14*: "... behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son...". However, the Hebrew used by Isaiah translates "a virgin" into "a young woman", with no implied abstinence from sex whatsoever. So, why the emphasis by Matthew that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth? The mythical Jesus was an obscure Galilean preacher. In the first century CE, tales of his childhood were invented and embellished, and although the Jews of the period had no need to believe that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth, Gentile religions at that time commonly required that the incarnation of any god on the Earth was always the result of coitus between the mother and a god. Aside from a few sideways references in Luke, there is no other mention of the Virgin Birth in the Bible, although it is found in the excluded gospel of James.

The account in Matthew of the slaughter of the first-born sons shortly after the birth of Jesus is not recorded in history, while other far less wicked deeds of Herod the Great are clearly documented. It is plausible that the "Hero's" need to barely escape death, a popular Jewish foil, was applied to Jesus and patterned after the tale of the infant Moses and Pharaoh. Joseph and his family's period in exile until an angel appears and gives the "all clear" is similar to the Old Testament's account of Moses' exile and return.

Regarding the Three Wise Men and the Star in the East: this has generated much speculation in recent times - most Christians mistakenly believe that astronomers have found a scientific explanation for the Star. Every year, someone will claim to have found new "evidence" of some astronomical phenomena that explains the "star". However, the entire story was apparently an embellishment on the part of Matthew. There are no records of a nova during this period, or of bright comets, which the careful astronomers of India, China, and other cultures would have recorded. Some claim that a conjunction of several planets might be what is referred to as the Star, but this is unlikely, as the ancients were very familiar with the planets and the paths they took through the sky. They would not have confused a conjunction with a new star in the east – the motions of the planets were not a source of surprise.

Matthew borrows liberally from the Old Testament in his tale of the birth and life of Jesus. In places, some of the stories of Jesus' life that Matthew depicts conflict with earlier Old Testament writing. In at least one passage in the book of Matthew, Jesus himself debunks the "descendant of David" theory. (The theory of Davidic Descent was not fully developed until after Jesus' death, so the debunking represents clear evidence that the "author" of Matthew was less interested in historical accuracy than in making a point.) After Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, heralded as being the Messiah while simultaneously being from Galilee, he is having a discussion with the Pharisees: *Matthew 21:11* "... And the Multitude said, this is Jesus the Prophet of Nazareth of Galilee". The Pharisee's were naturally outraged by a "Galilean

nobody" waltzing into town and claiming to be the Messiah, so one would expect them to challenge Jesus to prove that he is of Davidic descent. That would have then given Jesus the chance to demonstrate to them that he actually is the "Son of David". Instead, Matthew depicts Jesus himself as raising the question, and the answer Jesus gives to his own rhetorical question embarrassingly contradicts Matthew's own claims of Jesus' Davidic descent. Jesus quotes from the Old Testament, referring to Psalms, and makes it clear that he is more than a mere descendant of David, and that Davidic descent is not a requirement to qualify as the Messiah.

Why does Matthew present both arguments? Perhaps he was trying to cover all the bases, or perhaps the inconsistency is the result of multiple authors contributing to the book.

Regarding the disappearance of the body of Jesus from the Tomb: This tale appears only in the book of Matthew. Matthew advances an unlikely account that the priestly authorities bribed the Roman guards, so that the guards would claim that they fell asleep, and that while they were sleeping Jesus' disciples stole the body - the body had not actually risen. This is somewhat bizarre in that sleeping on guard duty is a cardinal sin for any soldier, particularly a Roman soldier, and would have resulted in the guards being severely punished or executed by Pilate. Perhaps one could imagine that a group of guards could be persuaded by a large sum of cash to risk flogging, disgrace and demotion - but execution?

To summarize the Book of Matthew from a historical viewpoint:

The book is an after-the-fact account of the life of the mythical Jesus, designed to accomplish two primary goals:

- * Show Jesus to be a Bethlehem-born scion of the line of King David, and
- * Show Jesus' similarities to Moses.

