

THE HISTORICITY AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

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ABSTRACT

The personality and historicity of Jesus has posed serious problems to contemporary New Testament scholarship. Some scholars have even concluded that Jesus did not exist, thereby ignoring passing references by historians of antiquity like Josephus, Pliny, Tacitus, and Suetonius, all of whom lived during, or shortly after Jesus' era. This paper, conscious of the pervasive influence of Jesus in the world today is to serve as a prolegomena to re-open the debate on the historicity of Jesus, and the circumstances of his birth in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS: Jesus, ancient history, Christmas, virgin birth.

INTRODUCTION

Arguments and questions on the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth has been the focus of most major movements in Christian theology. The rationalists with all its glaring errors pursued the argument with vigour and compelled the church to "take seriously its own confession that in Jesus God had not merely addressed the world but had actually entered" (Wright 348). It was the argument of the rationalists of the enlightenment that gave birth to the quest for the historical Jesus which was competently criticized by Albert Schweitzer, who in contrast projected the apocalyptic Jesus, rooted in 1st century Judaism.

In 1892, Kahler argued that, the search for the 'historical Jesus' was a mistake and theologically irrelevant. Rudolf Bultmann denied the possibility and significance of knowing anything about the historical Jesus. Bultmann concluded that what the church needed was the 'Christ of faith'. Kasemann initiated a new quest as an alternative to the docetism of Bultmanism. Despite the difficulty in arriving at a scholarly consensus on the historicity of Jesus, an historical and theological exploration of the circumstances of birth of Jesus can serve as a booster to revive the debate in the 21st century. It is certain that the debate in the 21st century will not rely on out-dated theological interpretations of past decades. Jesus of Nazareth has become a global phenomenon.

Gunther Bornkamm in his *Jesus of Nazareth* rightly observed that: "The story of Jesus does not end with his death. It begins anew with his resurrection. The scattered and bewildered band of his disciples gathers together; and, through their belief in him and their hope of his second coming, they become a community" (179). With the vast array of scholarly harvest on Jesus research, consensus on the historicity of Jesus, is still a theological problematic. Birger Gerhardson writes: "One cannot say that there exists any broad consensus about questions dealing with the person and work of the Jesus of history. The specialists express themselves with great caution on these matters. Consequently, the field lies open and free for the entire world's dilettantes...." (38, 39). In a state of utter dilemma, on the historicity of Jesus, Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen wrote:

Can one really know anything about the earthly Jesus? Since that which can be tracked down concerning him from sources outside the New Testament is minimal and unimportant, one is limited to the New Testament writings. But here we immediately meet with difficulty in that, all of these writings are confessions which bear witness to the primitive church's faith in Christ... There are clearly extraordinary difficulties in penetrating back to the primitive and free authentic figure of Jesus. Such research may well be compared to an attempt to restore a painting which during the course of time has been covered over with other colours (1, 2).

NAZARETH: THE BIRTH PLACE OF JESUS

Nazareth (Branch town) was a city in lower Galilee located in a mountain basin among hills rising 400-500 feet (122-152 meters), descending into Esdraelon from Lebanon. It was in

the north of the valley of Jezreel and halfway between the south tip of the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean coast. Nazareth is now modern En Nazirah on a hill of Galilee, with a population of over 50,000 people, dominated by Mahometan, Latin and Greek Christians. "It has a mosque, maronite, a Greek, and a Protestant church and large Franciscan convent" (Fausset 496).

Ancient Nazareth was very obscure. "It was not mentioned by Josephus, though he referred to nearby Japhia as the largest fortified village of all Galilee, leading to the idea that Nazareth was eclipsed by its neighbour." (*Aid to Bible Understanding* 1209). Nazarenes merited a reputation for mischief and moral bankruptcy. "Can anything good come out from Nazareth" (John.1:46). Palestine in the time of Jesus Christ was under Roman Empire. Roman civilization tapped so much from the Greek civilization. *Mare Nostrum* is the Roman name for the Mediterranean. Jesus spent most of his earthly life, along with his brothers and sisters at Nazareth. The two annunciations to Mary and Joseph took place in Nazareth, and later after the birth and the sojourn in Egypt, they took the baby back to Nazareth.

MARY AND JOSEPH

Mary is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Miriam, she was the mother of Jesus. At about the end of 3.B.C., Angel Gabriel was sent by God to inform her that the saviour of the world would be born from her womb and that the conception will be through the act of the Holy Spirit (Lk.1:35). Mary was also informed that her kinswoman Elizabeth was with six months pregnancy even in old age. She decided to visit Elizabeth, perhaps to confirm, or share mutual experience, upon entering the house, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped with joy, and instantly Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. At the end of three months, Mary returned to Nazareth.

