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## The Fullness of Time: The Day Jesus Was Born



**Part 1** (981129AM)

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### The Day Jesus Was Born

Someone has said, "This coming December 25th most parents will be lying to their children about old St. Nick. Some of us will be celebrating the birth of our Savior. But was he really born on this day?"

Was Jesus really born (1) on December 25th? Virtually every month on the calendar has been proposed by biblical scholars. So why do we celebrate his birth in December?

The tradition for December 25th is actually quite ancient. Hippolytus, in the second century A.D., argued that this was Christ's birthday. Meanwhile, in the eastern Church, January 6th was the date followed.

But in the fourth century, John Chrysostom argued that December 25th was the correct date and from that day till now, the Church in the East, as well as the West, has observed the 25th of December as the official date of Christ's birth.

In modern times, the traditional date has been challenged. Modern scholars point out that when Jesus was born, shepherds were watching their sheep in the hills around Bethlehem. Luke tells us that an angel appeared to "some shepherds staying out in the fields [who were] keeping watch over their flock by night" (2:8).

Some scholars feel that the sheep were usually brought under cover from November to March; as well, they were not normally in the field at night. But there is no hard evidence for this. In fact, early Jewish sources suggest that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside year-round. So you can see, December 25th fits both tradition and the biblical narrative well. There is no sound objection to it.

Now admittedly, the sheep around Bethlehem were the exception, not the rule. But these were no ordinary sheep. They were sacrificial lambs. In the early spring they would be slaughtered at the Passover.

And God first revealed the Messiah's birth to these shepherds—shepherds who protected harmless lambs which would soon die on behalf of sinful men. Why they saw the baby, could they have known? Might they have whispered in their hearts what John the Baptist later thundered, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Now, of course, we can't be absolutely certain of the day of Christ's birth. At least, not this side of heaven. But an early winter date seems as reasonable a guess as any. And December 25th has been the frontrunner for eighteen centuries. Without more evidence, there seems no good reason to change the celebration date now.

We can blame the ancient church for a large part of our uncertainty. You see, they did not celebrate Christ's birth at all. To them it was insignificant. They were far more concerned with his death . . . and resurrection.

But modern man has turned that around. A baby lying in a manger is harmless, non-threatening. But a man dying on a cross—a man who claims to be God—that man is a threat! He demands our allegiance! We cannot ignore him. We must either accept him or reject him. He leaves us no middle ground."

The True Glory of Christmas is how perfectly God entered our world that first Christmas. There are six perfections we will see:

1. His TIMING was Perfect because it was in the Fullness of Time.
2. His NAMES were Perfect because they reveal we deeply need what only God gives.

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3. His PLAN was Perfect because it was God with us.
4. His PROMISES were Perfect because they were the culmination of ALL PROPHECY.
5. His RECEPTION was Perfect because He was found by all who were looking for Him.
6. His TRADITIONS were Perfect because all the season points to Him.

Thus the world that cradled Christ was the world that Christianity entered - and by God's definition was the Fullness of Time: It was characterized by six things:

- Worldwide Citizenship
- Worldwide Language
- Worldwide Transportation
- Worldwide Peace
- Worldwide Moral Decline
- Worldwide Expectancy

In short order, let me demonstrate this:

1. God picked a time when there was global citizenship/language - **Acts 16:35** And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, "Let those men go." Why? Paul was far from home and in dire straits. So he used his rights as a citizen to help the church get started at Philippi.

He had no real home but heaven. Look again at **Acts 22:22** And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" But citizenship had its price. The empire began to puts its emphasis on Emperor (2) worship. It was the religious expression of the unity of the State which was seen in the empire, especially Caligula (A. D. 37-41) and Domitian (81-96). The Emperor ranked as:

- a. "God and sovereign Savior of human life" (so already Julius Caesar),
- b. "God's son" (Augustus),
- c. "Lord and God" (Domitian),
- d. "High Priest," "Savior of the World" (Augustus, Claudius, Nero),
- e. "King of Kings."
- f. His decrees were called "gospels" (good news),
- g. His letters "sacred writings."
- h. His arrival was termed a "parousia" (advent),
- i. His visit an "epiphany."

Through all this a clash with early Christianity was unavoidable. It was the chief ground of the persecution of Christians; and at the same time the empire of the first century became a type of Antichrist's empire of the End time (the 'beast', with the "names of blasphemy" on his heads adorned with diadems. **Rev. 13:1**). "And yet even this imperial will was subject to the will of the Most High.