Mark:

The book of Mark is generally accepted to be the earliest of the Gospels, and is the smallest. It was probably written shortly after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E, mentioned in Mark. Mark was supposedly a younger associate of Jesus' who wrote the gospel in his old age, but this is doubtful because the style of language used in Mark shows that it was written by a Roman convert to Christianity whose first language was Latin - not Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic. Mark was probably written long after any historical Mark (if there was one) had died. The content of Mark is a collection of myths and legends put together to form a continuous narrative. There is no evidence that it was based on any reliable historical sources. Mark was altered and edited many times; the modern version dates to about 150 CE. Clement of Alexandria (~ 150 - 215 CE) complained about the alternative versions of this gospel still circulating in his lifetime. The Carpocratians, an early Christian sect, considered pederasty to be a virtue; their versions of Mark told of Jesus' homosexual exploits with young boys. Jesus' birth is not mentioned in Mark, and there is no effort to show Jesus is of Davidic descent. Mark apparently wrote his Gospel for Christians of Jewish origin who did not have extensive knowledge of Biblical lore and Old Testament history, and it is a simple story of a prophet and a wonder-worker who is viewed by the author as the Messiah, who is wrongfully accused and executed but then triumphantly restored to life.

Luke:

The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are two parts of a single work. Christian's claim Luke was not a disciple of Jesus but a friend of Paul, but "Luke the healer" was probably not an historical person but a Christian adaptation of the Greek healer god Lykos. Luke and Acts use Josephus's Jewish Antiquities as a reference, and so they could not have been written before 93 CE, at which time any friend of Paul would be either dead or well into senility. Most scholars think that the earliest versions of the two books were written by an anonymous Christian in ~100 CE and were altered and edited until ~150 - 175 CE. Besides Josephus's book, Luke and Acts also use the Gospel of Mark and the Second Source (Q) as references. Although Josephus is considered to be fairly reliable, the anonymous author often misread and misunderstood Josephus; none of the information about Jesus in Luke and Acts comes from Josephus.

Luke was based on the book of Mark, but with additional subject matter included; there is evidence that the author of Luke tried to reference as many sources as possible. It was written primarily for an audience of Gentiles who were considering conversion to Christianity. The author of Luke was an educated Greek, judging from the style and syntax of the writing. Both Matthew and Luke used the book of Mark as their primary source, but each added, (i.e., "invented") material to fit the ears of their respected intended audiences. In Luke, the Roman authorities are treated more gently, and Jesus himself is depicted as being more sympathetic to Gentiles, than in the other synoptic Gospels.

Luke's account of the genealogy of Jesus differs from Matthew's, with Luke counting forty-one (or thirty-five, by some accounts) generations from Abraham to Jesus vs. twenty-eight (or forty-five, by some accounts) in Matthew; Luke also goes all the way back to Adam in his account and traces it through a different line than Matthew does. Scholars generally agree that Matthew's account is more consistent with the other books in the Bible.

Luke, like Matthew, felt compelled to say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in order to satisfy the prophecy in Micah. This presented serious difficulty, because the mythical Jesus could not have born in Bethlehem; all other Biblical references outside of Matthew indicate that Jesus was born in Nazareth. Both authors put on their fiction-writer hats to deal with the problem. Matthew handles it by claiming that Joseph and Mary were natives of Bethlehem who later migrated to Nazareth shortly after the birth of Jesus. Luke apparently did not have access to Matthew's version and it did not occur to him to use so straightforward a device. Instead, he depicted them as dwellers in Nazareth who traveled to Bethlehem just in time for Jesus to be born and then went back to Nazareth. (We now know there was no town named Nazareth at the time Jesus was supposed to have been born.)

Why then would Joseph and Mary have to travel to Bethlehem? Luke, in an apparent attempt at literary economy, makes double use of the census of Quirinius' second administration. Luke introduces the census early in his Gospel, apparently to try to pinpoint the date of the birth of Jesus. Luke tells the story of a Roman decree that all subjects were required to travel to the city of a distant ancestor's birth to be counted.

Luke 2.1:

"... So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David."

