

Christmas, 1997

Dear Friend,

Now that Christmas is coming, we must all take a moment and understand the true story of Christmas. Yes, Christmas specials are part of the tradition and should be watched, including those featuring aging country musicians who host a Christmas party with their celebrity best buds in a studio backdrop lovingly referred to as "back home."

However, Christmas is, after all, about Christ. And it isn't Christmas until you read the Christmas story for yourself in the Bible.

But who has time to read anymore? And what do "thee" and "thou" mean anyway? And what's with all the numbers that show up before every sentence? What's up with that?

So, for the Biblically clueless, we are proud to present a synopsis of the True Christmas Story. This is certifiably authentic and easy to read.

Actually, there are two True Christmas Stories, one found in The Gospel According to St. Matthew, and one found in The Gospel According to St. Luke. The Luke story is good for the kiddies, but you and your spouse can enjoy the thrilling drama of Matthew once the youngsters are safely dreaming of sugar plums.

MATTHEW:

An angel appears to Joseph, a direct descendant of David, who lives in Bethlehem. Mary, your fiancée, is pregnant, says the angel, but God did it, so don't be afraid to marry her. Call the kid Jesus. (The angel insisted that the child be named Jesus so as to be in accordance with an Old Testament prophecy that a child will be named Emmanuel. Cross-reference: Isaiah 7:14)

Jesus is born.

Wise men come from the East following a star and ask directions from King Herod. Herod, after consulting with his staff, realizes the true King will be born in Bethlehem and asks the wise men to let him know where the kid is so that he can worship, too.

Right. Actually, Herod plans to kill the kid in the cradle.

Anyway, the wise men show up at Jesus's house, which is presumably Joseph's house, give their gifts, and go back to their own land via a different route. They know to do this because God tells them to in a dream. Evidently the wise men aren't so wise as to figure out that a sitting king might not be completely honest when he says that he plans to just hand over the reigns to an infant King.

Herod is so pissed for not knowing which kid is the King--presumably because he's too stupid to look up and follow the star himself--that he orders ALL babies two years old and under executed. (Herod had to give this order so as to be in accordance with an Old Testament prophecy that at some point some woman would cry because her children were dead. Cross-reference: Jeremiah 31:15)

Fortunately, an angel again appears to Joseph and urges him to hightail it out of Bethlehem, whereupon they hang out in Egypt for awhile until Herod is dead. Alas, Herod's Judaeen successor, Archelaus, is even worse, so they go to Nazareth rather than return to Bethlehem. (Joseph had to take them there because of an Old Testament prophecy that the child would be called a Nazarene.) (Ed. Note: There is no cross-reference for this one because this isn't an Old Testament prophecy. It is possible that Matthew is referring to Nazarite, an order of special service to God. The most famous Biblical Nazarite was Samson. Nazarites were not allowed to cut their hair. This would explain why Jesus is always drawn with really long hair, but doesn't explain his general Anglo-Saxon features. Tradition has it that Jesus couldn't even carry his own cross at his execution, much less knock down a whole temple full of Philistines, so whatever benefits he

derived from his hair length, aside from increased physical attractiveness, were not as definable as Samson's.)

LUKE:

Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth. An angel comes to Mary (rather than to Joseph) and says you will give birth to the King, despite being a virgin. Call the kid Jesus.

Mary goes over to chat with her cousin Elisabeth about it. Elisabeth, by the way, is pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary and Elisabeth launch into a musical number about how great God is.

Meanwhile, back in Rome, Caesar has decided to order a census for taxation purposes. And the nature of this census is such that everyone has to go to the city of their ancestors to be counted rather than be counted where they actually live. So, Joseph takes his pregnant wife Mary into Bethlehem, since Joseph is a descendant of David.

Evidently, there are so many other descendants of David flocking the city that the hotels are all booked, so the kid is born in a manger.

(Ed. Note: Actually, David reigned 1000 years before this time. 1000 years is plenty of time to produce a great number of descendants. I would guess that at least 90% of the Palestinian Jews at that time were Davidic. And those that weren't would claim they were. Who WOULDN'T want to be a descendant of David? Small wonder the hotels were booked!)

Anyway, some local shepherds get their pants scared off them when an angel drops by to say you might want to go to Bethlehem and check out the new King. You'll know which one he is because he's the one sleeping in a manger. Then some backup angels show up and they launch into a musical number.

So, the shepherds decide to head into Bethlehem and check this out themselves. (No star or wise men in Luke.) Sure enough, there's the kid in the manger, although there's no mention of how many mangers they had to try before they found the correct one.

So impressed are they that after leaving, the shepherds launch into a musical number.

Now, according to Mosaic Law, Mary is unclean for seven days after the birth of Jesus. On the eighth day, Jesus is circumcised. And then Mary continues her purification process for another 33 days, after which she needs to present an offering to the temple. For details on this aspect of Mosaic Law, check out Leviticus, chapter 12. Don't thank Luke for this cross-reference, thank me. I had to hunt for it.

Evidently, Mary and Joseph are still in Bethlehem for the census, so Jesus is presented to God at a temple in Jerusalem, the next town over. And they meet two geezers, Simeon and Anna, who have been hanging around the temple for many years hoping that someday the Messiah might drop by. So impressed are they with Jesus that they each launch into a musical number. Well, actually Anna's number was the most uplifting. Simeon pretty much said, Now I've seen everything, and went off to die.

And when all is said and done, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus head back home to Nazareth.

So there it is! Sorry, Santa Claus isn't mentioned in the gospels, but if you read the story about Jesus's first miracle in The Gospel According to St. John, you'll learn about a party at which many of the guests had red noses!

Happy Holidays!

Andy P O E
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