From the center of the Mediterranean world there issued an order, affecting nations, the census decree of Caesar Augustus (**Luke 2:1**). But in the light of God's Word it was by the hand of the Lord of all Lords. God was about to fulfill an old prophetic word concerning a very small city in the land of Judah, the small city of Bethlehem Ephratah, the city of David (**Mic. 5:2; Luke 2:1-7**). Here verily the great and the small touch, and in the small the Greatest of all!!!"

2. God picked a time when there was global LANGUAGE - Greek became the common language Lingua Franca - Lang. Trade of World. A person could travel the entire known world from India to Britain and never be out of touch with what was going on. The language of the world was in place. So the good news about the sacrificial death of Jesus was quickly understood...
3. God picked a time when there was global COMMUNICATIONS. In the market place of every city there stood a milestone giving the distance from Rome. In the market of "Rome the eternal" there stood a golden milestone, erected by Augustus, which described the capital city as the heart of this giant, pulsating organism of peoples.
  1. Between Alexandria and Asia Minor there was a daily shipping connexion (Ramsay, Letters to the Seven Churches, 18, 435).
  2. According to Pliny one traveled from Spain to Ostia, the port of Rome, in four days, and in two days from Africa.
  3. The tomb inscription is known of a Phrygian merchant who not less than 72 times made the journey from Hierapolis, near Colosse in Asia Minor, to Rome, over 1,250 miles.

Without this notable world traffic the swift advance of early Christianity would have been inconceivable. Sea traffic was specially important to them, for early Christian gospel work was specially important to them, for early Christian gospel work was in great measure a labor in harbor cities, and especially so with Paul. "In the main the world of the apostle is to be sought where the sea wind blows." One need only think of Paul's sojourns in the ports of Caesarea, Troas, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and Rome.

Yet the land connections also were of the utmost importance. Even the most remote and isolated lands were opened up through roads and bridges. Already at that time a tolerably complete network of well-built highways, protected by walls and fortresses, spread itself over the whole empire. "All roads lead to Rome." On these imperial and main roads the messengers of the gospel later traveled, bringing to the world the joyful news of the

Redeemer who had appeared. Some estimate Paul alone journeyed by land and water a total of more than 15,000 miles.

4. God picked a time when there was global PEACE - This was an especial fruit of the rule of the Emperors. Since the Romans were the lords of the whole earth, the passions of the people became ever more allayed. There set in the much lauded "Roman Peace," Pax Romana . Although the period of Augustus was not entirely free from war, yet nevertheless at last the temple of Janus at Rome, the temple of the God of war, after over 200 years of uninterrupted fighting (since 236) could at length be shut, in the year 29 B. C. And for two centuries, until A. D. 180, the world lay in peace.
5. God picked a time when there was global DECADENCE/MORAL DECLINE and DEGENERATION - But morally this whole civilized world carried within itself the germ of death. The streams of gold which, especially since the victory over Hannibal (202 B. C.), flowed into the world's capital led to such luxury that filth and vulgarity soon lifted their heads in the most insolent manner.

According to the descriptions of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal, we cannot portray with adequate blackness the low moral state to which the aristocracy and highest State officials had sunk. Debauchery and gluttony, subornation and poisoning, vulgarity and immorality, unchastity and licentiousness were the order of the day, especially in the middle of the first century. The lowest classes had sunken equally low. In the large Hellenistic cities, especially of Italy, lack of work ruined the masses. "Panem et circenses" - "Bread and Games" - this was their demand to the rulers.

By day they loitered idly around; in the evening they went to the amphitheatre, the disgusting pleasure resort of Roman brutality. So vast were the crowds that pressed to the wild beast hunts, the gladiatorial contests, and the mimic sea battles, that the Emperor Vespasian and Titus caused to be built in Rome the vast Flavian amphitheater, which had 54,000 seats, and at the dedication of which, in spectacles lasting 120 days, not less than 12,000 beasts and 10,000 gladiators lost their lives. It was otherwise with the middle class. Here the papyri witness that there were still much decorum and morality, private family life, and strong religious feeling. Faith in the Gods of Greece and the Italian deities was indeed gone, on which account the mass of the people turned to the oriental deities from the remote East, which, in large numbers, were gaining ground at that time.

