

The History of Christmas

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1. Tonight I am going to talk about the history of Christmas.
2. Some of you might be thinking – this is going to be a very short talk.
3. Jesus was born 2016 years ago and we celebrate his birth on December 25.
4. As you will see, the history of Christmas is a little more complicated than that.

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1. For more than 300 years, Christians celebrated the resurrection of Jesus but did not celebrate his birth.
2. As Jewish historian Josephus explained near the end of the first century, **“[Jewish] law does not permit us to make festivals at the births of our children, and thereby afford occasion of drinking to excess”** Josephus *Against Apion* II.26.
3. As a result, early Christians paid very little attention to the date of Jesus’ birth
4. Paul’s letters and the *Gospels of Mark* and *John* say nothing at all about the birth of Jesus.

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1. *Matthew* and *Luke* place Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but they provide contradictory evidence about when it occurred.
2. *Luke* says that Jesus was about 30 in the **“fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.”** *Luke* 3:1, 23.
3. The fifteenth year of Tiberius was year 784 under the Roman calendar, so 30 years earlier would have been 754.
4. Using this calculation, in 533 A.D. a monk set Roman year 754 as the first year of our Lord, 1 *anno Domini*.
5. So far, so good.

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1. But the Bible also says that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod and suggests that Jesus was born at least two years before Herod died. *Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1, 16.*
2. Herod died in 750 in the Roman calendar, which is 4 B.C.
3. So, if Jesus was born before the death of Herod, he could not have been born after 4 B.C.

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1. *Luke* says that Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, to register in a census
2. That idea is shown in this medieval mosaic in a church near Istanbul.

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1. *Luke* says the **“census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”** *Luke 2:2.*
2. Quirinius **was** governor of Syria and he did hold a census in Judea, where Bethlehem was located.
3. But Quirinius became governor in 6 A.D., ten years after Herod died.
4. So, if Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, as the Bible says, he could not have been born during the time of Quirinius, as the Bible also says.
5. So we don't really know within ten years even the year Jesus was born.

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1. According to *Luke*, Jesus was born when **“there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.”** *Luke 2:8.2.*
2. Winter nights in Bethlehem are cold and rainy, so shepherds would not have been outside with their animals at night until at least the end of March, when the lambs were born.

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1. If early Christians did not celebrate the birthday of Jesus at all and he was probably born in the spring, why do we now celebrate it on December 25?
2. The answer lies in fourth century Rome.

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1. Romans spent a week beginning on December 17 in a raucous celebration called Saturnalia, honoring Saturn, the god of agriculture and fertility.
2. Courts were closed and laws governing ordinary relationships were suspended.
3. Slaves were given a week of freedom and the right to control their masters.
4. It was time of drunkenness and sexual permissiveness.

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1. People went house to house singing in the nude and demanding gifts.
2. About the only people working were the bakers, who reportedly turned out erotic human shaped biscuits.

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1. At the beginning of Saturnalia, a man down on his luck was selected as Lord of Misrule to symbolize the turning of society upside down.
2. At least one Lord of Misrule was killed at the end of the celebration as a sacrifice to the gods to induce the return of the sun.

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1. Saturnalia ended on December 24, the winter solstice under the Julian calendar then being used.
2. Romans celebrated December 25, when the days began to lengthen, as the birthday of Mithra, a sun god said to have been born from a rock and worshipped as *sol invictus*, the unconquered sun.
3. In 313 A.D., Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and Romans began converting to Christianity in larger numbers.
4. As you might expect, many new Christians did not want to give up celebrating Saturnalia and Mithra's birthday.
5. Someone pointed out that that Mithra was the unconquered sun and *Malachi 4:2* in the Bible said the Messiah would be the **“sun of righteousness.”**
6. The same passage also said they should **“go out and frolic like well-fed calves,”** so it was obvious the birthday of Jesus and Mithra had to be on the same day.
7. In 336 A.D., Roman Christians first celebrated the birthday of Jesus on December 25 while those around them were celebrating the birthday of Mithra.

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1. In 350 A.D. Pope Julius I officially decreed that Jesus had been born on December 25 and Christians could continue celebrating on that day and during the week leading up to it.
2. A twelfth century Catholic bishop explained the rationale: **"It was a custom of the Pagans to celebrate on the same 25 December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and revelries the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnised on that day."**
3. December 25 was initially celebrated as the "Feast of the Nativity."
4. It was not until the eleventh century that the celebration was given the name "Christ's Mass," connecting the celebration to a religion service.

