

Away in a Manger
Stories of Jesus' Birth
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Slide 1

1. Last week we looked at Jewish writings from the time of Jesus showing what people at the time expected of the Messiah.
2. As we saw, first century Christians concluded that Jesus met those expectations and was therefore the promised Messiah.
3. After Christians concluded that Jesus was the Messiah, they began writing about his birth.
4. Today, we will look at some of the stories of the birth of Jesus, looking at the people and places the Bible connects to those stories.
5. We will tell the story as it is usually told, adding some details from history along the way that will both shed light and perhaps cast doubts on parts of the story.
6. We will also look at some stories of Jesus' birth told in writings that are not included in the New Testament.
7. We will also see how interpretation of a single verse recited in many churches during the Christmas season is at the heart of the religious differences among Christianity, Judaism and Islam.
8. We will end with an explanation of why we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25.

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1. In 63 B.C., Roman forces under Pompey entered Jerusalem and conquered the independent Hasmonean Kingdom established by the Maccabees.
2. Judea became a province of the Roman Empire.

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1. During this period of Roman occupation, people began hoping for someone who would rescue them from the Romans and restore their independence.
2. Seeing that Cyrus the Great had allowed their ancestors to return from exile in Babylon and had been anointed by God, they began referring to their rescuer as "the Anointed One" or, in Hebrew, "the Messiah."

3. A book written during the Roman occupation contains **“one of the chief Messianic passages in the post-Biblical literature in Judaism.”** Surburg, *Introduction to the Intertestamental Period* at 145.
4. The book, called *Psalms of Solomon*, comprises 18 psalms, mimicking the style of the original *Psalms* but attributing them to Solomon instead of David.
5. Psalms 17 and 18 pray for a **“king, the son of David”** and **“the Lord Messiah,”** who will **“shatter [the] unrighteous rulers”** and **“reign over Israel.”** *Psalms of Solomon* 17:21 - 22, 32.
6. The prayer asks: **“May God purify Israel for the day of mercy in blessing, for the appointed day when He raises up his Messiah.”** *Psalms of Solomon* 18:5.

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1. In about 37 B.C., the Roman Senate appointed Herod ruler of Judea – here you see Herod coming into Jerusalem.
2. Herod, known as “Herod the Great,” was one of the great rulers of his era.

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1. For 33 years Herod ruled Judea and engaged in extraordinary building projects to bring more prestige in Rome to his dusty little province.
2. Herod built a new city called Caesarea Maritima along the Mediterranean coast, with an artificial harbor.

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1. The people who lived in Caesarea Maritima lived very well.
2. This theatre held 3,500 people.

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1. This race track was used for chariot racing.
2. The residents of Caesarea Maritima lived in the style of Romans, even though most of them had Jewish ancestors.

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1. But others in the rural areas were living a much more traditional life.
2. This is a reconstructed village from the early first century near the Sea of Galilee, where people made a basic living fishing.

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1. The people who lived in the villages and rural areas saw Herod as a foreign ruler, even though he had Jewish ancestry.
2. In their synagogues they prayed for the Messiah, who would restore their independence and eliminate what they saw as the corrupt and immoral behavior that the Romans had brought to their land.
3. The expectation of a Messiah grew stronger as what we now call 4 B.C. approached.
4. By then, the Romans had been in control for almost 60 years.
5. The Judeans knew that their ancestors had been held in Babylon for about 60 years before they were allowed to return by Cyrus the Great.

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1. Jesus was born into this era of fervent Messianic expectation, but exactly when is not clear.
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 he was two years old when 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 was born before 4 B.C.
4. Most scholars believe Jesus was born between 6 and 4 B.C.

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1. According to the *Gospel of Luke*, the angel Gabriel appeared in Nazareth to Mary, “**a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.**” *Luke* 1:27.

2. This is the modern city of Nazareth – the Jezreel Valley is in the background, looking south.
3. The trade routes from Egypt to Asia and Europe passed through this valley.
4. As a result, this valley has been the scene of many battles throughout history, as major powers sought to control those routes.
5. Today, Nazareth is a city of about 60,000 people.
6. In the first century, Nazareth was probably about in the middle of the picture, in the lowest part of this saddle shaped ridge.