There are many problems with this explanation. Beside the non-existence at that time of the town of Nazareth, Luke's dates are in error. He contends that the census took place close to the date of Herod's death in 4 BCE, but later states that it took place 10 years later when Quirinius was legate of Syria. In 6 CE, the Romans did conduct a census in Judea, Samaria and Idumaea, but it did not include Galilee (which at the time was independent and not a Roman province), and they did not ask anyone to travel – in fact, the census takers did the traveling. It is possible that Luke, writing about 80 years after the fact, confused the riots at the time of Herod's death with Quirinius' census. There was also a census conducted in Egypt in 104 CE, (the *kata oikian* census) where temporary dwellers in various towns had to return to their permanent places of residence for the count; that census might have made plausible the idea that the Romans had conducted a similar one.

It is highly doubtful that the Romans would ever have conducted a census in the queer fashion described in Luke - particularly Augustus, the most rational of Caesars. There were no "birth certificates" in those times, and many people did not know where they were born, let alone where their great-great-great...grandfather was born. How would a person know which ancestor to use? (40-45 generations implies millions of ancestors) Why would the Romans have wanted residents to be counted in the city of their birth instead of the city in that they worked, resided and paid taxes? What about people who were born outside the Empire? What about families where members were not all born in the same place – would they have had to travel to more than one city? How could the census takers in Bethlehem have accommodated the tens of thousands of living descendants of David? The Romans would not have wanted their subjects clogging the roads and interfering with military efficiency, particularly at a time when the Romans were having problems with the Parthians. They would not have wanted to irritate the populace unnecessarily - censuses were hated anyway, and generally caused riots and commotion without the additional irritant of having to travel to be counted.

Even if the ancestral town of a resident were information that the Romans wanted, it would have been sufficient to simply record this when the person was counted. Accepting for the sake of argument that the Romans did require this silly journey, would it not be simpler for just the head of the household to make the trip? Why would the entire family, including a very pregnant wife, have to go? Historians universally agree that this census did not take place in the fashion described in Luke at the time required to support his claim. There is no record (outside the Bible) of a census of this type at the time of Jesus' birth, in contrast to numerous other censuses that are described in the Bible and backed up by history. The tale of the census was pure fiction on the part of the author of Luke.

But, there is now an even bigger problem with the claim of Jesus being born in Bethlehem. In 2005, Israeli archeologist Aviram Oshiri discovered that the city now identified as Bethlehem in Judea was not inhabited during the Herodian period when Jesus was supposed to have been born!

From Archeology Nov/Dec 2005, pp. 44-45:

" ... Many Christians accept the story of Jesus' birth in a manger in Bethlehem in Judea. But what if there was no Bethlehem in Judea at the time of Jesus' birth? ... while Luke and Matthew describe Bethlehem in Judea as the birthplace of Jesus, "Menorah," the vast database of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), describes Bethlehem as an "ancient site" with Iron Age material and the fourth-century Church of the Nativity and associated Byzantine and medieval buildings...there is a complete absence of information for antiquities from the Herodian period--that is, from the time around the birth of Jesus. ... I researched the archaeological evidence for Bethlehem in Judea at the time of Jesus and found nothing. This was very surprising, as Herodian remains should be the first thing one should find."

John:

There is no mention of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John was written in the name of the apostle John the brother of James, son of Zebedee. The author of Luke used many sources but he was apparently unaware of John, making it unlikely it was written before Luke ~100 CE. John could not have been written by the semi-mythical character John the Apostle who was supposedly killed by Herod Agrippa shortly before his Agrippa's death in 44 CE. Herod Agrippa's real name was Marcus Julius Agrippa; he was a grandson of Herod the Great and was made tetrarch of Palestine by the Roman emperor Caligula and king by Emperor Claudius in AD 41. John the Apostle is apparently based on an historical disciple of the false Messiah Theudas. Theudas was crucified by the Romans in 44 CE and his disciples were murdered. The real author of the Gospel of John was probably an anonymous Christian from Ephesus in Asia Minor. The oldest surviving fragment of John dates to ~125 CE. The earliest version of John did not contain the last chapter where Jesus appears to his disciples. Like the other gospels, John only attained its present form around 150 - 175 CE. The author of John used Mark sparingly, and does not include information from Matthew and Luke which was not found in Mark. Most of John consists of legends with obvious underlying allegorical interpretations. John does not contain any information from extra-Biblical sources.