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1. The eight-day celebration of Hanukkah also starts on the 25th day of the month, the lunar month of Kislev (Kiss Lef), which always occurs this time of year.
2. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after the victory of the Maccabees in the second century B.C.
3. Some scholars believe the date of Hanukkah, like that of Christmas, allowed an ancient celebration of the winter solstice to be repurposed.
4. This year, Hanukkah will begin on sunset on December 24 and continue until nightfall on January 1.

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1. When Pope Gregory I sent Christian missionaries throughout Europe, he encouraged them to adapt pagan buildings and traditions to the service of Christianity.
2. Celebrating Christmas on December 25 enabled Christians to continue celebrating other winter solstice holidays started by pagans.

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1. Germanic Christians added to their Christmas celebration the traditional burning of an enormous Yule log, which they had long associated with hastening the return of the sun.
2. Each spark from the burning log meant another pig or calf would be born in the spring.

3. To guarantee a good year, they tried to keep the log burning for twelve days, a tradition that found its way to England.

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1. By the Middle Ages, the debauchery associated with Saturnalia and other pagan celebrations had become part of the celebration of Christmas in much of Europe.
2. People attended church and then celebrated in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere.

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1. As in Saturnalia, a beggar or student would be crowned the Lord of Misrule and eager celebrants played the part of his subjects, doing whatever tomfoolery he requested.
2. The poor would go to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink, threatening the owners with mischief if they didn't comply.
3. The verse in *We Wish You a Merry Christmas* that **“we won't go until we've got some”** reflects this tradition.

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1. In the mid-1500s, Hugh Latimer, the Protestant Bishop of Worcester, England, said: **“Men dishonor Christ more in the 12 days of Christmas than in all the 12 months beside.”**
2. In the 1583, Philip Stubbes, an English Puritan, complained about Christmas: **“That more mischief is at that time committed than in all the year besides, what masking and mumming, whereby robbery, whoredom, murder and what not is committed? What dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used, more than in all the year besides, to the great dishonour of God and impoverishing of the realm.”**
3. Presbyterian Scotland began discouraging celebration of Christmas in 1583 and banned it for a time in the seventeenth century.
4. In 1647, when English Puritans overthrew King Charles I, Parliament banned the celebration of Christmas as being totally un-Christian and a threat to public order.
5. Shops were ordered to stay open and ministers were arrested for preaching anything about the birth of Jesus on December 25.
6. When Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660, the laws banning Christmas were repealed and the drunken revelry resumed.

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1. In 1659, Boston Puritans outlawed the “Satanical Practices” of Christmas as a “sacrilege.”
2. The laws banning Christmas were repealed, but New England ministers continued railing against Christmas in their sermons.

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1. In 1687, the Reverend Increase Mather of Massachusetts, the father of Cotton Mather, explained the hostility: “[T]he early Christians who first observed the **Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens’ Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian ones.**”
2. In 1712, Cotton Mather preached that "**the feast of Christ's nativity is spent in reveling, dicing, carding, masking, and in all licentious liberty . . . by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd gaming, by rude reveling!**"

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1. In 1806, a drunken Christmas Day riot in New York City led to the first New York policeman killed in the line of duty.
2. In 1826, drunken cadets at West Point started the so-called Eggnog riot, leading to the court martial of 20 of them.

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1. St. Nicholas, said to have been born in what is now Turkey in about 270 A.D., became the key to a reinvention of Christmas.
2. At least according to tradition, Nicholas became a Christian bishop and attended the Council of Nicaea called by Emperor Constantine in 325.
3. He reportedly performed miracles involving sailors and children.
4. Nicholas became legendary for giving secret gifts, including putting coins and food in the shoes and socks of poor children.
5. In time, French nuns honored his feast day on December 6 by delivering candy to the shoes and socks of children who had been good, telling the children the gifts had been delivered by St. Nicholas himself.

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1. St. Nicholas became very popular in Holland
2. This church in Amsterdam honors him.

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1. The Dutch combined the legends of St. Nicholas with those of Woden, a Norse god with a long beard who traveled through the sky on a flying horse and for whom Wednesday is named.
2. To encourage children to study their catechisms, Dutch parents told their children St. Nicholas would visit them on December 5, the day before his feast day.
3. Dressed in bishop's robes and hat, a bearded St. Nicholas would distribute sweets and fruit to children who had been diligent in their studies.
4. He was accompanied by Black Peter, who brought switches for children who disobeyed their parents.

