

# The Mystery of Christmas

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**(CBS)** It's one of the most powerful and beautiful stories in all of Western culture: the son of God, born of a virgin in a manger in Bethlehem, his coming announced by angels, celebrated by shepherds and wise men.

But is what the Bible tells us about the birth of Jesus really true? Where was Jesus born? When? How? And why? As the Christmas carol asks, "What child is this?"

**48 Hours correspondent Maureen Maher** explores these questions with curiosity and with respect.

Hard facts about Christmas are hard to come by, since the birth of Jesus was not a well-covered news event. To get any kind of glimpse into what really happened, one has to travel back to the first century and into the world of Jesus.

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The troubled lands of Israel and the West Bank are saturated with pilgrimage sites where, at least according to legend, the events of the Christmas story occurred.

Nowhere does the story seem more concretely real than inside the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

A small staircase leads down to the grotto where it is claimed that Jesus was born.

As much as we know anything, we know from multiple historical documents that Jesus was a real person who really died on a cross. But the mystery of his birth is much harder to solve.

The monuments to Christmas were built hundreds of years after the fact, and there are no contemporary documents such as birth records to delve into.

"We would like there to be records of all of this. And instead, what we have is Gospels," says John Dominic Crossan, a former Roman Catholic monk and a professor emeritus at DePaul University.

Crossan has spent a lifetime studying the four separate texts of the New Testament that recount the life of Jesus – the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. On the subject of Christ's birth, Crossan says, their stories are very difficult to harmonize.

"The interesting thing is, of the four gospels, Mark and John of course have no nativity story. Only Matthew and Luke," he explains. "They agree that Mary and Joseph are the parents. They agree about a virgin birth. They agree about a birth in Bethlehem. But pretty much apart from that, the stories go completely their own way."

The shepherds, for instance, appear only in Luke, while the magi are only in Matthew.

"When you start looking at them and realize that you can't make the way you heard it come out the same way, you have to ask, 'Wait a minute, what's going on here?'" says Michael White, a New Testament scholar at the University of Texas. Unlike fundamentalist Christians, White concludes that the Gospels include plenty of creative writing.

"The Gospels themselves were not really intended to be the kind of newspaper-like reporting of day-to-day events that we tend to assume," says White.

He says that's because the Gospels aren't just recording facts. They are making a case to convince people that Jesus was divine.

How would White suggest people read the Gospels? "To read them as religiously-motivated stories," he says.

"They are not writing history. They are trying to tell you the meaning of history. So to do that, they have to take historical events, of course. But they will adapt them. They will change them. They will create," says Crossan.

And most scholars agree that each Gospel author tailored his argument to fit his target audience.

"If they had a complete videotape of everything Jesus did and said, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John would still say, 'Well, no, I'm going to adapt that for my community,'" Crossan says, with a laugh.

The Gospel of Matthew, for instance, was written for newly-converted Jews.

"It's a message that gets involved in the whole sense of Jewish identity and the role of Jesus as the Messiah," says White.

"Matthew is in there, saying in effect, 'It's the Christian way that is the future for Judaism,'" says Crossan.

The implications for the accuracy of the Christmas story are profound.

"It becomes pretty clear, I think, that Matthew is creating a lot of the story," says White.

Where was Jesus really born? Matthew says in Bethlehem, which is, coincidentally, the home of the great Jewish King David and the place where the Jews had always expected their messiah to come from.

"It is the natural way to link Jesus into the lineage of David," says White.

Some scholars argue that it all seems to fit too well.

"Born in Bethlehem is a clue that we are making the claim that this child is the Messiah," says Crossan. "But nobody else seems to know anything about it in the New Testament.... It doesn't seem, for example, that John, in John's gospel, has any idea that Jesus was born in Bethlehem."

But if Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, then where? Crossan and White believe the name says it all: Jesus of Nazareth.

"It's probably the case he was born in Nazareth," says White. "He's called 'Jesus of Nazareth.' And that would've been the norm, that is, wherever you're born is the namesake that you will carry with you."

Instead of a manger, the actual birthplace might have been within a house. "The houses that we have excavated at Nazareth are very often very small, tiny houses, many of them backing into a cliff which has a cave in it," says Crossan.

But we don't know exactly where that house might have stood. While most of the ancient village has been excavated, part of it remains buried under what is now the bustling present-day town of Nazareth.

It may be hard to grasp, but there's a real possibility that Jesus was actually born on a plot of ground now used as a market place, unmarked by a church or even a monument.