When Joseph, who had engaged Mary, heard of this pregnancy, he made up his mind to terminate the engagement secretly. As he contemplated on his plans, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to suspend the planned divorce (Matt. 1: 20). Then the angel pointed to Joseph that this was a fulfilment of the prediction recorded in Isaiah 7: 14. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, God with us)".

Scholars are worried about the position accorded to Joseph in the Scriptures by sacred writers. Joseph was the earthly father of Jesus. He was a poor orphan boy who worked as a labourer with his uncle, who also taught him carpentry. Tradition has it that Joseph had a premature bald head. The golden bearded carpenter was often called a "visionary" because he avoided gambling, free women, and found pleasure in discussing ideas with selected neighbours (Oursler 3). Socially, Joseph was very humble, considerate and peace-loving. We do not know why the paternal role of Joseph on Jesus has attracted only a minute and tangential attention. The people of Nazareth knew Jesus only as the son of Joseph (Luke 3: 24, Matt. 13: 55).

Joseph taught Jesus carpentry and he was known both as a "carpenter's son" (Math. 13:55) and as the "carpenter" (Mark 6:3). Each year Joseph took Jesus and other family members to Jerusalem for the Passover feast and on one occasion, they found that the twelve year-old boy was missing. Joseph as the head of the family led the search until they found him at the temple in Jerusalem, listening and questioning scholars on topical issues of life (Lk.2:41-50). Unfortunately, Joseph's death is not mentioned in the Scriptures. But from every indication, he did not outlive Jesus, otherwise Jesus would not have entrusted the care of Mary to the beloved apostle John (John 19:26-27).

THE VISIT OF THE *MAGI*

On the day of this great birth, Luke the beloved physician recorded an angelic announcement and divine orchestra that inspired and motivated the shepherd to visit the Christ child; without any mention of a star guiding them to Bethlehem. St. Mathew analyzed the visit of the Gentile scholars and astrologers from the East to Jerusalem to enquire the birth place of the king of the Jews. The wise men, called *Magi* (Greek *Magoi*, i.e. astrologers), were a caste of star-gazers who specialized in astrology, dream interpretations, medicine and natural science. It was also the title of Zoroastrian priest of the ancient Medes and Persians. The *Magi* were traditionally called *Casper*, *Melchior* and *Balthazar*. They were also called *Atharva*, meaning "guardians of the fire". Their new name *Magi* (pronounced *may-ji*) was given to them first by the Chaldeans (Fausset 444). *The Imperial Bible Dictionary* has this to say:

According to Herodotus, the *Magi* were a tribe of the Medes, who professed to interpret dreams, and had the official charge of sacred rites; they were, in short, the learned and priestly class, and having, as was supposed, the skill of deriving from books and the observation of the stars, a supernatural insight into coming events... later investigations tend rather to make Babylon than Medes and Persia the center of full-blown Magianism (139).

The Jewish philosopher, who was born in Alexandria, North Africa, Philo Judaeus is reported to have said that the *Magi* were "Men who gave themselves to the study of nature and contemplation of the divine perfections, worthy of being counsellors of kings". *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* has it that: "The word is Persian or Median; it appears in Rab-mag, "Chief of the magicians" (Jer xxxix.3)... The *Magi* were a sacerdotal caste among the Medes, in connection with the Zoroastrian religion. They waited upon the sacred fire, and performed ablutions and practiced observation of the stars" (444). The question that often agitates the mind of scholars is how did the astrologers from the East come to know and identify with Jewish messianic expectations? The meeting point was the Babylonian captivity.

Nebuchadnezzar gathered round him the religious teachers and wise men of the nations he conquered (Dan 1: 3,4,20). The *Magians* probably lost some of the original purity of the simpler Median religion by contact with the superstitions of Babylon. Still there remain some elements of truth and opposition to idolatry, which formed common ground between them and Daniel (*Fausset 444*).

Daniel who was known as "t-he chief of the *Magi*" was at a time the principal of the wise men college of Babylon. Daniel had prophesied the coming of the messiah (Dan. 2: 48; 7: 13,14). Balaam who was a member of that class had prophesied that "a star shall come forth out of Jacob; a sceptre shall rise out of Israel... (Numbers 24: 17). The journey of the *Magi* to Bethlehem was not an empty one, without a meaning. Upon their arrival, the astrologers fell down and worshipped the Christ-child.

They unpacked their treasure chests and gave three symbolic gifts with the following meanings: gold, symbolized kingship or deity, frankincense or perfume, symbolized the righteousness and priesthood of Christ, while myrrh, or spices, symbolized the suffering and death of Jesus. These were usual gifts of vassal states and "in the eastern nations, when they

did homage to their kings, they made them presents" (Church 5). On the significance of their visit, Nlenanya Onwu posited that the visit of the wise men serves to affirm:

- (a) That the place of the messianic origin is Bethlehem.
- (b) That the appearance of the messiah on the stage of history provoked hostility on the part of the leaders of his people, but was acknowledged by representatives of the non Jewish world; and
- (c) That their search for and worship of Jesus prefigures the conversion of pagan nations to Christ (130).