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1. St. Nicholas became known to Dutch children as *Sinterklaas*.
2. *Sinterklaas* and Black Peter still visit Holland on December 5.

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1. The idea of St. Nicholas giving gifts to obedient children on December 5 spread to Germany and came to the attention of Martin Luther.
2. For Protestant Luther, celebrating the feast day of a Catholic saint was inconsistent with his teaching that feast days had no Biblical support.
3. To maintain the tradition, but on a different basis, Luther taught his followers to tell their children that they would be visited on Christmas Eve by *Christkindl*, German for Christ Child.
4. Because Jesus was knowledgeable about everything, *Christkindl* would be able to reward those children who had been obedient during the previous year.

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1. Children in German-speaking countries are still told that they

- 2 Today, *Christkindl* does not look much like the Baby Jesus.

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1. Dutch settlers brought the idea of *Sinterklaas* to New York, where it came to the attention of Washington Irving, who wrote, sometimes satirically, about Dutch culture.
2. In the early nineteenth century, Irving, who was not Dutch, wrote about *Sinterklaas* and a dream in which "**the good St. Nicholas came riding over the tops of the trees, in that self-same wagon wherein he brings his yearly presents to children.**"
3. Irving also wrote about an imagined English Christmas celebrated with family and gift giving and not drunken revelry at its core.

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1. Charles Dickens later credited Irving's imaginary English Christmas as his inspiration for *A Christmas Carol*, which became popular in the United States.
2. Influenced by Irving's and Dickens' new visions of Christmas, New Yorkers began exchanging Christmas wishes and stores stayed open during the days leading up to Christmas to accommodate shoppers.

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1. Irving's idea of Christmas as a time of gift giving and family togetherness was propelled by his friend, Clement Moore, who wrote *A Visit by Saint Nicholas*,
2. First published anonymously in 1823, the poem gave Saint Nicholas a new appearance, having nothing to do with the bishop whose gift giving legend started the whole idea.

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1. Moore took Irving's dream of St. Nicholas flying through the sky, itself based on Woden, and created a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer.
2. Unlike the Dutch version, when Moore's St. Nicholas came "**twas the night before Christmas,**" an idea borrowed from Luther's *Christkindl*.
3. As you can see from the caption of this cartoon, by 1841 some people had Santa Claus coming down the chimney on New Year's Eve.

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1. St. Nicholas or *Sinterklaas* became Santa Claus, *Christkindl* became Kris Kringle and the two became indistinguishable, both coming in the United States on Christmas Eve.
2. Children were told if they were good, Santa Claus or Kris Kringle would put presents under an evergreen tree, a custom brought to the United States from Germany.

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1. American cartoonist Thomas Nash published numerous illustrations of Moore's vision of St. Nicholas, adding elves and a workshop at the North Pole.
2. The idea of Christmas as a holiday of gift giving and family togetherness began to catch on beyond New York.

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1. The first Christmas card was published in England in 1843.
2. Early Christmas cards had nothing to do with the birth of Jesus, but promoted the idea of a "Merry Christmas" made popular by Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

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1. In 1856, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a New Englander, noted that people were beginning to see Christmas as a "**cheerful, hearty holiday**" despite its notorious past.
2. In 1859, an Episcopal priest in New York City translated *Silent Night* into English.
3. In 1863, Longfellow contributed to the changing idea of Christmas with his poem, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*.

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1. President Grant declared Christmas Day declared a federal holiday in 1870, along with New Year's Day, the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving.
2. The first department store Santa appeared in the 1890s, looking a lot different than he looks today.

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1. By the beginning of the twentieth century, cards using Xmas appeared.

2. X is the Greek letter chi, the first letter of Christos that has been used as symbol for Christ since the first Christians used IchThUS, the Greek word for fish, to represent “Jesus Christ God’s Son Savior.”

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1. In 1931, the Coca-Cola Company commissioned an artist to create an image of Santa Claus for use in advertising materials, emphasizing the red and white colors of his fur trimmed suit and hat.
2. That image cemented the way Santa Claus is supposed to look in the minds of most Americans.
3. For American children, Santa Claus and not Jesus now sees them when they’re sleeping and knows when they’re awake.

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1. In 1939, Montgomery Ward published a children’s book about Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.
2. The idea was originally rejected because the red nose suggested the drunkenness of Christmas past.

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1. American ideas of Christmas and Santa Claus have spread around the world.
2. These Santa Clauses are in South Korea, where Christmas is a national holiday even though the majority of the population professes no religion.

