

Sermon Series: *Christmas*

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

The Christmas Clatter: Historical Fact or Religious Fiction?

In honor of this wonderful Christmas season and all the excitement it brings, I wrote a little poem. I'll share half of it at the beginning of the sermon and the other half at the end.

T'was the week before Christmas and all through the church,
Not a Christian was stirring, except one guy—whose always late—hanging lights on a White Birch.
Their Bibles placed neatly on the table by the bed,
With not a thought in the world that someone was about to mess with their heads.

The children were wrapped up in the hope of cool gifts,
Not expecting in the least that the foundations might shift.
And ma in her Christian kerchief and I in my theological cap,
Had failed to prepare them for the annual literary slap.

When on the lawn of Christendom, there arose such a clatter,
We were too sleepy to arise and see what was the matter.
Knowing there might be trouble, we remained comfortably in bed,
And prayed that God would do for us what we should, instead.

Anxiously we lay under the covers, while a weaver of stories crept quietly in,
He looked nice enough, tall, well dressed, but thin.
He told fantastical stories, exciting, but none were true,
As he kept on telling them, we didn't know what to do.

Should we alert the children that his stories, though thrilling, were false?
But surely *our* kids are smart enough to distinguish truth from dross.
Someone will warn them, won't they, perhaps a Sunday school teacher or a friend?
But, it's Christmas! If we protest, what message will that send?

The Annual Christmas Attack

Over the past few decades it has become standard practice for major news magazines to commemorate the most sacred days of the Christian faith with a particular kind of news article. These articles have varied from overt attack on core Christian beliefs, to lately a more subtle attack which attempts to make a distinction between religious truth and historical truth, as though they were two different kinds of truth.

Such is the case with December 17 issue of Newsweek Magazine. The cover story leads with the question, “Who was Jesus?” And the lead article, written by Bart Ehrman, author and professor of Religious Studies at University of North Carolina, is entitled, “[What Do We Really Know About Jesus?](#)”

Ehrman’s conclusion is that we really do not know much about the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, at least not much that is factually true and historically accurate. What we do know are the myths about Jesus that early Christians chose to believe and record and pass on to subsequent generations who were equally willing to believe tradition rather than truth.



The Attack Should Not Surprise You

This is an attack on the Christian faith and upon Jesus himself.

The weapon of course, is not a sword or a club but, ink shot from the canon of chronological supremacy and arrogant intellectualism. Such attacks should not surprise us. Jesus warned that His name would cause many to stumble in the world and that the hatred he endured would eventually spill over onto all who would dare to be called by his name.

John 15:18-21 (ESV)

18 “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. **19** If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. **20** Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. **21** But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

1 Peter 4:12-14 (ESV)

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. **14** If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

[Peter goes on to make it very clear that you are not blessed if you are insulted and mistreated for your own sinfulness, but the blessings come when you are treated badly specifically because of your association with the name of Jesus.]

We should not be surprised by these attacks, but neither should we be silenced by them.

Do Christians Willingly Believe Lies?

So is Ehrman correct that Christians willingly believe lies and myths? As supporting evidence, Ehrman claims that “millions” of believers today cling to extra-biblical misinformation about Jesus which comes from non-canonical books. Such books contain amazing information about the immaculate conception of Mary and other dubious information about Joseph and Jesus. Ehrman rightly notes that these stories are not contained in the Bible, but he cites them as proof that “millions of Christians” are content to believe myths rather than truth.

Read Your Bible: Tradition vs. Truth

This is one of the many reasons why you should be a student of the Bible. We should all make it a regular habit to consistently reading the Bible—all of it. Read all of it so you will know what the Bible says and what it does not say; what it teaches and what it does not teach. This will help you know the difference between tradition and truth. If you are well grounded in what is true, then it will keep you from being “tossed to and fro by the waves of human cunning and carried away by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14). If you know what the Bible says then you’ll be able to reject untruth when some supposed authority tells you “this is what the Bible *really* says.”

Christmas: What’s Cultural & What’s Biblical?

For example, when you read the Christmas passages in Scripture, pay close attention to what they do and do not say. Know the difference between those elements of our Christmas celebration that are cultural and those that are biblical. Hold loosely to those elements that are merely cultural, but hold tenaciously to those that are biblical. For example, the Christmas tree is cultural. It could be done away with today and yet the deep joy of the truth of Christmas would remain undimmed. We can remove cultural aspects of Christmas, but not the biblical ones. We can take the tree out of Christmas, but we cannot allow Christ to be taken out of Christmas (and I do not mean fight for manger scenes on public land), I mean keep the gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, must remain at the center of the celebration Christmas.