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

Another important event in the birth narratives was the star that was seen in the East, and which followed the wise men, "till it came to rest over the place where the child was". "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him" (Matt 2:2, 9-11). The earth is located within the galaxy called the "milky way," *via lactea*, which measures between one hundred thousand to one hundred and twenty thousand light-years.

The Milky Way probably contains one hundred billion stars like the sun (*Aid to Bible Understanding* 1551). It was common for astronomers to monitor any corner of the globe when there is a total eclipse, or related phenomenon. The star of Bethlehem that attracted the astronomers may have been shooting star; either a comet, meteor, or a new star known as super nova. There are speculations that there was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, in 6 or 7BC. Elmer Mould writes:

On the basis of a certain Egyptian papyrus roll, now in the British Museum, which gives the positions of the planets between 17 B. C. and 10 A. D., a certain German scholar named Oefele has computed that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction repeatedly between April 15 and December 27, of the year 6 B. C., and on December 27" of that year Jupiter became stationary in Aries... Another suggestion would identify the star of Bethlehem as a nova, i.e., a star that suddenly flares up only to fade away after a few weeks or months, such as the astonishing Nova Herculis of 1934-35 A.D., which reached its maximum brilliance at Christmas time (492).

Origen, one of the church fathers, who lived in Alexandria about A.D. 200, wrote:

I am of the opinion that the star which appeared to the Wise Men in the east was a new star which has nothing in common with those stars which appear either in the firmament or in the lower levels of the atmosphere. Presumably it belonged to the category of these heavenly fires which appear from time to time and have been given names by the Greeks depending on their shape, either comets, or fiery beams, or starry hosts, or starry tails, or vessels or some such name (qtd. in Keller 331, 332).

Halley's Bible Handbook, ably disproves the theory of it being a conjunction of the planet which took place thrice in 7 B.C. : "The star that the wise men saw was, no doubt a distinct phenomenon, a supernatural light which by a direct act of God went before them, and pointed out the exact spot; a supernatural announcement of a supernatural birth" (419). *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* puts it this way:

The star was probably a meteoric body employed by the God of nature to be His instrument in the world for revelation, to guide the wise men to the divine messiah. Curiously a star appeared in September 1604, between Mars and Saturn after a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in Pisces, but at a shorter interval than the star of the *magi* after the conjunction in 7.B.C (663).

CENSUS IN ROMAN PROVINCE

Jesus was born during the census. Census was conducted in Rome every fourteen years. The census figure was used to tax the people and call up soldiers for military service. The Jews were always exempted from serving in the army because of their objection to fighting on the Sabbath. The Jews detested paying of taxes to a pagan government. It was during this period that Judas the Galilean also called Judas of Gamala by Josephus led an unsuccessful religious uprising in A.D 6, in protest against the Roman census, which was made for purposes of taxation on the grounds that Israel had no king but Yaweh and to him alone should true Israelites pay tribute. Luke's statement that "this was the first enrolment" has led Bible critics to accuse him of historical inaccuracies. E. A. Gardiner has said that:

It is well known that Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was the Governor of Syria in A.D 6 when Judea became a Roman province and that he

carried out the census which led to the revolt of Judas of Galilee... Egyptian papyri discovered in 1893 have however shown that periodical censuses were made of the Roman provinces and from an inscription found at Tibur (modern Tivoli) we now know that Quirinius had two periods of office in Syria. It is quite reasonable to assume that Augustus ordered an earlier census while Quirinius was acting as his legatus in Syria (8).

Many commentators have endorsed the views of Gardiner, including William Neil who posited that when Archelaus was deposed in A.D.6, Judea became the Roman Province of Syria, with Quirinius as the legate. And that Quirinius actually conducted a census, which was different from the census, referred to in Luke 2: 1-2, that took place in the reign of Archelaus father, Herod the Great, who died in 4B.C. Census in the Roman empire was not only for the *cives Romani* (The Roman citizen) but the entire vassal states which included Spain, Gaul, Syria, Egypt and Palestine. After many years of researches and brainstorming scholars have endorsed Luke's account as the correct version.

The scholarly research of Zumpt and Mommsen has confirmed that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria. When Cilicia was ceded to Syria, Quirinius as governor of Cilicia was also governor of Syria. The time of the first tenure was likely between the years 4 to 1 B.C. The second tenure according to Josephus ran from 759 to 765 (6 to 12 B.C.). Luke was therefore correct when he said that "this was the first enrolment... when Quirinius was governor of Syria", distinguishing it from the second, which occurred later under the same Quirinius and to which Gamaliel makes references as reported in Acts 5:37. Another evidence for Quirinius double tenure was an inscription discovered at Rome and Antioch which revealed that some years earlier Quirinius had served as the emperor legate in Syria at the time Saturninus was proconsul. Elmer Mould writes:

There is some evidence that Quirinius was governor of Syria, which was 6-9 A. D. There is some evidence that Quirinius at an earlier date was in service under the legate of Syria, though exactly when is problematic; 3-2 B.C. has generally been regarded as the date, though more recent research tends to push the date back to 11-18 B. C. At that time, Quirinius may have been dispatched to conduct a census in Judea, though there is no evidence of any such census having taken place before 6 A.D. (492).

