

The Feast of Christmas

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Joseph F. Kelly



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*To Margaret and David Mason,
and to the memory of Richard Clancey*

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Preface

This brief book surveys how Christmas was celebrated religiously over the centuries. It differs from most general studies, which focus on the religious Christmas until the end of the Middle Ages but then turn to the rise of the secular one. As I make clear in the book, I value both the religious and secular Christmas and see no inherent opposition between the two. My purpose here is simply to highlight the religious one, not least because I know of no other book that has done this. Most histories of Christmas focus on the last 250 years when the familiar celebration with trees, lights, and Santa became popular.

This book has the advantage of a survey, showing individual episodes and events against a larger background. It also has the disadvantage of a survey, a cursory treatment of topics and the omission of many more. A detailed, full-fledged history of the religious Christmas would be multivolume and thus unsuitable for the general reader for whom this book is intended.

The book covers the whole history of the feast, but from the late Middle Ages until today, it focuses on what happened in Great Britain and the United States. I do not mean to play down the many important contributions of other societies, but this book is written for English-speaking readers, and so it concentrates on those countries.

At John Carroll University I teach a course on the history of Christmas. Over the years my students have asked me

many good questions that have sharpened not only my understanding of the subject but also of the kinds of topics that would interest the general reader. If you find this book helpful, my students can take much of the credit. Any deficiencies in the book are the sole property of the author.

My thanks to Peter Dwyer, director of Liturgical Press, and Hans Christoffersen, editorial director, for their interest and support. Thanks also to Mary Stommes, who supervised the editing. My graduate assistant Bridget Ludwa read most of this book, and I am grateful for her help. As always, my sincerest thanks go to my wife Ellen, a loving and generous spouse, who took time from her own busy schedule and made myriad sacrifices so that I would have time to write.

This book is dedicated to my good, longtime friends, Margaret and David Mason, and to the memory of Richard Clancey, a wonderful, much-loved, and still-missed friend to the Masons, my wife, and me.

CHAPTER ONE

Christianity without Christmas

At first glance, this chapter seems to have the wrong title. Christianity has always had Christmas. Actually, no. Although we commonly call the birth of Jesus “the First Christmas,” it was not. Christmas is the feast in honor of Christ’s birth; the birth itself is rightly called the Nativity. No first-century evidence survives for any kind of feast in honor of Jesus’ birth; in fact, not much evidence of the birth survives.

The Christian New Testament consists of twenty-seven books, twenty-one of which are classified as epistles or letters. The book of Revelation contains visions of the imminent end of the age, while the Acts of the Apostles recounts the early history of the Christian community with a strong focus on the career of the apostle Paul. These twenty-three books contain occasional references to Jesus’ earthly life, but only the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recount anything biographical about Jesus, and only two of them, Matthew and Luke, tell of Jesus’ birth. The conclusion is inescapable. No matter how much we value Christmas and its traditions today, the earliest Christians had very little interest in Jesus’ birth.

Why?

No early Christian writer actually wrote, “We are not interested in Jesus’ birth because . . .,” but scholars think they can pinpoint the reason. Ample evidence in the New Testament books, especially Paul’s epistles, makes it clear that the

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Christians anticipated a very early end to the world. They literally thought that it could happen tomorrow. With no future, they apparently had little interest in the past. But nothing wears down apocalyptic expectation like passing time, and in an era when most people failed to reach the age of forty, many Christians inevitably wondered why so many had died and the end had still not come. As the end receded into the future, Christians looked to their past. Around the year 70, a Christian named Mark wrote a gospel, a theologized account of Jesus' public career. Significantly, it included no mention of his birth.

Mark's innovation caught on, and other writers followed him. Next to do so were Matthew and Luke. Both knew Mark's gospel and generally followed his outline. They wrote in the eighties of the first century, and both included a Nativity narrative. Since Mark's gospel proved that a gospel did not necessarily have to have an infancy narrative, what prompted Matthew and Luke to include one?

The two evangelists never said explicitly why they did so, but biblical scholars believe the cause was Mark's account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. In that gospel God recognizes Jesus as his son as he emerges from the Jordan River after his baptism by John. Like all early Christians, Mark believed John to be a forerunner of Jesus, but not all of John's disciples did. In his book the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells how disciples of John continued his movement after his death, and not just in the Holy Land but in other parts of the Roman Empire, such as Egypt and Asia Minor (modern Turkey). A third-century text from Roman Syria says that John, not Jesus, was the Christ, that is, the Messiah.