Christians claim that the Gospel of John contains passages (John 19.34-35 and John 21.20 – 24) stating that it is an historical document written by John. John 19.34-35 does not state that John wrote the gospel; it only says that a witness accurately reported the events described in the immediately preceding verses. The passage is ambiguous and does not clarify if the witness is the same person as the author. Many scholars are of the opinion that the ambiguity is deliberate and that the author of John is trying to tease his readers in this passage as well as in the passages that tell miraculous stories with allegorical interpretations. John 21.20-24 similarly does not claim that the author is John, but only says that the disciple mentioned in the passage is the one who witnessed the events described. The passage was added as an epilogue by an anonymous redactor and is found in the last chapter that was not part of the original gospel.

Conclusion: "Jesus" was not born in Bethlehem on December 25th

Notwithstanding the persistent and often successful efforts of Christians to rewrite history, there is no evidence from non-Biblical sources that an actual person named Jesus ever lived or was born in Bethlehem. Careful analysis of the Bible leads one to conclude that even the legendary Jesus was born in "Nazareth" – a town that did not exist in 1 BCE! The mythical Jesus led a nondescript life until he started preaching and attracted the attentions of the Jews and Romans. The mythological tales of his birth, although contradictory, point toward the mythical Jesus' birth being an uneventful, private affair in the then-imaginary town of Nazareth. There was no forced journey, no need to find a "motel", no problem with lack of rooms necessitating sleeping in the barn, no lack of a crib, no wise men following a star bearing gifts ... in other words: *the manger scene is fiction.*

Theists who insist that the Bible is the inspired word of God and 100% accurate either don't know the facts or choose to ignore them.

For most of my life, I accepted the commonly told tales of the birth of Jesus as historical fact, even though I never believed that Jesus was a god. I never realized just how much of it was fantasy until I read Asimov's Guide to the Bible, which led me to investigate further. Even then, I assumed that Jesus was a real historical figure, until additional research led me to conclude that there is no historical evidence outside the Bible that Jesus actually existed – and plenty of evidence that Jesus was a legend concocted by the 1st century Christians. Although I have not consulted the primary sources directly – those are in museums and libraries that limit access - I have read many works where the authors *did* read those primary sources.

So, when you encounter rabid pro-Christmas fundamentalists spouting the nonsense of: "how *dare* you say Happy Holidays instead of Merry Christmas? ", please do your part to dispel the myth.

Merry Christ Myth!

Sources

- Bart D. Ehrman, Lost Christianities and Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It into the New Testament, (Oxford University Press, 2003)
- Isaac Asimov, Asimov's Guide to the Bible, (Gramercy, 1988);
- Michael Grant, Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times, (Scribner Book Company; 1st U.S. Ed edition, 1994);
- E. P. Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus, (Penguin (Non-Classics), 1996;
- Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion, (Houghton Mifflin, 2006)
- Hayyim Ben Yehoshua and Refuting Missionaries,
(<http://mama.indstate.edu/users/nizrael/jesusrefutation.html>, retrieved November 5, 2007)
- Robin Lane Fox Pagans and Christians, (Harper-Collins, 1988)
- J. Allegro, The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth, (Prometheus Books, reprinted 1991);
- J. Campbell, Occidental Mythology, (Penguin Books, reprinted 1985);
- E.D. Cohen, The Mind of the Bible-Believer, (Prometheus Books, reprinted 1991);
- R. Helms, Gospel Fictions, (Prometheus Books, reprinted 1991);
- S. Levine, You Take Jesus and I'll Take God: How to Refute Christian Missionaries, (revised edition, Hamoroh Press, Los Angeles, 1980);
- J.M. Robertson, A Short History of Christianity, (2nd Ed., Watts & Co., London 1913);
jewishencyclopedia.com,
The Associated Press (December 2007);
- Bruce Forbes, Christmas: A Candid History, (University of California Press, 2007);
- Joseph McCabe, Rationalist Encyclopedia, (Watts & Co, London, 1950);
- W.P Dawson, Christmas: Its Origins and Associations, (London, 1902)
- Aviram Oshiri, Where was Jesus Really Born? (Archeology Nov/Dec 2005 pp. 42-45)
- Ronald F. Hock The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas, (Polebridge Press, 1996)