THE SOJOURN IN EGYPT

Another interesting story in the birth narrative was the sojourn in Egypt. As soon as the wise men departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and directed him to take the child and the mother to Egypt and stay there until further instruction because Herod intends to make a search for the child in order to put him to death. Octavius conquered Egypt in 30 BC and Egypt became a Roman province. Joseph and Mary fled into Roman province with the baby to escape Herod's destruction so that the prophecy of Hosea "out of Egypt have I called my son" ... (Hos 11: 1) can be fulfilled.

When Herod waited in vain for a feedback from the *Magi*, he became excessively furious and rashly ordered the killing of all the young boys of two years and under in the town of Bethlehem and neighbourhood. (Matt 2: 18; Jer.31: 15). After the death of Herod, the heir-apparent Archelaus ascended the throne. Archelaus was wicked than the father. When the first Roman ruler came to Judea due to the misrule of Herod's son; Jesus was only ten years old. He lived among an oppressed, cynical and embittered people. Taxes were oppressive, freedom was unknown, survival was uncertain, and religion was restrictive, negative, and joyless.

VIRGIN BIRTH POLEMICS: INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 7:14

The Hebrew word *bethulah* which is derived from *bathal* means "to separate". Literally, it connotes relationship (Gen. 24: 16; Duet 32: 25). *Bethula* means "virgin", while *almah* means "maiden". The Greek *parthenos* is used of the Virgin Mary, Matt. 1:23; Luke 1:27. It also applies to both single men and single women (Matt 25: 1-12; Lk. 11:27). Seven hundred years before the incarnation, the prophet Isaiah predicted that a virgin shall give birth to a child whose name shall be called Immanuel - God with us. *The Revised Standard Version* translates Isaiah 7:14 as follows: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign, behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel".

This translation was suitable to modern liberal theologians who were bent on eliminating all dimensions of supernaturalness from the holy writ. *Almah* was deliberately translated as a young woman to weaken and crumble the doctrine of virgin birth which is fundamental to historic Christianity. The word *Almah* occurs nine times in the Old Testament in two separate passages (Ps. 46: 1; 1Chron.15: 20). The plural form is *alamoth*. Herman J. Otten has argued that "Nowhere in the Bible or in any Hebrew or Semitic literature does *almah* means anything different from virgin" (93). Martin Luther was also quoted to have said:

If they make the claim that the Hebrew text does not state a virgin is with child, but rather: an *almah* is with child... in the case of Christians, the answer is easy from St. Mathew (1:22,23) and Luke (1:27) both of whom apply the passage in Isaiah to Mary and translate the word *almah* "virgin", whom we believe rather than the whole world (qtd. in Otten 94).

Almah was translated "virgin" by the Septuagint (200 BC.), the Vulgate (400 A.D.), Luther (1534-46), the King James Version (1611), the British Revision (1881-85), and the American Standard Version (1901) (Otten 94).

WAS JESUS BORN ON 25th DECEMBER?

The word "Christmas" is derived from Old English *Cristes maesse* which means "mass of Christ". The church is divided on Jesus birthday. Some have argued that the early church did not celebrate the birthday of Jesus. According to the *Encyclopedia Americana*.

The celebration was not observed in the first centuries of the Christian church. A feast was established in memory of Jesus' birth in the 4th century. In the 5th century the western church ordered the feast to be celebrated on the day of the Mithraic rites of the birth of the sun and at the close of the *Saturnalia*... most of the customs, now associated with Christmas ... were pre-Christian and non Christian customs taken up by the Christian church. *Saturnalia*, a Roman feast celebrated in mid-December, provided the model for many of the merry-making customs of Christmas (622).

The historian Augustus Neander writes: "The notion of a birthday festival was far from the ideas of the Christians of this period" (190). *McClintock and Strong's Encyclopedia* says: "the observation of Christmas is not of divine appointment nor is it of New Testament origin. The day of Christ's birth cannot be ascertained from the New Testament, or indeed from any other source... The Jews regarded birthday celebrations as parts of idolatrous worship" (817). The authoritative Watchtower's *Aid to Bible Understanding* has this to say:

"Astrology teaches that the life and fortune of a person largely depends on the position of the heavenly bodies at the time of birth, hence the need to observe annually the return of the stars to that position. The horoscope is accordingly consulted by such cultists to learn of one's future. Astrology, however, is emphatically condemned by the Scriptures (237).

Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend is of the opinion that some primitive societies view birthdays as dangerous period when one is vulnerable to attack from malevolent spirits, who are whimsical and capricious, hence the need for exchange of gifts, parties and offering of sacrifices to their protective spirits (144). *The Encyclopedia Americana* further informs that:

The reason for establishing December as Christmas is somewhat obscure, but it is usually held that the day was chosen to correspond to pagan festivals. That took place around the time of winter solstice, when the days begin to lengthen, to celebrate the rebirth of the sun. The Roman Saturnalia (a festival dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture) and to the renewed power of the sun, also took place at this time... (qtd. in Abili 23).

In Babylon, Nimrod's birthday was celebrated on December the 25th. In Greece, Nimrod was known as *Adonis* and was worshiped as the great sun-god. The concept of God as the "The sun," "the powerful one", "the guardian of order" and "the sacred fire" (*Sanskrit agni*, Latin *ignis*, Greek *hagnos*), was common to all natural religions (Brow 14). Nature was deified and venerated as the visible evidence of the supernatural. The Egyptians claimed that the sons of *Isis* (The Egyptian title for the "queen of heaven") were born on December the 25th. In Arabia, where the "Lord Moon" is worshiped, his birthday is celebrated on the 24th of December (Warsop 14).

The Catholic Encyclopedia quotes Origen (A church father of the third century) as saying that "of all the holy people in the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod) who make great rejoicing over the day on which they were born into this world below" (709). *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Religions* also confirm that Jesus was not born in December 25th. According to it, the celebration of Jesus birth day started around the third century, and that December 25th falls approximately on the day of the winter solstice, and it took over the pre-Christian festival of the rebirth of the sun" (Abili 23). "Once in England the secular and religious celebrating of Christmas was outlawed as a pagan practice. That was when the puritans ruled England. In the Massachusetts Bay colony in North America, the puritans who left England because of their belief also banned Christmas and imposed fines on merry making during this season" (Abili 23).

Traditionally, ancient Romans celebrated the *Dies Natalis Invicti* (The birthday of the unconquered on December 25th, which was also the last day of the *Saturnalia* in Roman calendar (Keller 338). December 25th appeared in documents as a Christmas day officially for the first time in A.D 354. It was recognized as an official holiday during the regime of the Roman Emperor Justinian (A.D. 527-565), that is, precisely in 529 AD. Most of the European nations endorsed Christmas celebrations by about 1100 A.D. The Protestant revolution of the 16th century banned Christmas festivities, especially in Britain, but the celebration was revived in the reign of Charles II.

We are convinced that Jesus Christ was not born in December the 25th. The miscalculation of Jesus birthday has been blamed on the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus, who lived in Rome. Exiguus was instructed in the reign of Emperor Justinian to fix the beginning of the new era by working backwards. He failed to insert the year zero between 1B.C and A.D1. Exiguus was also blamed for over looking the four years reign of the Roman Emperor Augustus under the name Ocatavian.

Exiguus formula was as follows: "Year of the foundation of Rome 753= 1. B.C. Year of the foundation of Rome 754 =A. D.1. (A.D. = *Anno Domini* = year of the Lord)" (Coutts and Thompson 43). It is now generally agreed that the date of Herod's death should be fixed four years earlier (4. B.C.), allowing only a few weeks between this and the birth of Christ, the

later event must be placed in 4 B.C. So far, everything about the exact birthday of Christ rest on probability. While E. A. Gardiner fixed the birthday at 4 B.C, Ramsay considered 6 B.C. to be the correct date. Coutts and Thompson considered 7 B. C. to be the possible date. Another scholar who endorsed 7 B.C. was Werner Keller. Some Eastern churches keep Christmas on 6 January.

CHRISTMAS TREE

Not many years ago, Christmas was known as "yule-day" and it is still referred to as "yule-tide" (old English, geola originally a name of a pagan feast which lasted for 12 days). Yule log was a large log of wood traditionally used as the foundation of a fire in the hearth of Christmas. The fire ate it up and it disappeared. "When the children came down in the morning there was the Christmas tree, laden with presents. They were told that when the Yule log died the Christmas tree appeared in its place" (Warsop 16). "Yule" is the Chaldee name for an "infant" or "little child. That is the reason Anglo-Saxon ancestors called the 25th of December "yule day" or the "child's day" and the night of the 24th "mother's night".

The idea of the Christmas tree probably originated in Germany. Tradition has it that St. Boniface who lived in the eight century gave a young fir tree to his co-workers, which symbolized a transition from their pagan worship to the new faith. The Christmas tree therefore was a replacement for the Oak tree, which was an appendage of paganism. From Germany, the Christmas tree was introduced to England in the early 1800's. In many parts of England, candles lighted on Christmas Eve and were used as long as the celebration lasted.