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1. This cave in Nazareth has been associated with the angel’s visit to Mary since about 380 A.D., when a Spanish nun named Lady Egeria visited Nazareth and returned saying that she had found the cave in which Mary’s family lived.
2. The stairs are said to lead to the kitchen.
3. The column marks the spot where tradition says Gabriel stood while telling Mary: **“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.”** *Luke* 1:31.
4. Surprising to most Christians, the Quran also describes the angel’s announcement to Mary: **“When the angels said: O Mary, surely Allah gives thee good news with a word from Him (of one) whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, worthy of regard in this world and the Hereafter, and of those who are drawn nigh (to Allah).”** *Quran* 3:45.
5. Note that the Quran describes Jesus as the “Messiah.”

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1. According to *Luke*, this is how Mary responded to the angel’s statement that she would conceive and bear a son: **“‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’”** *Luke* 1:34.
2. The Quran reports an almost identical response: **“She said: My Lord, how can I have a son and man has not yet touched me?”** *Quran* 3:47.

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1. It is in the angel’s answer to Mary’s question that we find the fundamental disagreement between Christians and Muslims about the nature of Jesus.

2. According to *Luke*, “[t]he angel answered, **‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’**” *Luke* 1:35.
3. This verse, probably first written in about 80 A.D., is among the cornerstones for the Christian belief that Jesus is the divine Son of God.
4. Most Christians, hearing these familiar words at Christmastime, never hear them as Muslims hear them.
5. Many Muslims hear in these words a clear reference to a sexual encounter between God and Mary, resulting in Jesus being the “son of God” in the most literal sense.
6. A literal translation of the original Greek makes the basis for this interpretation even clearer: **“The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee, therefore also the holy-begotten thing shall be called Son of God.”** *Luke* 1:35 (Young’s Literal Translation).
7. The word “begotten” itself suggests procreation, leaving aside the language about the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and the power of God overshadowing her.

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1. As one author states: **“When Muslims hear the phrase ‘Son of God,’ they understand it to imply that God had physical relations with a woman in order to have a son.”** Halverson, *The Illustrated Guide to the World Religions* at 117.
2. Muslims reject this idea of the son of God as a pagan concept, similar to the Egyptian story of Isis, who bore Horus after a sexual encounter with Osiris, the god of the dead.
3. This statement in the Quran is typical: **“Wonderful Originator of the heavens and earth! How could He have a son when He has no consort?”** *Quran* 6:101.
4. One of the harshest statements against Christians in the entire Quran is based on the claim that early Christians adopted pagan beliefs in asserting that Jesus is the son of God.
5. **“[A]nd the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. These are the words of their mouth. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before. Allah’s curse be on them! How they are turned away!**” *Quran* 9:30.
6. Here is the commentary to this statement in a popular translation: **“We are told here that the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ was the son of God was borrowed from earlier pagan people. . . . In fact, when St. Paul saw that the Jews would on no account accept Jesus Christ as the messenger of God, he introduced the pagan**

doctrine of sonship of God into the Christian religion, so that it might become more acceptable to the pagans.” Ali, *The Holy Quran* at 405 n. 30b.

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1. The Quran’s report about the angel’s response to Mary demonstrates the difference between Christians and Muslims about Jesus’ conception.
2. **“She said: My Lord, how can I have a son and man has not yet touched me? He said, Even so; Allah creates what He pleases. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, Be, and it is so.”** *Quran* 3:47.
3. For Muslims, God created Jesus without a father in the same way he created Adam without a father: **“The likeness of Jesus with Allah is truly as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him, Be, and he was.”** *Quran* 3:39.
4. Here is what one author says: **“Islam honors Jesus as a prophet and accepts his virgin birth; Adam’s and Jesus’ souls are the only two that God created directly. The Koran draws the line at the Incarnation and the Trinity, however, seeing these as inventions that blur the Divine/human distinction. . . . Muslims are not fond of parental images of God, even when employed metaphorically. To speak of human beings as ‘God’s children’ casts God in too human a mode. It is anthropomorphic.”** Smith, *The World’s Religions* at 236.

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1. Although, as we saw last week, there is evidence that first century Jews may have expected a divine Messiah, Jewish people today have an understanding of the nature of Jesus that is very similar to that of Muslims.
2. Today, the idea of a Jesus being a “Son of God” **“is incompatible with Jewish monotheism.”** Shanks, *Partings* at 15.
3. As one author writes: **“[T]he Christian doctrine that God took the form of a human being in Christ is contrary to Jewish beliefs. To the Jew, God has no human form and no human being has been or ever can be the incarnation of God.”** Trepp, *A History of the Jewish Experience* at 100.

