

“Jesus [Christ] was born!”

1 John 4:1-3; 7-12

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My friends, hear the good news: On this day, in the city of David, Jesus Christ was born!

Or was he?

If you have watched the History Channel over the past week or at any point wondered about the origins of Christmas Day with a skeptical mind, you have more than likely begun to doubt the veracity of December 25th and its inescapable link with the birth of our Savior. Researching, or hearing of Saturnalia, Roman Mithraism or any of the other pagan festivals connected with this date would have surely by now provided enough ammunition to blast holes in even the most apologetic of traditional Christ's Mass backers.

Here's all of that somewhat simplified: It wasn't until the 4th Century A.D./C.E. or whatever you choose to call it that December 25th was settled upon for celebrating the Incarnation of the Word/Jesus' birth. Why? Well, according to most resources it was because of religion and politics, of course – what virtually every landmark decision in history has either been persuaded or coerced by.

You see, in the early days of Christianity there was a bit of rivalry. Paganism was still running rampant and being enjoyed openly. The Christian movement, though becoming increasingly more noticeable, hadn't yet reached its imperial peak by way of Constantine's “dream” and thus was still on the fringe of the societal forefront. So what better way to nudge Christianity further into the collective consciousness of the public than by championing the nativity of Jesus on a day previously ceremonialized for the Winter Solstice and the rebirth of pagan Sun gods?

And thus, Time conquered what it always defeats best – memory – and the birth of Jesus became forever entrenched in the season of winter. Interestingly however, it's probable that Jesus was born over half a year earlier, or later, in the springtime; and there's this whole exegesis which comes out of Luke 2, from the mentioned Roman census to the passage on *the shepherds keeping watch over their flock at night* that adds support to this claim (sheep were kept in pens, not in the fields during the winter; just as censuses were usually conducted during warmer months).

But as many have asked, even perhaps as you may now be asking yourselves, does any of this matter? Does it matter if December 25th was actually Christ's Earthly beginning; does it matter if Jesus was born somewhere between 7 and 2 B.C.E., or at the turn of the calendar; does it matter if it was in Bethlehem, Nazareth or some uncharted cave or haystack out in the fields? Really, should any of these questions peak anything other than the idle curiosity of our religiously inclined minds? Probably not.

So instead of questions of **when** and **where**, interesting though they may be, what ought to matter to us today is **why** Jesus was *born* at all. Yes, why? God being God could have just as easily descended and then walked around in the Middle East for a short period of time spreading a direct message from Heaven. Why go through the confusing hassle of an Immaculate

Conception, a Virgin Birth, and Magi following a star? Wouldn't God in God's infinite omniscience realize that come centuries later, when our culture celebrates flying reindeer and an omnipresent man in a red suit, that the Virgin Birth might be thought of in a similar light... as fantasy over reality?

Perhaps more poignantly, why would an immortal creator take on a finite form (human flesh) that was at least in part created by a mortal woman? It was precisely this type of thinking that inspired small bands of early Christians to believe that Jesus's body was only an illusion. These Separatists as 1 John called them, or Docetists as heresy remembers them thought that Jesus only appeared to have a physical body, that his essence in fact was pure spirit. These then are the people whom John is taking aim at in his letter when distinguishing between those being and not being of God. When John writes, *every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God*, these are the adversaries who he has in mind.

For John, like so many of us, Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine, but to the Docetists, Christ was pure divinity. Jesus was merely his name, his appearance so to be recognized by humanity, but not his reality. The Word was not literally made flesh, only figuratively. For if Jesus was to be considered fully divine and fully human then that would have to infer that **God** was *born* from an inferior in Mary to ultimately *die* on a wooden cross; and God being God simply could not succumb to either of those fates.

Logically speaking, these early Gnostics weren't far off from the mark of common sense, especially when you connect their Christological teachings to the then accepted pagan interpretations of the divine. To them, Docetic thought was a way to bridge the newness of Christianity with traditional understandings of the Heavenly entities.

But oh, how they missed this crucial point: Jesus did not exist simply to become the next Hercules, Adonis or Horus. No, Jesus was not compatible with them nor was he meant to be. He was not a myth, nor a vehicle simply to tell a story. Yes, maybe some of his narrative became embellished... maybe he never walked on water or fed 5,000, maybe it was only 50. But Jesus was born of woman and Jesus did die on an old rugged cross. He cried at the manger and he wept at Lazarus' tomb; he got angry with his disciples and furious at the synagogue. He laughed, He loved, He lived. Jesus [the anointed one] came in the flesh so that we may both know him and recognize the God who lives in those who love as he loved, and every spirit that does not confess that Truth is not from God. My friends, he was real. He was real. Jesus was Real!

So on this day and in this season, when we can so easily be caught up in the fantasy of Clause, the fallacy of this date, or the difficult mystery of the Virgin Birth, let us remember that Jesus was not an illusion. Let us take down the stained glass and see beyond the extravaganza. Let us remove the halo and see his beard. Let us see him as a man who came to John in the desert to get baptized, like everyone else, like all of us.

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I must say, there's such a unique quality to the Gospel of Mark, the lesser referenced though first written account of our Lord. Of course, Mark was not our lesson for today but that's for an obvious reason. You see, there is no nativity; there is no pomp and circumstance. It simply begins with a proclamation of good news, a reference to prophecy, and then we meet a fully grown Jesus who comes to John to be baptized. Now, according to an alternative reading, which admittedly I find seductively interesting, it is at this point, at his baptism, when Jesus is "adopted" by God. It's called Adoptionism, and yes, it is another heresy. It follows that Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph without miraculous intervention and *became* the Son of God; not at his birth but at his baptism when God witnessed in Jesus the complete embodiment of the Word, of the prophecies from old; that through his special faith and complete understanding of the true nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, God thereby chose this man to become the Messianic messenger of the Holiest of Words.

Recently this reading of Mark, in addition to its Messianic Secret theology, has gained some notoriety amongst scholars. Perhaps however, it should also gain momentum in our understanding of Christmas and the message it holds for us today. That in celebrating Jesus' coming into the world, irrespective if it commenced on this day of winter or in the warmer days of spring, we ought also commence our own rebirth, reclamation, and redemption with the anointed one; recognizing that God is indeed in each of us just as 1 John exclaimed, choosing and loving and beckoning us all closer toward embodying the grafted Word of Divinity.

Praise be to our example in Jesus the Christ.

Hallelujah! Amen.