We Don’t Know His Actual Birthdate

Ehrman then moves on to question some elements of Christmas tradition which **are** mentioned in the New Testament. He notes a few matters about which there is no certainty. For example, he points out that we do not know for a fact that Jesus was born on December 25. He is right about this. The Bible does not tell us exactly when Jesus was born. Evidently the actual date of the birth of Jesus was not what was most important to the New Testament writers. Therefore, it should not be overly important to us. My faith in Jesus will not waver one bit should it be conclusively proven that Jesus was actually born on December 23 or September 23. It makes no difference to me. Exactly when he was born is the main point.

Not When He Was Born, But THAT He Was Born

The main point is **the fact that Jesus was born**. It’s not about *when* he was born, but *that* he was born. The birth of Jesus is THE most important birth in the history of the world. Nothing will ever change that. His birth has forever become a permanent reference for our understanding of time, no matter how hard contemporary academics want to have it otherwise. It may be common publishing practice to refer to time before Christ as time before common era (B.C.E.), but we all know we’re talking about time Before Christ.

And what century is this? It is the twenty-first century. It is nice to ask ourselves, the twenty-first century since what? The answer, of course, is that it is the twenty-first century since the birth of Jesus. We may not exactly when Jesus was born, but we do know for a fact **that** he was born and that is the most important fact of all.

We Don’t Know How Many Wise Men There Were

Ehrman then turns his attention to the wise-men. He notes that the Bible does not tell us there were three. Again he is right. Most likely it has been assumed that there were three wise-men probably because there were three gifts named; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. However, there may have been only two wise men who brought three gifts or twelve or twenty wise-men. We simply do not

know for sure because the Bible does not record the number of wise-men, but only the number of gifts that they brought.

So let's be clear about what the Bible says and what it does not say. And what the Bible does say is that there were wise-men, plural, meaning there were at least two. They were "from the east," perhaps as far as Babylon. If so, then they traveled a very long distance, about 800 miles, which would have taken them over a month to make the journey. They were not Jews. They were Gentiles and they came to worship Jesus as *king*—a little baby with no army and no kingdom. They undertook an incredible journey to come to him so that they could give him expensive gifts and bow themselves before him and honor him as a king! They were choosing to worship him. And they chose to ignore the command of a king who was known to be a ruthless man, who had an army and a kingdom, in favor of honoring a little baby boy. That is worth noting. Whether there were two or twelve, these wise-men went to great lengths and great expense to worship Jesus, something many today would never go out of their way to do (which is eternally unwise).

The Census During Reign of Caesar Augustus?

Ehrman goes on to list other problems, such as the fact that no historian, other than Luke, notes a census during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Ehrman concludes that Matthew or Mark must have just made this up in order to claim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem so that it could be claimed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy written about Messiah in Micah.

This is an argument from silence which fails at disproving the gospels. As theologians like to say, "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Just because no other historian mentions the census does not mean that it did not actually take place. All it proves is that no other historians thought it important enough to write about or if they did write about it, we have not found their writing, or it has been destroyed. In any case, it does not prove that it did not happen. "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Ehrman knows this, and yet he is content to keep casting doubt upon the gospel accounts.

Virgin Birth & Traveling Stars?

Ehrman sees further problems with believing that a virgin could give birth and that a star could lead anyone to a town, much less a particular house. Thus Ehrman concludes that the gospel accounts are "not historically reliable descriptions of what really happened when Jesus was born." It is amazingly arrogant to claim that just because you cannot understand *how* something happened, that is then necessarily could not have happened. But of course, when you deny the existence of God, you are simply left with a purely naturalistic universe where miracles are impossible. Of course miracles are impossible if there is no God. However, if God, who created this world and everything in it, truly does exist, then miracles are really not a problem.

If God is powerful enough to create man and woman—the incredible biological wonders we are—out of dust, then He probably would not find it so difficult to see to it that a virgin could become pregnant. And if God created all the stars in the universe (and named each one), then is it really a problem to see to it that one of them, whether it was an actual star or an angel who looked like a star, could lead a few guys to a particular house? If God possesses the power to create this universe out of nothing, then it is reasonable to assume that He can do anything with what He did create. Miracles may be incredibly challenging to us, but they are not challenging for God.

So just because a very smart man cannot understand *how* something amazing happened is no reason to conclude that it in fact did *not* happen.

Ehrman's 'Pastoral' Advice

Yet Ehrman does not want to offend Christians and so he offers his own brand of 'professorial advice.' He wants to affirm that there is some spiritual value in believing in these 'Christian myths' even though they are not factually true. So he encourages believers to just be a little "less literally minded." Instead of claiming that the Scriptures are factually true, just say they are spiritually helpful. He encourages believers to think of the "Gospels"—proclamations of the good news—and not as "histories," which records true and actual events. He writes, "these are books are meant to declare religious truths, not historical facts."