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1. The Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth is built over the cave where tradition says that Mary learned from the angel that she would give birth to Jesus.
2. This church was built in the 1960s by the Franciscans, on the site of earlier churches dating back to about 500 A.D.

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1. The Church of the Annunciation, the largest church in the Middle East, is on two levels.
2. The first level is modern looking, with colorful art.
3. The bottom level includes the cave associated with the Annunciation to Mary.

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1. In the last 50 years or so, some people expressed doubt about whether Nazareth even existed at the time of Jesus.
2. Nazareth is not mentioned in any list of cities and towns from that period and is first mentioned in the New Testament.
3. Before construction of the new church, extensive excavation was carried out in the area where the church was to be built.
4. This cave was found very near where the church was to be built and is maintained today in an area adjacent the church.
5. The cave appears to have been used as part of a residence.
6. The excavations also uncovered a quantity of lamps and other items from the time between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D.
7. Today, most people believe that Nazareth, at the time of Mary, was a farming village of perhaps 35 families or about 200 people.

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1. Although the Church of the Annunciation is the most popular church in Nazareth associated with Gabriel's announcement to Mary, it is not the only one.
2. The nearby Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gabriel lies over an ancient spring, visible below the church, which first became a church site early in the fourth century.
3. The original church was built by Roman Emperor Constantine, apparently at the urging of one Count Joseph, who claimed Gabriel had spoken to Mary at the spring.

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1. Perhaps both churches are correct in associating their locations with Gabriel's announcement to Mary.
2. The *Infancy Gospel of James*, a popular second century text elaborating on the Biblical narratives about Mary, reports that Gabriel first approached Mary as she was

fetching water for her jar and then completed his revelation in Mary's home, to which she had retreated, trembling with fear.

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1. *Matthew* and *Luke* both report that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, about 100 miles south of Nazareth. *Matthew* 2:1; *Luke* 2:4.
2. Bethlehem was the ancestral home of David, the king who united the tribes of Israel into a single country.
3. The Hebrew prophet Micah said that **“one who will be ruler over Israel”** would be born in Bethlehem. *Micah* 5:2.
4. As a result, many Jews at the time of Herod expected a Messiah capable of liberating Israel to be born in Bethlehem.

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1. Many scholars today are skeptical of the claim, first made perhaps 80 years after Jesus' birth, that he was born in Bethlehem. See Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* at 85-89.
2. They base their skepticism on the only reason the Bible gives for why Mary, ready to deliver, would travel 100 miles from her home in Nazareth to give birth.
3. The *Gospel of Luke* says that Joseph, the fiancé of Mary, had to travel to Bethlehem, his ancestral home, to register in a **“census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”** *Luke* 2:2.
4. That event is pictured in the Church of Christ the Savior near Istanbul, Turkey.

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1. Roman records establish that Quirinius was a governor of Syria and he did hold a census in Judea, where Bethlehem was located.
2. The census became well known for triggering a riot.
3. But the Roman records indicate that Quirinius first became governor in 6 A.D., ten years after the death of King Herod in 4 B.C.
4. So, if Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, as both *Matthew* and *Luke* unambiguously assert, the census that *Luke* says took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was at least ten years in the future.
5. Many scholars believe that Jesus was actually born in Nazareth.

6. They believe the Biblical authors, writing generations later without a detailed calendar, placed Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to satisfy expectations that a Messiah would come from Bethlehem.

7. In fact, the *Gospel of John*, which says nothing about Jesus being born in Bethlehem, notes that Nathaniel, who became his disciple, said this when hearing that **“Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,”** was the Messiah: **“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”** *John* 1:45-46.

8. John also reports that some people rejected Jesus as the Messiah precisely because he was **“from Galilee”** and *not* **“from Bethlehem.”** *John* 7:41-42.

9. As one author writes: **“[I]n ordinary history, Jesus was from Nazareth; according to salvation history, the redeemer of Israel *should* have been born in Bethlehem.”** Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* at 85.

10. Of course, those who believe that every word in the Bible is literally true disagree, claiming that Quirinius may also have served at an earlier time and conducted an earlier, but unreported, census even though the Bible says the one mentioned was **“the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.”** *Luke* 2:2.

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1. Today Bethlehem lies in the Palestinian Territory and has about 22,000 people.
2. It is located about 8 miles south of Jerusalem.
3. These Palestinian farmers near Bethlehem are doing pretty much what farmers have always done in that area.