Although John's movement never achieved great influence, Matthew and Luke feared that Mark's account might imply that God did not recognize Jesus as his son until John's baptism. Even worse, some believers might see a causal relationship between the baptism and the divine recognition. Therefore, the two evangelists set out to make it clear that

God had recognized Jesus as his son right from his conception, and they did so by adding the infancy narratives to their accounts of Jesus' public ministry, death, and resurrection.

The infancy narratives occupy the first two chapters of both gospels. When modern believers read these accounts (the magi, the shepherds, the star), we do so in the wonderful context of Christmas. The accounts appear familiar and even heartwarming. But there was no Christmas in the first century, and the two evangelists did not write their accounts for a nonexistent feast. They wrote those chapters as introductions to their entire gospels, and to understand the infancy narratives we must understand their role in those gospels.

As we shall see, the two evangelists did not agree on all points, but they clearly drew from some common sources. Both agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great, the Roman-appointed king who ruled Judea from 37 to 4 B.C. Both identify his parents as Joseph and Miriam (Mary in English) and say that, after his birth, the family lived in Nazareth. Both evangelists point to a sign in the sky, although Matthew says it was a star and Luke that it was an angel. Both concur that visitors came to see the Holy Family, although Matthew says they were magi and Luke that they were shepherds. Both agree that the birth of Jesus fulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament and that Mary conceived virginally.

Where did Matthew and Luke get this information? Older generations of Christians thought it came from Mary, especially the material in Luke, who says much about her, but that was when scholars thought the gospels were written much sooner than the eighties of the first century, when Mary would have been more than a century old, almost impossible for that era. Scholars now believe that accounts of Jesus' birth, some of which could have originated with Mary, became part of the general collection of traditions about Jesus that started to circulate shortly after his death and resurrection.

The Gospel of Matthew

In the centuries before Jesus' birth, many Jews left the Holy Land and migrated to some of the Eastern Mediterranean cities, such as Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. The presence of Jews outside the Holy Land is called the Diaspora, the Greek word for "dispersion." Living in these largely Gentile areas, the Jews came to speak Greek and even produced a Greek translation of the Old Testament. Matthew was a Diasporan Jew, a native Greek speaker, who may have lived in Judea for a while since his gospel reflects a knowledge of local customs.

We know little about him. Tradition identified him as the Matthew who was one of Jesus' twelve apostles, but modern scholars disproved that some time ago. Matthew the evangelist clearly relied upon Mark's gospel, but Mark was not one of the twelve apostles. This means that if the evangelist were one of the apostles, then someone who was an eyewitness to Jesus' public career would be getting information and modeling his gospel on information provided by someone who was not an eyewitness. This and other matters, mostly literary, make it clear that the author of the first gospel was not one of the twelve apostles. All we can say about Matthew was that he was a Diasporan Jew, probably from Roman Syria, who had an excellent education, since his gospel, a theological masterpiece, reflects considerable learning.

Readers of Matthew's gospel quickly notice his emphasis on Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies; his infancy narrative alone includes five of them. Matthew also had a familiarity with Jewish laws and customs, and he portrays Jesus as a good Jew, obedient to the law. Clearly the evangelist needed to emphasize Jesus' Jewishness to his readers, which means that many of his readers were Diasporan Jews who had converted to Christianity but who understandably worried about the relation between their new faith and their former one. Matthew recognized those concerns, so throughout his gospel he emphasizes Jesus' Jewishness, although he makes it clear that the Christian message went to all people.

This gospel opens with a genealogy that traces Jesus' descent from Abraham, father of the Jewish people, through the great king David, down to Joseph and Mary, a standard Old Testament approach his readers would have recognized. Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary were not living together when she was found to be pregnant, yet he refers to Joseph as her husband (1:19). In ancient Judea, when a couple announced their engagement, they were considered husband and wife even though they would usually live with their parents for a while after the engagement (people usually got married in their teens in those days). Joseph believed his wife had committed adultery, but an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream to tell him that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit and was guiltless of any wrongdoing. Thanks to endless artistic portrayals of the angel Gabriel's annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary, most Christians think of that alone as "the annunciation." But here Matthew reports that an unnamed angel made the announcement to Joseph. Interestingly, Matthew does not say where Mary and Joseph lived.