But if Matthew concocted the Bethlehem birthplace to inspire his Jewish audience, what else did he make up? White suspects other episodes were inspired by another Jewish hero.

"There's this constant undercurrent in Matthew to Moses stories and Exodus stories, and aspects of the life of Moses," says White.

For example, Mathew writes that Herod, the power-mad king of the Jews, ordered the slaughter of all the young boys in Bethlehem, and Jesus, Mary, and Joseph fled to Egypt.

"So, now Matthew is saying to himself, 'Jesus is the new Moses. Aha, I know what I'll do. When Moses was born, Pharaoh tried to kill him, and kill all the young men. I will say the same of Herod,'" says Crossan.

In a cave underneath the Church of the Nativity lie the skulls of Herod's alleged victims. To some they look too big to be those of children.

"We have no historical evidence that such a massive slaughter or any kind of event like that ever occurred," says White. He adds that there is no historical evidence he is aware of that the holy family fled to Egypt.

But if Matthew took liberties with the truth, what about Luke?

"The birth narrative in Luke is far more miraculous at every turn. More spectacular," says White.

And how did people who first heard the Christmas story respond to its most important miracle, the virgin birth?

By far the most sacred tradition in the Christmas story, and one of the few points on which the gospels of Matthew and Luke agree, is the phenomenon of the virgin birth.

"The two gospels that talk about the birth of Jesus are very emphatic about the virgin birth," says White.

But biblical scholars like Prof. White see reason to wonder whether the circumstances of Jesus' birth may have been less miraculous. "We do have the fact that the other sources and, in fact, the earlier sources about Jesus don't mention it at all," says White.

One has to wonder why an eye-popping story like the virgin birth gets absolutely no mention in the gospel of Mark, written decades before Matthew or Luke.

"Had it been known that the birth of Jesus was some kind of extraordinary miracle in the way that Matthew and Luke suggest, the author of the Gospel of Mark might have heard about it, or known about it, or cared about it. Certainly not said nothing," says Princeton University professor Elaine Pagels.

She says that what Mark does say about Jesus' family background is somewhat suspicious.

"In the earliest account, the gospel of Mark, is the statement that Jesus is the son of Mary. There's no mention of a father there," says Pagels. "Now, it would be very unusual to talk about a Jewish boy as a son of Mary if he had a legitimate father. So, it's an odd account."

Does Pagels think Jesus was illegitimate? "I think we don't know. But I do know that there was something embarrassing or troubling about the birth of Jesus that caused a lot of questions," she says.

Pagels believes that Matthew and Luke, in an effort to put an end to those nagging questions, reached into the Old Testament for the solution: a virgin birth.

"Matthew read the prophet Isaiah, and he read a passage in chapter seven that said, 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and this will be a sign,' I think he must have said, 'Oh. That's it. It was a miracle. The woman was a virgin.' That's why people said it was illegitimate. But in fact, it was a divine sign," says Pagels.

Not everyone was convinced. As Christianity spread in the second century, its critics began spreading outrageous rumors of Jesus' birth.

"There later developed a counter legend in Jewish tradition that, in fact, Jesus was the product of an illicit liaison between Mary and a Roman soldier by the name of 'Pantera,'" says White.

Archeologists have found the gravestone of a Roman soldier inscribed with the name "Pantera." But most scholars view that theory as far-fetched.

"It's the obvious rebuttal. I don't think what came first was the adultery, and then the virgin birth. I think what came first was the claim of the virginal conception. And then the obvious rebuttal by opponents," says Crossan.

Crossan thinks Luke had his own reasons for including the virgin birth. He says that, just as Matthew was writing for Jews, Luke was writing for Pagans of the Roman Empire, people ruled by a living god: Caesar Augustus.

"In texts and inscriptions and on coins, Caesar was announced to be the Lord, Capital "L". The savior of the world. The one who brought peace," says Crossan. "My own idea is that the virginal birth comes up as opposition to the birth of Caesar.... They're saying, 'No, peace does not come from Caesar. Peace comes from God.' In a way it's terribly subversive."

To put Jesus on a par with Caesar, Crossan says, Luke borrows from Roman myths about the emperor's birth.

"Caesar Augustus was born of a human mother, Atia, and a divine father, Apollo. Jesus, who would become the Christ, was born of a human mother, Mary, and a divine father, Yahweh, the God of the Jews," explains Crossan.

And just as in imperial mythology, Luke has angels triumphantly announcing the new Lord's arrival.

"Luke is writing almost a caricature of the birth of Caesar," says Crossan. "He's really saying as clearly as he can, 'In your face, Rome.'"