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1. Also near Bethlehem is a watch tower that is built the same way it would have been built two thousand years ago.
2. Farmers stay in the tower to protect their crops from animals and other predators.
3. In this case, the watch tower guards a vineyard that still uses the techniques used for thousands of years.

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1. Because life has not changed much in the last 2000 years in the area around Bethlehem, many people believe it is possible here to get a better sense of the logistics of the story of Jesus' birth if he really was born in Bethlehem.

2. The town of Taybeh, a few miles from Bethlehem, contains a house that has been saved from destruction because it is very similar to first century hill country houses from the time of King Herod.

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1. This is the main room in the house.
2. At night, the family, adults and children alike, slept together on mats on the floor.

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1. In the wall to the right are holes for storing food and other items.
2. To the left are a few steps that lead into a room behind the wall where people who were not immediate family members could sleep or conduct other activities.
3. In Greek, this raised area was called a “*kataluma*,” a word meaning essentially “an upper place where people could stay” or simply an “upper room.”

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1. This area directly below the main floor of the Taybeh house is formed from a cave under the house.
2. Animals were kept in this area below the house - toward the back you can see the feed trough or the manger.
3. So what does this house have to do with the Christmas story?
4. I’m sure that you have heard that Jesus was laid “**in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.**” *Luke 2:7 (KJV)*
5. The word “inn” was chosen by the translators of the King James Bible, who were familiar with English inns but had never been to Israel.
6. The Greek word that the authors of the King James Bible translated as “inn” is actually “*kataluma*,” the word that describes the raised guest room of a first century hill country house and is the same word that is translated “upper room” in connection with *Luke’s* description of the Last Supper. *Luke 22:12.*
7. In the 1961 edition of the *New English Bible*, *Luke 2:7* reads: “**She wrapped him round, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them to lodge in the house.**”
8. 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).*

9. For many people, these translations make more sense than the traditional translation – there is no archeological evidence of any inn in Bethlehem in the first century, when it was a tiny village of perhaps 300 people a few miles from Jerusalem.
10. It also makes sense that Joseph, whose family is said to have come from Bethlehem, would have first considered staying in the family's guest room, which may have contained other members of the extended family or may not have been an appropriate place to give birth.
11. They then went to the stable below the house.
12. As you can see, the manger is about the right size for a new born baby.
13. Palestinians mothers even today put their new born babies in the manger, where they can be kept warm by the animal heat.
14. This understanding would also explain why the earliest traditions have Jesus being born in a cave - the cave was below the house, where the manger was.

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1. The tradition of Jesus being born in a cave is reflected in the Church of the Nativity, a church built in the fourth century over what was thought to be that very cave.
2. The original church on this spot was built by Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine.
3. In the early part of the fourth century A.D., Constantine decreed that Christianity was an official religion of the Roman Empire.
4. He sent his mother Helena to Israel to identify the places where Biblical events had taken place and to erect churches at those places.
5. One of the places she identified was the cave where Jesus was said to have been born, where she erected the first church on this site in 327 A.D.
6. Much of that original church was destroyed about 200 years later, but was rebuilt by Roman Emperor Justinian to be even grander.
7. Much of what remains today dates to that period, making it one of the oldest, if not the oldest, church in the world.
8. When the Persians invaded Israel in the seventh century and destroyed all the churches they could find, they spared this one.
9. The prevailing story is that they saw pictures of the wise men and thought the church related to Persia.

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1. This is inside the church.
2. Much of this dates back to the sixth century.

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1. Below the church is the cave where Helena determined that Jesus had been born.
2. You can see the picture of the cave, with Mary, Joseph and the baby.

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1. The claimed spot of the birth is marked by the star on the floor.
2. The star is of fairly recent origin.
3. Why this spot was selected is not entirely clear.

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1. Around the corner from the star is a space identified as the location for the manger.
2. The décor in the cave is representative of the Armenian style.
3. The church above is controlled by the Greek Orthodox Church.

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1. The Quran presents a different picture of the location of Jesus' birth.
2. According to the Quran, the pain of child birth drove Mary to a palm tree, which she shook to obtain dates. *Quran* 19:23–26.
3. Although the Quran devotes an entire chapter to Mary, it does not mention Joseph or Bethlehem.