The angel spoke to Joseph in a dream. People in the ancient world, including the Jews, believed that deities would speak to them via dreams. The angel also told Joseph that Jesus' virginal conception fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that a virgin would conceive and bring forth a son who would be called Emmanuel (Hebrew for "God with us"), something his converted Jewish readers would surely have appreciated.

Matthew next recounts how Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod, the Roman-appointed, half-Jewish tyrant. Suddenly "magi from the East" appear in the story. We all know who they were: three kings named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar, who rode on camels to see the newborn king. Alas, no. Matthew simply says "magi." The familiar "three kings" would emerge in Christian tradition in the following centuries.

The word "magi" usually meant Persian astrologers, and these magi followed a new star to Judea. Believing the star

heralded the birth of a king, they went to the court of the reigning king, who became frightened at the thought of an infant rival. Herod's court scholars told him that the child promised in the prophecies would be born in Bethlehem, so Herod sent the magi there under the condition that they would report back to him. They went to Bethlehem, offered the Holy Family their gifts, and then, being warned in a dream (that is, receiving a sign from God), returned to their home a different way.

The infuriated Herod, who could not find the actual child, tried to eliminate the threat by killing all the infant boys in Bethlehem up to the age of two. Warned in a dream, the Holy Family escaped to Egypt, while Herod's soldiers killed the other children, known in Christian tradition as the Holy Innocents. Matthew finishes his account of Jesus' birth with two more dreams. In the first an angel told Joseph that Herod was dead and that he could return home. As Joseph prepared for the return, he learned that Herod's son Archelaus had succeeded to the throne, and he feared what the new king might do. An angel appeared to him in another dream and told him to go to Galilee and to settle in a town called Nazareth, which would fulfill a prophecy and explain why Jesus grew up in Nazareth.

As gospel introductions, the infancy narratives contain theology as well as history. Matthew makes comparisons between Moses and Jesus, both of whose lives were in danger when they were infants. The evangelist's converted Jewish readers would know and appreciate that. Furthermore, Matthew shows that when Jesus was born, the Jewish rulers (but not the people) sought his death but the pagan Gentile magi venerated him. At the time of Jesus' death, when the Jewish rulers (but, again, not the people) sought his death, another pagan Gentile, the wife of Pontius Pilate, spoke up on his behalf. When we recall that the four gospels dealt primarily with Jesus' public ministry and death, we can see how Matthew relates the birth and death accounts.

The Gospel of Luke

Contemporary with Matthew's gospel, that of Luke targeted a different audience. Luke was a Gentile from the Eastern Mediterranean, and he emphasized that Jesus came to save all people. Whereas Matthew's genealogy traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham, father of the Jewish people, Luke's genealogy, which is not in his infancy narrative, goes back to Adam, the father of all people. Luke also wrote a second book, the Acts of the Apostles, which, focusing on the apostle Paul, recounts the early Christians' acceptance of the Gentiles into the church and the geographical movement of the faith from Judea into Asia Minor, Greece, and then Rome.

But Luke embraced more than ethnic and geographical universalism; he also focused on social universalism. His gospel emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor and downtrodden, for those who suffer, and, very significantly for the ancient world, for women. Luke's accent on women appears most clearly in his infancy account where he focuses on Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. In fact, most of the biblical passages that Christians associate with Mary—the annunciation, the visitation, the *Magnificat*, the trip to Bethlehem, the presentation of the infant in the Temple, and the trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve—all appear in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel.

Luke opens his gospel with a dedication to a nobleman named Theophilus, his literary patron who subsidized his work. He then moves to the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the priest Zachary that he and his wife Elizabeth, who are both elderly, will have a son whom they will name John. Matthew does not mention John the Baptist in his infancy narrative, but Luke deals with him directly, emphasizing that the child of Elizabeth and Zachary will be a great man but that he will prepare the way for a greater one. This would nullify any misinterpretation of Mark's account of Jesus' baptism by John.