Boar's head was used as the traditional dish on Christmas dinner table in England. There is a fable that Nimrod died of a fatal wound inflicted by a boar's tusk and so, for that reason, the heathen sacrificed a boar to appease his wife, the goddess *Semiramis*. In Rome and Egypt, the goose "could not be eaten except in the depth of winter" (Warsop 18). The practice of "kissing under the mistletoe" originated with the worship of the Druids, who were members of an ancient order of priests in Gaul, Britain and Ireland in the pre-Christian era.

Druidism, which is derived from old Irish "druid", meaning "wizards", was the traditional religions of England during the Roman Empire. Druidism worship which involved human immolation was banned by the imperial government of Rome, the mistletoe

represented their saviour who was viewed as a divine branch. "Mistletoe is a plant parasite, which means that it cannot grow on its own, but lives and grows on different trees, mainly the apple tree and poplar" (Warsop 19). The Druids worshipped the plant when it was found on the oak tree. The kiss is now an international symbol of pardon and reconciliation.

CHRISTMAS CAROLS

Carols was a circular dance accompanied by singing, inside the ring, a baby was kept in a cradle. The first Christmas carols were written in the fifth century and were awe-inspiring. In the 13th century, St. Francis injected a more joyful spirit into the carols. The church is indeed grateful to hymn writers like Christian Georgina Rosetti (1830-94) who wrote "Love came down at Christmas" and "In the bleak mid-winter". Edward Caswall (1814-78) for "See! in yonder manger low". John Byrom (1691-1763) for "Christians, awake, salute the happy morn", Martin Luther (1483-1546) for "Give heed, my heart, lift up thine eyes", and "From heaven above to earth I come", Charles Wesley (1707-88) for "Hark! The herald angels sing," Philips Brooks (1835-93) for "O! little town of Bethlehem". Traditional carols includes "The First Noel the Angel did say", "On Christmas Night all Christian Sing", and "God rest you merry, gentlemen". Some of our carols, admittedly, came from United States about 100 years ago. "Silent Night" was originally composed in Austria in 1818.

The most glamorous and time-honoured contribution to Christmas carol was from the German-George Friedric Handel (1685-1759), a composer who was resident in England, noted particularly for his oratorios, including "the messiah" (1741) and Samson (1743). On April 13, 1737, Handel had a stroke which paralyzed his right side, he trusted Jesus Christ for divine healing and restoration. Within 12 years, Handel wrote 15 oratorios including, Save, Israel in Egypt, Samson, Judas Maccabeus, Jephtha and above all, messiah. At the completion of the messiah, Handel collapsed for joy, for 17 hours, for God had given messiah to a world that had largely forgotten him and his Christ.

Messiah, which was widely accepted all over, Europe, was sung 34 times in London alone (Gunn 19, 20). As the dawn of that beautiful Good Friday, of 1759, gilded the hills with its golden glory, the beauty of an eternal morning broke upon his soul, for Handel -the epitome of spirited rhythm had gone to be with the Lord.

There are five other Biblical hymns, which Christians sing along with carols during Christmas seasons.

a) The *Ave Maria* of the Angel:

This is in commemoration of the visit of the angel to Virgin Mary - Lk. 1:28-33.

b) The *Magnificat* of the Virgin Mary:

This was a hymn of praise with which Virgin Mary replied Elizabeth-Lk. 1:46-55.

c) The *Benedictus* of Zacharias: Recorded in Luke 1: 68-79, it was unconsciously rendered by the priest Zechariah after the birth of his son - John. The use of *Benedictus* in Christian worship started in the sixth century.

d) The *Gloria in Excelsis* of the Angels:

This was the hymn of the angels that appeared to the shepherd in the field where they were watching over their sheep in the night. The story was recorded in Luke 2:14.

e) The *Nunc Dimittis* of Simeon.

This was the spirit-filled utterances of Simeon when Christ was presented to him in the temple for dedication according to Jewish religious ordinances (Luke 2:29-32). Like the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus*, it was introduced into Christian worship in the sixth century.

SANTA-CLAUS

Santa-claus is the legendary patron saint of children, commonly identified with saint Nicholas. The legend goes back to over 1600 years to Myra in Asia Minor, where Nicholas lived with his wealthy Christian parents. St. Nicholas was so committed to the ideals of Christianity and the doctrines of the church, which culminated in his consecration and enthronement as the bishop of Myra. Nicholas was given to humanitarian services at all levels. He loved humanity, and was always happy for helping the poor. His public spiritedness, urbanity and human-heartedness endeared him to the larger society to the extent that towns and hundreds of churches were dedicated to him. Over the years, he has become a symbol of generosity, empathy and hospitality.