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1. Hindus have a different explanation for the birth of Jesus.
2. The Hindu god Vishnu is said to have had incarnations called “avatars.”
3. As Karen Armstrong writes: **“At times of historical crisis, Vishnu gave up the bliss of heaven to save the world. It was said that he had made ten such appearances: Krishna was the most important of these avatars, but Vishnu had also**

become manifest as a fish, a bear, a dwarf, and a tortoise.” Armstrong, *The Great Transformation* at 449.

4. For many Hindus, Jesus was another avatar of Vishnu, sent to save the world.
5. For Hindus, the story that Jesus was born in a manger, along with cows, makes perfect sense.

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1. Modern nativity sets almost always show three wise men visiting the baby Jesus, lying in the manger, with the wise men often dressed as kings.
2. None of this is based on the Biblical story.

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1. Despite the popularity of *We Three Kings*, the Bible never says how many wise men came to visit Jesus and never identifies them as kings.
2. The idea there were three comes from the fact that *Matthew* 2:11 says they brought three gifts -- gold, frankincense and myrrh.
3. The idea that they were kings comes from an association with Psalms 72:11: **“May all kings bow down to him and all nations serve him.”**
4. John Calvin expressly rejected this idea, saying: **“But the most ridiculous contrivance of the Papists on this subject is, that those men were kings.”**
5. Finally, the Bible never says that the wise men visited Jesus in the manger.
6. Instead, *Matthew* 2:11 says the wise men visited Jesus, then a **“child with his mother Mary,”** in **“the house.”**
7. By this time, Jesus was probably two years old. *Matthew* 2:16.
8. The Greek word traditionally interpreted as **“wise men”** in *Matthew* 2:1 is *“magos,”* members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, the Persian religion that had become familiar to Jews during the occupation of Israel by Persia.
9. Zoroastrianism predicted that a savior would **“be born of a virgin, bring about the resurrection of the dead, and make humankind immortal.”** Wray, *The Birth of Satan* at 87.
10. Some scholars have speculated that the writer of *Matthew* included the visit of the wise men in his account of the birth of Jesus to show the connection between Jesus and the prophecies of Zoroaster, which by the time of Jesus were well known among Jews.

11. According to this view, Jesus, born of a virgin, was also the savior promised by Zoroaster.

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1. *Matthew* reports that when King Herod learned that the “**King of the Jews**” had been born in Bethlehem, he ordered that all babies less than two years old living in Bethlehem be killed. *Matthew* 2:16–18.
2. There is no record outside the Bible that this happened, but it would have been consistent with Herod’s known actions.
3. Herod was a ruthless ruler – he had his favorite wife and three of his sons executed.
4. Augustus Caesar is reported to have said that he would rather be Herod’s pigs than his sons – because Herod was a Jew, he did not kill pigs.

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1. *Matthew* reports that Mary, Joseph and Jesus fled to Egypt after being tipped off by an angel about Herod’s plans to kill Jesus.
2. That visit to Egypt is reflected in this stained glass window in a Cairo church - you can see the pyramids on the right.

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1. This mosaic on a wall outside an ancient Cairo church reflects the same event.
2. This scene is much more popular in churches in Egypt than is the scene of the baby Jesus in the manger - that, of course, happened in Israel and not in Egypt.

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1. The account in *Matthew* about the Holy Family’s escape to Egypt gives no details about the trip except that it ended when Herod died. *Matthew* 2:13-19.
2. However, Egyptian Christians have developed elaborate details about where the Holy Family went and where they stayed while in Egypt, with churches and monasteries along the way.
3. This map in a church in Cairo shows the route and the sites – you can see the route coming toward the Mediterranean from the east and then going south along the Nile, all the way to Aswan.
4. According to the Coptic Christian Church, this route and the sites along it were revealed to an official in the church in a dream in about 500 A.D.

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1. These stairs are near a church in Ma'adi, a prosperous suburb of Cairo.
2. It leads down to an area along the Nile where the Holy Family is said to have stepped into a boat, on which they traveled further south on the river.

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1. The *Gospels of Matthew* and *Luke* agree that Mary, Joseph and Jesus went to live in Nazareth after Herod's death. *Matthew* 2:23; *Luke* 2:39.
2. But they do not agree on the reason.
3. *Luke*, which locates Mary in Nazareth before the birth of Jesus, says that they **“returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.”** *Luke* 2:39.
4. *Matthew*, which never identifies the home town of Mary and Joseph but suggests they were both from Bethlehem, says they went to Nazareth because they were afraid to go back to Bethlehem once they learned that Herod's son was in charge of the area. *Matthew* 2:22.
5. Whatever the reason for going to Nazareth, from that point forward Jesus became known as **“Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”** *John* 1:45.