In fact, [Romans 1:28-32](#) may be Paul looking out a window. But finally, there was one more notable feature of those full times

6. God picked a time when there was global EXPECTANCY - Out of Egypt, Persia, Babylon and Asia Minor flowed the rivers of human religions and mystery God's. The "Fullness of Time" was also a time of great religious expectancy:
  - Isis and Osiris of Egypt
  - Mithras of Persia
  - Cybele of Asia Minor
  - Emperor Worship from the Orient
- a. State Gods, Greek Gods, Oriental Gods - all flowed into one vast river of human religious mixture.

Together this was the Oriental/Eastern secret religions. Moreover, most of these Oriental religions had the common root idea of faith in a Nature God who died and came again to life, at which they had arrived by deifying the fading and reviving of the vegetable world or the rising and setting of the sun, moon, and stars.

And in their religions, on December 25th, three days after death of the night rose the conquered Son...It was the birthday of Baal in Syria - Mithas in Persia, etc.

For so long man had focused on outward power, wealth, architecture, religion. But in the end each found he was inwardly bankrupt. Thus came the praise of death and the other side - when the body or prison of soul opened to let the "birthday of eternity."

SO THERE WAS SEEN AN EXPECTANCY - Both Suetonius (3) and Tacitus make mention of a wide-spread rumor that the Orient would become powerful and that a mighty movement would go forth from the Jews. Writing about A. D. 120, both historians report that it stands in the ancient priestly books that descendants of Jewry would seize world authority.

Extremely noteworthy is the ring of these presentiments in the fourth Shepherd song of the Roman poet Virgil, in the century before Christ. There the poet sings of a child who will bring back the Golden Age. The child descends from heaven. Then peace rules on the earth. The land dispenses its gifts without toil. The oxen no more fear the lion.

Thus, the World Law and Language combine with Communication/Peace and out of blackest moral decline is a strange expectancy that as the night is conquered by the light, so.....can we?

Until at last, coming from the East, from the rising of the sun, from the mouth of simple witnesses, becoming ever stronger and stronger, there rings the world-conquering proclamation:

THE ONE CONSCIOUSLY EXPECTED BY ISRAEL,

THE ONE UNCONSCIOUSLY DESIRED BY THE

PEOPLES OF THE WORLD:

He has come!

[Galatians 4:4-5](#)

4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

[Luke 1:78-79](#)

78 Through the tender mercy of our God, With which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; 79 To give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, To guide our feet into the way of peace."

God picked a time when there was global readiness and at that moment - CHRIST APPEARED!

Thus the whole pre-Christian history of salvation is a guiding of mankind to the Redeemer of the world. The people of Israel were prepared in advance by historical revelation; the peoples of the world by the happenings of politics and civilization.

The Old Testament is promise and expectation, the New is fulfillment and completion. The Old is the marshalling of the hosts to the battle of God, the New is the Triumph of the Crucified One. The Old is the twilight and dawn of morning, the New is the rising sun and the height of eternal day.

This Christmas (4) season, take a close look at a nativity scene once again. Remove your rose-colored glasses--smell the foul air, see the cold, shivering animals. They represent the Old Testament sacrificial system. They are emblems of death. But they are mere shadows of the Babe in their midst. He was born to die . . . that all who believe in him might live. In the winter of 5 or 4 B.C., God invaded history by taking on the form of a man. He was born in a small town just south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem, which means 'the house of bread,' indeed became worthy of its name one lonely winter night. For there, in that town, was born the Bread of Life . . .

His mother placed the infant king in a manger--or feeding trough--because the guest room where they were to stay was occupied. The birth of this king was celebrated that night only by his mother, her husband, and a handful of shepherds. The shepherds had been in the fields around Bethlehem, guarding the lambs which would die at the next Passover. An angel appeared to them and gave them the birth announcement: "today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" ([Luke 2:11](#)). In their simple faith, they rushed to see their newborn king.

1. ©1996 Daniel B. Wallace

2. Sauer, p.

3. See Tacitus Hist. V, 13, and Suetonius, Vesp. 4.

4. ©1996 Daniel B. Wallace

5. A. P. Gibbs, Worship, p. 45

6. ©1996 Daniel B. Wallace

7. Moody sermon book

8. MacArthur, John F., The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

9. I am indebted for this comparison to a small tract written years ago by Joseph Hoffran Cohn for the American Board of Missions to the Jews, entitled "The Man from Petra," No. 65 in the series "What Every Christian Should Know About the Jews" (revised 1961, no original date of publication).

10. MacArthur, John F., The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, (Chicago: Moody Press) 1983.

11. III, pp. 394ff.

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