Evidently it is possible to rejoice in 'good news' even though it is not true news.

Thinking in the way Ehrman is recommending will, in his opinion, lead one to a "broader vision, a more generous appreciation of [biblical] literature, and a fuller sense of theological meaning." In other words, you'll be a more advanced and highly developed Christian if you can stop thinking of the Christmas story as factually true. His closing pastoral advice is that it is possible for faith to "be founded not on what really did happen, but on what really does happen, in the lives of those who believe that stories such as these can convey a greater truth" even if it is a fictional truth.

So, take heart, says Ehrman! You can't really know what *actually* happened when Jesus was born. All you can know is what early Christians *believed* happened when Jesus was born. And that's really all we need in order to celebrate a happy Christmas.

Well, following that line of argument, we could say the same thing about Santa Clause too, couldn't we. It really doesn't matter that Santa Clause is not real. What really matters is the happy feeling you get when you think of Santa Clause.

This kind of thinking is behind a recent New York ad campaign sponsored by American Atheists. The ad advocates "dumping the myth" of Jesus, while embracing the merriment of Santa. Apparently Santa is not a myth!

So it's OK to believe in Santa if believing in Santa makes you happy. The only problem comes when you expect Santa to actually bring you some presents. I wonder what happens when peace, or contentment, or a job, or a family, or love is on your Christmas list? Does Santa really make you happy when he fails to deliver?

I fail to see the wisdom in delighting in religious truth, if the religion cannot deliver what it promises.

If Jesus was *truly* and *factually* **not** God's only Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then why should we celebrate his birth more than any other baby boy?

If Jesus *truly* and *factually* **cannot** give us the gift of eternal life, then what on earth are we doing coming here to worship him?



 americanatheists atheists.org

If Jesus did **not** *actually* bear the wrath of God on behalf of sinners, then for what possible reason should we be joyful?

If Jesus did **not** *actually* remove the punishment of sin, then we still have a fearful judgment of a holy God to look forward to after we die and those of us who are sinners know that will not go well for us.

BUT, if Jesus truly and actually **is** the Lamb of God who takes away sin of the world, then the whole world has something amazing to celebrate!

And if Jesus truly and actually **can** give us the gift of eternal life, then we have abundant reasons to celebrate his birth and come and worship him!

And if Jesus truly and actually **did** bear the wrath of God on our behalf, then we have the greatest reason in all the world to be joyful!

And if Jesus actually **did** remove the punishment for our sins and he was judged on our behalf, then it will go very well for us who trust in him on the day of judgment and for all the days of eternity also!

So don't let your faith in God be troubled by the words of faithless men. God's word has been attacked in the past and will be attacked in the present and in the future until Jesus returns. But consider one amazing fact.

The Bible was the first book ever printed on a printing press, and since it's printing in 1455 it is has never gone out of print. It is the number one best-selling book of all time.

On the other hand, Newsweek Magazine goes out of print in one week. In the year 2013, you will not find Newsweek magazine on any news stand. They will remain a presence on the web, but they're not making enough money to keep printing the magazine.



Isaiah 40:8 (ESV)

8 *The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Matthew 24:35 (ESV)

35 *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Let me conclude with the last half of the poem I began with.

The words of man often carry much wind,
They drone on and on, but will soon come to an end;
But we need not be shaken by the claims they crow,
Most men don't know half of what they claim to know.

Like those who said Dec 21st was the world's end,
Caused many to doubt and worry, but it was only pretend;
There are some who thrive off of fear and doubt,
They promise clear water, but bring cloudless drought.

Base not your life on the writings of eloquent pedigreed academics,
Celebrity worship is frighteningly pandemic;
There's only One whose word is forever true,
Trust unfailingly in Him, He will carry you through.

Jesus is his name, born in Bethlehem town,
At his quiet birth, heaven's brilliant glory shown down.
His coming stirred the world, both Gentile and Jew,
His life stirred mine, what about you?

His word is eternal and will never die,
It is living and active like a bird in the sky.
Be not distressed by all the Christmas clatter,
Religious truth or historical fact? God's word is both, and it really does matter.

Since God demands holiness, that's why Jesus came,
So the whole entire world could have life, through faith in his name;
His unstoppable purpose, salvation for man, woman, girl, and boy,
How can we be silent about such amazing joy?

So spring from your chairs, go home with a whistle,
Dance upon the clouds, like the down of a thistle.
Let the hope of Christ in you, never be out of sight,
Happy Christmas to all, rejoice whole-heartedly in this good news tonight!