The gospel then recounts Gabriel's annunciation of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary, who lives in Nazareth of

Galilee. Here we see a discrepancy between Matthew's and Luke's accounts because Luke says Mary originally lived in Nazareth, while Matthew says the Holy Family went there from Egypt because they were afraid to return to Judea. The accounts cannot be reconciled. Both evangelists knew that Jesus' parents lived in Nazareth, but apparently they did not know for sure how they came to be there.

The angel informs Mary that the "Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," assuring her that her pregnancy is part of God's plan (Luke 1:35). Gabriel also makes predictions about the future of her son, whom she is to name Jesus.

After this, Mary visits the elderly and pregnant Elizabeth, who addresses her as "the mother of my Lord," another emphasis by Luke that John the Baptist does not equal Jesus since "Lord" is a word for the divine. Mary responds with a poem later called the *Magnificat* because in the Middle Ages, when educated people spoke Latin, the first words of this poem were *Magnificat anima mea*, which means "My soul magnifies (the Lord)." The first word came to stand for the poem. When Mary returns home three months later, Elizabeth gives birth to John, and his father Zachary makes yet another prediction about him, again stressing his role as a forerunner of someone greater. Luke has effectively made it clear that Jesus' baptism by John had no role in God's recognition of Jesus as his son.

Now Luke turns to the birth of Jesus with some of the gospel's most famous words: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world [Roman Empire] should be registered" (2:1). Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register, but they must stay in a stable because they could find no room in an inn. (Luke just says that there was no room, never even hinting about a rude or cruel innkeeper, a villainous staple of later traditions.) The evangelist does not mention a star, but he does speak of a sign in the sky, in this case an angelic apparition to some shep-

herds. Significantly, Luke focuses on what the birth of Jesus will do for poor people, here represented by the shepherds.

Since many Gentiles had reservations about the much-maligned Christians, Luke shows how Jesus' parents obeyed not only the Roman law by registering for the census but also Jewish law by having their son circumcised. Although Luke does not focus on prophecies as Matthew does, he recounts how the Holy Family encountered two prophets in the Temple in Jerusalem, Simeon and Anna, who both prophesy how Jesus would redeem his people, that is, both Jews and Gentiles.

Luke closes his infancy narrative with the only account of Jesus' life between his birth and public career: his parents' taking him to the Temple, leaving without him, and then finding him there, safe and sound, three days later. Although an integral part of Luke's infancy narrative, this episode never became part of the Christmas story.

Theologically, Matthew and Luke succeeded brilliantly because their fellow Christians accepted that God's recognition of Jesus as his son by the river Jordan had nothing causal to do with Jesus' baptism by John. Inadvertently the two evangelists had also created the basis for one of Christianity's greatest feasts.

After the New Testament

No New Testament book written after these two gospels mentions Jesus' birth, and, in the first century, it appeared the infancy narratives would play no role in Christianity. But two forces changed that.

By the middle of the second century, as the Christian population became increasingly Gentile, the Christians concluded that the Bible should include not only the inspired books of the Old Testament but also books written by Christians. But which ones? The Christians debated that until the mid-fourth century when they settled on the twenty-seven books now in the New Testament. Yet as soon as they began to compile their own list of inspired books, or *canon*, in the early second

century, they included the four gospels that modern Christians know so well. This meant that Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives would be part of the Christian Bible, and they would never be lost or forgotten, and no Christian could or would ignore them.

The second development was rethinking the Christians' belief that at any moment but definitely before any believers died, Jesus would return to earth and the end of the age would occur. This widespread belief effectively removed the Christians from history since at any moment they would be entering an eternal world. But by the early second century, when Jesus had been dead for many decades, fewer and fewer Christians believed in an imminent end but instead followed the evangelist Luke, who, in his book the Acts of the Apostles, insisted that the Holy Spirit will work in the Christian community until Jesus returns (although he probably did not think that the church would go on for two millennia more). The second-century Christians realized that they too would be part of the world's history, and this prompted an interest in their own history. They paid more attention to the gospels, including the infancy narratives, and we have some rather strange proof for that: they began composing their own gospels.