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1. Stories of the birth of Jesus were also included in Christian writings that were not selected for inclusion in the New Testament.
2. For example, the *Proto-Gospel of James* identifies Mary's parents as a wealthy man named Joachim and his wife Anna. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 64.
3. It reports that when Mary was in the cave just after giving birth to Jesus, Salome, a midwife who did not believe that a virgin could have a child, **“inserted her finger to examine her condition”** and assured herself that Mary was, in fact, a virgin. *Id.* at 70.
4. As a result of her **“put[ting] the living God to the test,”** she reported that **“my hand is burning, falling away from me.”** *Id.*

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1. The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* describes Jesus as a mischievous child performing a number of miracles.
2. In one of the stories, Jesus was five years old when he made 12 sparrows out of mud on the Sabbath and brought them to life by simply speaking to them. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 58.

3. Interestingly, the same story is found in the Quran, in which Jesus says: **“I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, that I determine for you out of dust the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with Allah’s permission . . .”** *Quran* 3:49.

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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. Paul’s letters and *Mark* and *John* say nothing at all about the birth of Jesus.
4. As a result, early Christians paid very little attention to the date of Jesus’ birth.

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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 both Bethlehem and Nazareth are cold and rainy, so shepherds would not have been outside with their animals at night until at least the end of March, when 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.
3. These are the remains of the temple of Saturn in the Roman Forum.
4. Inside the temple was a large wooden image of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and fertility, with his feet bound by woolen straps.
5. The straps were removed each year on December 17.
6. The unbinding, symbolizing liberation, signaled the beginning of a raucous celebration that included sacrifices at Saturn’s temple.
7. The celebration, called Saturnalia, continued with gift giving and a temporary suspension of laws governing social behavior.

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1. Slaves were given a week of freedom and the right to control their masters.

2. It was time of drunkenness and 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 Roman bakers, who reportedly turned out erotic human shaped biscuits.

Slide 55

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 says the Messiah would be the **“sun of righteousness.”**
6. The same passage also said people 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," attempting to connect the celebration to a religion service.

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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.
3. 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."
4. 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 connection with the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, P. Joseph Ward, a Presbyterian minister in Warsaw, Indiana, recently published his own list of 95 theses.
2. No. 84 states: **"Let the Church settle on a more probable date for celebrating the birth of Jesus than December 25 and call it Incarnation Day, separate in time and content from the winter solstice holiday-Zoroastrian holiday—Saturnalia which is celebrated with revelry and gift giving. Let us celebrate the infancy of Jesus as a religious holiday with worship, study, fellowship and mission activity that emphasizes the incarnate Word."** P. Joseph Ward, *95 Theses for 31 October, A.D. 201.*, 77 encounter 1, 15 (2017).

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1. So, what can we take away from this brief tour through the Christmas story?
2. We can conclude that "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is a wonderful Christmas song, but may not describe where Jesus was actually born.

3. We can also conclude that if Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there was probably no cruel inn keeper who turned away a young woman about to give birth, as is so often portrayed in Christmas pageants.
4. We can learn that we celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25 because new Christians did not want to stop celebrating the winter solstice with drinking and revelry.
5. But far more important, we can learn that the most fundamental difference between Christians and Muslims really comes down to the meaning to be given to the term “Son of God” in *Luke’s* version of the angel’s announcement to Mary.
6. Does the term suggest that Jesus was the product of a sexual encounter between God and Mary, similar to stories of pagan gods coming upon human women?
7. Or does it simply suggest that Jesus was created by divine will, as the Bible says Adam was created and as Muslims believe?

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1. I believe that most Christians, if they were to think about it, would not conclude that Jesus was conceived as the result of a sexual encounter and the phrase “son of God” does not have that connotation for them.
2. Instead, I think most Christians believe the term connotes someone especially blessed by or empowered by God, a view supported by other uses of that phrase in the Bible.
3. For example, Paul wrote that **“those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”** *Romans* 8:14.
4. In its genealogy of Jesus, *Luke* identifies Adam as the **“son of God.”** *Luke* 3:38.
5. Obviously, Adam could not have been the result of a sexual encounter because there were no women at the time of his creation.
6. So, if Christians could all agree that Jesus was not the result of a sexual encounter, the most important difference between Christians, Muslims and Jews about the birth of Jesus would largely disappear.
7. That could be the good news about the Christmas story.

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