In the 17th century, St. Nicholas visited the United States in the company of Dutch aborigines. He was called *sinter klass*, which later developed into "Santa Claus". The actual image of Father Christmas was an invention attributed to the son of Bavarian musician who lived in the United States. His Christmas drawings which were produced for *Harpers Weekly* for 23 years, created the image of Father Christmas. Another positive development that

consolidated the Santa Claus fame was the poem "*'Twas the night before Christmas*", written by the distinguished Hebrew scholar Clement C. Moore. Moore's poem mystified Nicholas in North America as a key traveller.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Another interesting variety of Christmas celebration is the distribution of cards to loved ones. In 1843, Sir Henry Cole suggested to J. C. Horsley that he should design a card. It was made up of three symbolic artistic components. In the middle was a family comfortably seated around a table with their glasses raised, and on the left a picture depicted "feeding the hungry", and on the right "clothing the naked" (Gunn 19, 20). The emphasis behind the design was that cards are not only for greetings, but a reminder on the plight of the hungry and suffering humanity in seasons of love, goodwill and brotherhood.

CHRISTMAS: PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL?

So far, we have heard that Zoroastrian scholars and astrologers visited and paid homage to infant Jesus. Rendering of homage is an act of respect and allegiance made by a vassal to his lord. It also means an acknowledgement of vassalage. The visit of the *Magi* has been interpreted to mean the recognition, and surrendering of all pagan religion's to Christianity. The church has never condemned Joseph and Mary for accepting the gifts. We even have theological meanings for each of the gifts. As a cross-cultural faith, the mission of Christianity is to purify and integrate all cultures of the world, but in doing this, Christianity must have an upper hand in the acculturation process.

Everything on earth has a pagan origin. Some of our traditional names, streets, lands, market names, and even family buildings have pagan backgrounds. Some converted Christians were born in herbal home. Some of those who criticize Christmas as a pagan feast do not even know the meaning of the word "pagan. Our English word "pagan" is derived from two Latin words *pagus* which means "village," and *paganus* which means "village dweller". In church Latin, *paganus* means "civilian" (hence not a soldier of Christ).

Polytheism that is, the worship of many gods has a long history, while monotheism is the heritage of revealed religions. We all know that the pre-mosaic Jewish religions were polytheistic. Monotheism was entrenched into Jewish religiosity by Moses. The mission of the

church on earth is not to preach Christ with all dosages of emotionalism and psychological manipulations as we are witnessing today, but to incorporate the Christian world-view into the "opinion of mankind" and transform every culture through Christian influence. Joseph Ekarika posits thus: "... Christianity does not treat the non-Christian religions with disdain. It purifies their doctrines free them from error and crowns them with Christian wisdom. The Christian mission is not destruction and condemnation, but liberation and transformation of other religious values, ancient and modern..." (74).

Pagan kings like Emperor Constantine played historic roles in the expansion and consolidation of Christianity as a state religion. We have it on sound biblical scholarship that some New Testament writers quoted comfortably from heathen poets. A glaring example is Luke who lifted a statement credited to the pagan poet Aratus and applied it to drive home a point in acts 17:28 "in him we live and move, and have our being; as even some of your poets have said" (RSV). St Paul cited another pagan poet by name Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33, "Do not be deceived; bad company ruins good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33 RSV).

In the pastoral epistle, St. Paul cited another heathen poet by name Epimendes in Titus 1: 12 "one of themselves, a prophet of their own, said" Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons". We are of the opinion that truth is truth no matter the source, whether uttered by a heathen poet, a pagan priest as in Numbers 24: 17, truth can even proceed from a dumb animal (Numbers 22: 28). The church cannot afford to abandon the collective wisdom of humanity on the slippery and illusory altar of sectarianism.

JESUS IN ANCIENT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Some critics have erroneously contended that nothing is said about Jesus in ancient history, and therefore, conclusively he did not exist. The weakness of such argument is that critics of Christianity do not often recognize facts. With a prejudiced mission to disprove the historicity of Jesus, and weaken the foundations of Christianity, they ignore history. If anybody is bent in propagating the Christ-myth theory at a time that "Jesus research" has reached the pinnacle of scholarship, it is a clear case of resisted illumination. Was it possible to have a sect out of Judaism, without a founder? B. B. Warfield in his *"The Person and Work of Christ"* points out why there is comparatively little reference to Jesus Christ in ancient literature:

The rise of Christianity was a phenomenon of too little apparent significance to attract the attention of the great world. It was only when it had refused to be quenched in the blood of its founder, and, breaking out the narrow bounds of the obscure province in which it had its origin, was making itself felt in the centres of population, that it drew to itself a somewhat irritated notice. (21).

Another reason that can be deduced for the seeming obscurity of Christianity in antiquity was the fact that primitive Christianity had no temples. Built no magnificent cathedrals or altars, used no crucifixes, and had no distinctive clerical garb and had none of the paraphernalia of modern priesthood. There was no element of priestcraft, vested interest and profit motive hence, little or no publicity. One of the ancient historians whose works contains a detail reference of Jesus was Joseph ben Mathias known as Flavius Josephus, Jewish historian and general, who was born around the time of the crucifixion and who spent many years in Galilee. He wrote:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men has had veneration for truth. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles: he was the Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared unto them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had spoken of these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him: whence the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct this day (815).