Expanding the Infancy Narratives

When modern Christians think of "the gospels," they naturally think of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But there were actually dozens of gospels written in the first centuries of Christian history; there were also other epistles, acts, and even apocalypses. These books did not make it into the biblical canon, even though they claimed to have been written by biblical figures, such as Paul and even Mary Magdalene. Books claiming to be by or about biblical figures but not accepted into the canon are called *apocryphal* books. (This phenomenon also occurred among the Jews, for example, the apocryphal *Life of Adam and Eve*, which recounts what happened to the primal couple after God expelled them from

Eden.) The apocryphal gospels said much about Jesus' life, but some focused exclusively on his birth. A few of these infancy gospels contain absolute nonsense, but one had tremendous influence on Christmas.

In the middle of the second century a now anonymous Christian living in Syria wrote the *Protogospel of James*, claiming it was the work of Jesus' disciple James or possibly James the first leader of the Jerusalem community and a relative of Jesus. Moderns would call this work a "prequel," that is, it claims to tell us about events *before* the birth of Jesus, specifically the birth and upbringing of his mother.

So what does the *Protogospel* say and how did it impact the Christmas story? First, it provides the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna (Anne). There is no way to tell if these names are accurate. Modern scholars do not accept them as authentic, but previous generations of Christians did. The Medieval church developed an extensive cult of Saint Anne.

The *Protogospel* also explains something else that puzzles many people—why so much Medieval and Renaissance art portrays Mary's husband Joseph as an old man. This began with gospel references to Jesus' brothers and sisters. Some modern churches believe in the perpetual virginity of his mother Mary, and they explain these brothers and sisters as relatives of Jesus but not full-blood siblings. This interpretation has validity since "brother" and "sister" are occasionally applied in ancient literature to non-siblings. But the author of the *Protogospel*, reflecting the views of the second-century Syrian church, took a different approach. He explained the brothers and sisters by claiming that Joseph had been married before. His wife had died and left him with children. Mary's parents had dedicated her to the Temple in Jerusalem, but when she became an adolescent and might have polluted the ritual purity of the holy place, the Temple priests decided to find her a husband. A miracle led them to Joseph, who identified himself as "an old man with grown children." He

married Mary, but they did not have relations, so the Syrian Christians could account for the gospels' "brothers and sisters" and still insist on their belief in her perpetual virginity.

The devotion of the Syrian Christians to Mary's virginity took another step forward. The gospels spoke of a virginal conception, and other Christians shared the Syrians' belief in her perpetual virginity, but the Syrians believed not just in a virginal conception but also a virgin birth, that is, Mary gave birth to Jesus with no change to her body, which remained an intact, virginal body. This belief took quite a big step, but slowly and surely other churches came to accept it. Since the Middle Ages the Catholic Church has taught that Mary was a virgin before, during, and after Jesus' birth, a belief expressed in the Latin formula *ante partum, in partu, post partum*.

The *Protogospel* had even more to say. It tells us that Mary was sixteen when she gave birth to Jesus, a reasonable estimation for the ancient world when girls got married as early as twelve and thirteen. It also says that Jesus was born in a cave, not the stable of Luke's gospel. This notion grew in popularity, and in future centuries Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land visited the "Cave of the Nativity." This apocryphal gospel also increased the significance of the star of Bethlehem, claiming it shone so brightly that it dimmed the other stars. The evangelist Matthew said nothing like this, but a fabulously bright star became a staple of Christian art and, in the modern era, of Christmas cards.

The *Protogospel* also added to the story of John the Baptist and other gospel passages as well, although these did not become attached to the Christmas story.

But how could these Syrian Christians just write their own gospel? Two reasons. First, as we saw, the Christians did not finalize what books belonged in the New Testament canon until the mid-fourth century, and until then the concept of Christian "Scripture" did not mean a closed list of books. In some ancient Christians' minds the *Protogospel* was a serious candidate for the canon. Second, Christians have always

added to the Scriptures. Famous novelists such as Thomas Mann and Taylor Caldwell wrote fictional accounts of New Testament figures; movie directors such as Martin Scorsese and Mel Gibson added events and characters not found in the gospels in their films about Jesus; as for Jesus' birth, the composer Gian Carlo Menotti wrote an opera about a shepherd named Amahl who went to Bethlehem with the magi, while the songwriter Katherine Davis had a drummer boy visit Jesus. Christians have never been satisfied with what the New Testament provides, and they have been adding to the story of Jesus for almost two millennia.