Crossan says there is one important difference.

"Apollo doesn't ask permission. It's really a divine rape," he says. "In this story of the Annunciation it is much more delicate. The angel asks, as it were, God's permission first. A far more beautiful, and far more magnificent, story."

But many Christians would find it very offensive that there is any sort of association between Jesus, the Christ, and Caesar and Apollo.

"It's not offensive because it is a counter-story. You're saying, if in the first century I want to say God is not on the side of Caesar, how do I tell that story? They understood it," says Crossan. "The people in the first century got the message. Jesus represents a different vision of peace on Earth."

Eventually, Jesus' vision would dethrone the pagan gods. Today, Christmas is the holiday, not Caesar's birthday. Ironically, it falls on a day that was once a Roman festival.

"It was probably chosen at that time in December," argues Crossan, in order to replace the winter solstice holiday.

But before the virgin birth became official church doctrine, some other early Christians had their own ideas and their own Gospels.

In 1945, an extraordinary discovery of dozens of ancient texts was made in Egypt. They describe a more controversial version of the birth of Jesus than anyone had ever heard before.

One of those texts was a later Gospel, ultimately declared heresy by the Church – the Gospel of Phillip.

“The Gospel of Phillip basically implies that Jesus had biological parents as we do,” says Pagels. “It’s not a literal truth that Jesus was born from a mother impregnated by the Spirit. But, rather, one has to understand that as a metaphor for the divine process of rebirth that takes place when we’re born again spiritually.”

Pagels says the Gospel of Phillip questioned the entire concept of the Virgin Mary. “What it does is suggest that it’s a mistake to take literally the idea that Jesus was born from a woman who hadn’t conceived with a man,” she says.

Though Christianity eventually rejected that opinion, it remains popular among some biblical scholars.

“If I had to reconstruct it as a historian, I think Jesus was born in the normal way any children are conceived and born in the normal way any child is born,” says Crossan, conceived by Joseph and Mary.

“Mary is not a virgin. It’s a way of saying that this child is unique, and therefore the conception of this child must be as unique as you can imagine,” says Crossan.

But Crossan argues that such an interpretation does not negate the belief in Jesus as the son of God. “You do not need to take the stories, say, of Matthew and Luke, the infancy stories, literally in order to believe that Jesus was the Messiah or the Lord or the savior of the world or the Christ.”

If you take away the elements of the story of Christmas that scholars don’t really believe actually happened -- the site in Bethlehem, the birth in a humble manger -- what does Michael White think one is left with?

“There, I think, you do have a legitimate question, there is something lost,” he says.

But millions of people don’t want to lose any part of Christmas.

They include Ben Witherington, a conservative Bible scholar and an evangelical minister. “Christians assume that this is part of the foundation of the story, and it’s extremely important,” he says.

Witherington headed to the holy land to refute the skeptics. “The event of the virginal conception happened. History. All right? The event happened,” he says.

**48 Hours** brought Ben Witherington to Israel to make the case that the miracles of Christmas really happened.

Witherington took **48 Hours** to the village of Capernaum. This is the home of St. Peter, where Jesus often stayed and preached.

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, this is X marks the spot. This is actually the place, really, where the Christian movement begins,” says Witherington.

He believes Matthew came here too, and actually interviewed relatives and the first followers of Jesus.

“And here’s why Matthew is so important: he’s literate. He’s the perfect guy to write this down,” says Witherington.

Does he feel that the story gains validity from the fact that Matthew was here listening to the stories of Jesus?

“Yeah, I think there’s the eyewitness component of it,” Witherington says.

Back in the holy city of Jerusalem, Witherington told **48 Hours** that Luke’s Christmas story can also be trusted, since Luke got his version of Christmas from a key eyewitness.

Witherington believes Luke may have actually spoken with Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But why are the two accounts so different? Witherington says that, besides the inclination of the authors to write for different audiences, there could be a more simple explanation: cost.

“Papyrus was expensive. Scribes were exorbitantly expensive, and so they have to be very selective to get it on a single scroll,” he says.

That helps explain some of the apparent contradictions in the two Gospels. But what about those miracles?

To appreciate the Gospels the way the early Christians did, one must step back from the modern understanding of the world. In the time of Jesus, miracles and magic were a very real part of everyday life. And if one can at least accept the possibility of the supernatural, then it becomes possible to read the story of Christmas as more fact than fable.

"We like to tout ourselves as very open-minded, but in fact, in regard to this matter, the ancients were far more open-minded than we are," says Witherington.

Back in Nazareth, Witherington says he believes the account in Luke that this is where the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the son of God.