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1. This is just outside the Old City of Jerusalem.
2. Santa Claus is selling Christmas trees.

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1. Not everyone is happy with the Americanization of their holidays.
2. For generations, Greek children have been visited on New Year’s Eve by St. Basil.
3. Based on the influence of Santa Claus, St. Basil began looking like this.

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1. The Greek Orthodox Church recently published this icon of St. Basil.
2. The expressed purpose was **“to attempt to encourage children (and adults) to remember the true likeness of St. Basil, ie. not as an overweight ‘Coke-a-Cola’ Santa Claus.”**

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1. Based on this history, some people ask: **“Why put Christ back into Christmas when he was never there in the first place?”**
2. But the desire to put Christ into Christmas is not new.
3. In 1223, Saint Francis of Assisi created a living Nativity scene to try to get people to see Christmas as a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus and not a time for drunkenness and debauchery.

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1. Some Americans follow this example by displaying their own Nativity scenes.
2. But most Nativity scenes often have little to do with the story told in the Bible.

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1. Despite the popularity of *We Three Kings*, the Bible never says how many wise men came to visit Jesus.
2. The idea there were three comes from the fact that *Matthew 2:11* says they brought three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh.
3. *Matthew 2:11* says the wise men visited Jesus, then a **“child with his mother Mary,”** in **“the house.”**
4. Jesus was probably about two years old at the time.

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1. The typical Nativity scene showing Jesus in a drafty barn made out of wood is almost certainly wrong, as is the idea that Joseph and Mary were turned away from an inn.
2. In the first place, very little in Israel is made from wood, which is scarce.
3. According to the original Greek of *Luke 2:7*, Jesus was **“placed in a manger”** because there was no place in the *kataluma*.

4. Some early English translators, never having seen a Palestinian house, mistranslated *kataluma* as “inn,” leading to countless stories of the heartless inn keeper who turned away the mother of God.

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1. This is the main room of a house in Taybeh, Palestine, that is like houses at the time of Jesus.
2. At night, the family, adults and children alike, slept together on mats on the floor.
3. To the left of the wall on the right are a few steps that lead into a room behind the wall where people who were not family could stay.
4. In Greek, this room was called the *kataluma*, which is correctly translated as “upper room” in English translations of *Luke 22:12*, describing where Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples.
5. The most recent version of the *New International Version* of the Bible, one of the most popular Bibles among Protestants, now says that Jesus was born in a manger **“because there was no guest room available for them.”** *Luke 2:7* (NIV).

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1. If the *kataluma* was the guest room in a house and not an inn, where was the manger?
2. This area for animals was directly below the main floor of Palestinian houses, formed from the caves around Bethlehem.
3. Palestinian homes often kept animals in the house at night and Palestinians mothers even today often put their new born babies in the manger, where they can be kept warm by the animal heat.
4. So, since the guest room above was not available, either because it was filled or not suitable for a birth, Jesus was placed in the manger in the house.

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1. The ancient tradition of Jesus being born in a cave is reflected in Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity.
2. Emperor Constantine sent His mother Helena to Israel to identify the places where Biblical events had taken place.
3. One of the places she identified was the cave where Jesus was said to have been born, where she erected the first church in 327 A.D.

4. Much of that original church was destroyed about 200 years later, but was rebuilt by Roman Emperor Justinian in the sixth century.
5. When the Persians invaded Israel in the seventh century and destroyed all the churches they could find, they spared this one because they saw pictures of the Magi, the wise men, on the wall and thought the church somehow related to Persia.

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1. Below the church is the cave where Helena determined that Jesus had been born.
2. The Eastern Orthodox Christians who control the Church of the Nativity celebrate Christmas on December 25.
3. However, they still use the Julian calendar, which now differs from the Gregorian calendar by 13 days.
4. This year, December 25 will come on January 7 on the Gregorian calendar.

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1. Nativity scenes often show palm trees near the stable.
2. People apparently imagine Bethlehem as an oasis, probably because of the camels in Nativity scenes.

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1. But Bethlehem is characterized by grassy fields and olive trees,
2. The only palm trees were imported to satisfy tourists.

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1. There **is** a tradition that Jesus was born under a palm tree.
2. According to the Quran, the pain of child birth drove the Virgin Mary to a palm tree, which she shook to obtain dates before Jesus was born. *Quran 19:23–25*.

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1. So, there you have it – the history of Christmas (or at least as much of it as I could tell you in 30 minutes.)
2. And so, to everyone, a right Merry Christmas.