But then as now, many Christians felt uneasy about adding nonbiblical material to scriptural stories, and they believed that they could add to the account of Jesus' Nativity and still stay within the Bible. From the time of Jesus' ministry, Christians understood that many passages in the Old Testament pointed to his life. In most cases they looked to actual prophecies, but they believed many other, nonprophetic passages also had importance. Surely, the Christians believed, some Old Testament passages pointed to the Nativity.

They soon found an important one, Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's manger; but Israel does not know [God]." The early Christians identified the master as Jesus and then turned to the rest of the verse. The words "ox" and "donkey" appear often in the Bible, but the Christians focused on the word "manger" because of Luke's Nativity account. This Isaian passage did not tell Christians much about Jesus' birth, but it did change forever the visual image of that birth. Every pictorial representation of Jesus' birth includes the magi and shepherds, who are mentioned in the gospels, and also the ox and donkey because of this passage in Isaiah. The visual images also include sheep because of a Medieval tradition that the shepherds brought one or two lambs as gifts for the Holy Family.

In later centuries the Christians would again return to the Old Testament for information about the Nativity.

The Date of Jesus' Birth

The Christian interest in Jesus' life naturally included an interest in the date of his birth. Who today would study the life of George Washington or Jane Austen without knowing when they were born? So, when was Jesus born? Determining the year presented great problems. The Roman Empire officially used the Julian calendar, but many peoples in the empire, such as the Egyptians and the Jews, had their own calendars, which often caused confusion. The only real chronological information supplied by the gospels is that Jesus was born no later than the end of Herod's reign. When was that?

Today we use the B.C.-A.D. calendar, that is, Before Christ and *Anno Domini*, Latin for "In the Year of the Lord." In the sixth century a monk named Dionysius Exiguus created this calendar, but he made a rather serious mistake when he calculated that Jesus was born 753 years after the founding of Rome. Dionysius did not realize that according to his calculations Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., which produced an amazing phenomenon: Christ had been born four years Before Christ. So historians believe that Jesus was born no later than 4 B.C., but possibly two years earlier. Matthew tells us that Herod executed all the boys in Jerusalem who were "two years old or less," which means Herod thought, on the basis of what the magi had told him, that Jesus could have been alive for two years before the massacre of the Holy Innocents. That means he could have been born as early as 6 B.C. No more can be determined than that. This does present some confusion, but there is no real need to change the form of the calendar just for this.

What about the day? The gospels provide no clue as to the actual date, but that was not so unusual. Every year Christians celebrate Easter on a different date that falls within a general time period between mid-March and mid-April. This is because no one knows the actual date of Easter. The gospels tell us that Jesus died during a Passover week when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea between 26 and 36 A.D.,

but no more than that. It is not possible to determine which Passover week it was since we do not know the year Jesus was born or how old he was when he died. Luke's gospel tells us when he began his public ministry he was "about thirty" (3:23), which could mean anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-two. Furthermore, Matthew, Mark, and Luke mention one Passover while John mentions three, so was Jesus' public career one year or three? Recognizing these difficulties, by the mid-second century the Christians concluded they could not determine the actual date of Easter.

Shortly after this they came to the same conclusion about Jesus' birth but went on to contend that if they could not determine the exact date, they could determine an appropriate one. For example, the Christians often tried to replace a pagan feast day with a Christian one to alleviate the difficulties of conversion. In Egypt January 6 had a dual significance as a festival of the virgin goddess Kore and the birthday of the deity Osiris. By the second century, some Christians claimed this date for themselves, but in an unusual way.

From the time of the apostle Paul, Christians believed that Jesus had died a redemptive death on the cross for the sins of humanity. But in the second century, some converts with a Greek education had difficulty with that because the great Greek philosopher Plato had called the body the prison of the soul, and many Greek-educated Christians thought the body was too unimportant to be a means of redemption from sin. But if Jesus did not redeem humanity with his physical death, how did he do it? For these Christians, he did it by bringing us a secret and special knowledge.