Some of the critics of Christianity have condemned this statement, which is credited to Josephus as a pro-Christian interpolation, and a fabrication by Christian copyists. An expert in Jewish studies at Oxford University, Geza Vermes has admitted that the style and vocabulary belongs to Josephus, but that the use of "Christ" instead of the "messiah" is suspect. Vermes asserted that to declare that the entire statement is a Christian fraud is unwarranted and that there is no doubt that a remarkable Jew called Jesus walked on the streets of Palestine.

Another ancient writer who confirm the historicity of Jesus was Publius Cornelius Tacitus (55-12 A.D), Roman historian and orator whose works include *The Histories* dealing

with the period 68-96, and *The Annals*, dealing with the period 14-68. Tacitus who lived in the first part of the second century, commented on the rumours that Nero himself was responsible for the conflagration that engulfed Rome in A.D. 64, he wrote:

But not all the relief that could come from man, not all the bounties that the prince could bestow, nor all the atonements which could be presented to the gods, available to relieve Nero from the infamy of being believed to have ordered the conflagration. Hence, to suppress the rumour, he falsely charged with guilt and punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius: but the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time, broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also... (423).

Another writer of antiquity was Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus (62 -113 A.D.), known as Pliny the younger, who was the governor of Bithynia in 111 or 112 C.E. Faced with the Christian problem he wrote:

They affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error was that, they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god and bound themselves by a solemn oath not to do any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to deny a trust when they should be called on to deliver it up... (403)

A second century Greek writer and satirist, Lucian popular especially for his satirical *Dialogues of the Gods, and Dialogues of the Dead*, spoke of Christ as: "The man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers one of another after they have transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping that crucified Sophist himself and living under his law" (12, 13).

Thallus, who wrote about A. D. 52, just a few years after the death of Jesus, is quoted by Julius Africanus, a Christian writer of the early third century. Africanus speaks about the

mysterious mid-day darkness, which came at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus. He says, "Thallus, in the third book of his histories, explains away this darkness as an eclipse of the sun unreasonably, as it seems to me". The crucifixion of Christ was known in Rome among nonChristians (qtd. in Acts of Pilate XI. 6). Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (75-150 A.D.), Roman biographer, whose chief works, were *Concerning Illustrious Men*, and *The lives of the Caesars*, in his *Life of Claudius*, (about A.D.100) wrote: "Since the Jews were continually making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome" (qtd. in Rhoton 21, 22).

Some critics have described New Testament account of Jesus as fallible documents containing theological propaganda. George Wells of the Department of German Studies, London University, has argued that Paul's letters, which came up before the gospels made no reference to Jesus parentage, and that conclusively Jesus of Nazareth was not an historical figure. G. D. James in his *"The Greatest Conqueror"* asserted that: "The historicity of Jesus is proved not only by the Bible, but also by secular history. Historians recorded the fact that Jesus was a person, that He led a holy life and perform many miracles, that he was crucified and that the tomb in which he was buried was empty three days after he was laid there" (44).

H. G. Wells has this to say on the historicity of Jesus "The four gospels gives us a picture of a very definite personality, they carry a conviction of reality. To assume that Christ never lived, that the accounts of his life are inventions, is more difficult and raises more problems for the historian than to accept the essential elements of the gospel stories as fact" (qtd. in Okon 10). Theodore Parker, a famous American infidel wrote: "Measure Jesus by the shadow he cast into the world; or by the light he shed upon it, shall we be told such a person never lived? That the whole story is a lie? But who did their works, and thought their thoughts? It takes a Newton to forge a Newton. What man could have fabricated a Jesus? none but Jesus" (Okon 10). F. F Bruce expressed the weakness of such a position when he said: "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a Christ-myth, but they do not do so on the grounds of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the Christ-myth theories"(119).

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* devotes 20,000 words to Jesus more than those allotted to renowned men like Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great, Cicero and Julius Caesar (James 44). William Menzies in his *Apologetics* wrote: "in the entire western world, every time a calendar is viewed, every time a date is announced, every time a coin struck, there is a testimony to the one who is pivotal to all history. We count the years as before Christ (B.C) or as in the year of our Lord (Latin *Anno Domini*, AD)"(88).

CONCLUSION

Martin Hengel has observed that the basic problem in writing the history of earliest Christianity is the fragmentariness of the sources and the haphazard way in which they have survived (3). Hans Kung has also pointed out that the word "Christian" which arose in Antioch was first used in world history in a derogatory sense (119). To that extent, it is clear that earliest Christianity was not a popular movement to attract the fullest attention of secular historians. But then, it is unacceptable now for anybody to say that Jesus did not exist, or that the things said about him were mere myths, or fabrications of his disciples and apologists.

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