The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*, and historians call these Greek-educated Christians "Gnostics." With a low opinion of the body, the Gnostics did not see January 6 as the date of his birth but as the manifestation of the divine Son of God on earth. The Greek word for "manifestation" is *epiphany*. For the Gnostics, Jesus' epiphany could have been his birth, but it also could have been his recognition by the magi, his

acknowledgment by the Father at his baptism, or his first miracle, the changing of the water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

This is a very small beginning, but by the early third century in Egypt some Christians in Egypt celebrated a feast that could (but did not have to) refer to Jesus' birth. This date grew in popularity in the Eastern Mediterranean and represented a tentative step toward Christmas.

Other third-century Christians took a different tack. They looked for a date that would be symbolically appropriate. In the New Testament the apostle Paul refers to Jesus as the New Adam, and the book of Revelation used a lot of Genesis imagery, comparing the first creation to the new creation at the end of the age. By the third century some Christians ingeniously speculated that the New Adam had been incarnated, that is, created as human, on the anniversary of the creation of the world. But how did anyone know on what day God had created the world?

Actually, the answer was rather simple. The world moves through annual cycles, being born in the spring, flourishing in the summer, declining in autumn, dying in winter, and being reborn in the following spring. For many ancient people, the first day of spring, the vernal equinox and the first day of the regenerative period, marked the anniversary of the creation. Today we mark that day on March 20, but, according to the Julian calendar, the day was March 25. In the third century, many Christians thought Jesus' birth fell that day, a New Adam for a new creation.

But a North African Christian named Sextus Julius Africanus had a different idea. He contended that the Son of God became incarnate not at his birth but at his conception, so if Mary conceived him on March 25, he would have been born nine months later on December 25.

This, of course, is *the* day, but it did not catch on quickly. Yet it had much to recommend it besides Sextus's theology. The Israelite prophet Malachi had referred to the Messiah as the "sun of righteousness." Some early Christians applied

that title to Jesus because Matthew's gospel says that at the transfiguration Jesus' face shone like the sun, and the book of Revelation says a figure "like the Son of Man . . . was like the sun shining" (1:13, 16). Early Christian writers picked up on that, and "sun of righteousness" became a common image for Jesus. (The phrase is still used today in the hymn "Hark the Herald Angels Sing.") This solar symbolism would play a significant role in elevating December 25 to be the date of Christ's birth, largely because of moves made by pagans.

By the third century the Romans had taken up an interest in solar monotheism. The emperor Aurelian (270–75), convinced of the futility of polytheism, instituted the veneration of one god, the Unconquered Sun, partly hoping that this new monotheism would help combat Christianity. During the same era many Roman soldiers and other men worshiped a virility god named Mithra, who was the son of the Sun. Both of these cults celebrated a great feast, the birthday of the sun, on the winter solstice since it is the shortest day of the year, and the sun grows stronger every day after that. The winter solstice, according to the Julian calendar, fell on December 25 (December 21 for us). Just as the Christian Egyptians had used January 6 to counter the feast of pagan divinities, so would the Roman Christians do with December 25.

But there was an added "bonus." The Romans celebrated a festival called Saturnalia, in honor of a pagan deity. The festival ran from December 17 to 23, and it involved much eating and drinking, gambling, temporary equality between slave and master, a mock king who presided over the feast, wearing of costumes including men and women wearing clothes of the opposite sex, and the exchange of gifts, although these were usually small things like wax candles. Much of this sounds familiar and would return as part of the secular Christmas, but it had religious importance for the pagans, and so the Roman Christian leaders hoped that their late December feast would counteract the pagan one and maybe keep Christians from taking part.

Barely a week after the end of Saturnalia, the Romans celebrated Kalends from January 1 to 5, greeting the New Year. For this festival the Romans decorated their homes with greens symbolizing the birth of the New Year, exchanged gifts, enjoyed temporary equality between the classes, and ate and drank a great deal.

Many people think that the church simply took over a pagan holiday, but that is not so. As Sextus Julius Africanus had shown, there were good reasons for celebrating the feast of Christ's birth on December 25, and sun and light symbolism played a very great role in Christian worship. By coincidence, this new feast could counter several pagan feasts, and while that added to its attraction, it did not determine the date.

Unfortunately we do not know who made the final decision to celebrate Christ's birth date on December 25, but no later than 335 it was being observed in Rome itself with the title *dies natalis Christi*, the "natal" (birth) day of Christ. We have Christmas.