Who was Mary?

"Well, we're talking about a small town girl here. And in early Judaism, an engagement in marriage was an arranged proposition between two sets of parents. So we shouldn't get too romantic about the story," says Witherington.

At the time of the Annunciation, he says, Mary was very young, barely a teenager.

Witherington says the Annunciation took place in Nazareth, but he doesn't know whether the event occurred at Mary's home, as the Roman Catholics claim, or at a well, as Greek Orthodox tradition maintains.

"What happens is that an angel appears to her and says, 'Something great is going to happen to you. You are going to be the mother of the Messiah,'" says Witherington.

Does he think there was some discussion about the issue?

"You're absolutely right that, you know, if Mary goes home to Mom and Dad and says, 'Well, I've got good news and bad news. Here's the good news. The good news I'm going to be the mother of the Messiah. The bad news is, I'm already pregnant. But, not to worry. I'm pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit.' And, you know, if I'm a normal parent I'm going, 'Uh-huh'. And where was Joseph when all this was happening?" says Witherington. "You know, of course, there's a scandalous element to the story."

And it's precisely because the story was a public relations problem for the early Christians that he's convinced the Gospel authors would never have made it up.

"You don't make up a story like this if we're dealing with an evangelistic religion that wants people to believe the story," says Witherington. "The virginal conception is too improbable not to be true."

But then, how did Mary and Joseph wind up 70 miles south in Bethlehem? Luke's explanation is often disputed but Witherington believes it.

"They had to go back to their ancestral home in Bethlehem to register for the census," he says.

Witherington says the census was ordered to collect taxes. No records of that census have ever been found. Still, when **48 Hours** returned to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Witherington was sure he was in the right place.

"Well, we've got two distinct traditions, Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel," says Witherington.

Is it possible that these are stories that were compiled because the Jews wanted and needed the Messiah to have come from Bethlehem?

"Well, it's possible. But in a world of possibilities it's not very probable, because we know how early Jews handled sacred traditions. You don't play fast and loose with the most essential parts of the story," says Witherington.

But what happened when Jesus was born? Were there really wise men and shepherds?

Perhaps the most touching part of the Christmas story is also one of the least verifiable: the visit of the Magi to pay homage to the baby Jesus.

The Magi, and the fabled star they followed, appear only in the gospel of Matthew, but Witherington says that's no reason to dismiss them.

"Now, they themselves were not kings. You can call them sages, you can call them star-gazers, they were not kings. But these were the kind of people who knew a king when they saw one," he says.

Witherington says it was common for ancient astrologers to travel to investigate heavenly signs. "We know these kind of things did happen; we have other historical parallels," he says.

If there was a celestial event that prompted a cross-continent journey, then surely the Magi would have had to travel through the ancient stone city of Petra.

At the time, it was also a great place to buy frankincense and myrrh.

Now, as then, the road through Petra is best traversed on camelback.

But could there really have been something in the sky guiding their journey? One astronomer says yes.

"There really was a historical basis to the star of Bethlehem," says Michael Molnar of Rutgers University.

He says that if ancient astrologers saw the planet Jupiter in the constellation Aries, it would have had great historical significance.

"If you had Jupiter in the East in Ares, the Ram, you had the sign that a King of the Jews was born," says Molnar.

Using a computer model, Molnar discovered just such an event.

"I was really ecstatic when I found in my computer screen all these things coming together in this time frame, that is April 17, 6 BC," says Molnar.

Could April 17, 6 BC be the real Christmas? In fact, most scholars agree that our calendar is off by a few years. And the possibility that Jesus was born in the Spring is supported by Luke's mention of shepherds tending their flocks.

"The shepherds tend their flocks during the spring time in that part of the world. So there were a number of things that just fell together very nicely," says Molnar.

Other scholars like John Dominic Crossan say that Luke, by having angels appear to shepherds of all people, is sending a subversive message to the Roman Empire.

"Romans would think of shepherds, they're kind of on the margins," he says. "That heaven would send angels to shepherds is another way of saying, this ain't your regular birth, people."

But there actually is evidence that shepherds were in Bethlehem.

"What we've got here is a sheep pen, where you can keep them. And you have a feeding trough right here, conveniently sheep height, not the height for an oxen or a beast of burden but sheep height," says Witherington.

One of the local archeologists excavating the site showed **48 Hours** what he had found: the skull of a small sheep.

"It's clear that these stories are not simply made up out of whole cloth," says Witherington. He says he has no problem with the story that the shepherds saw angels in the sky. "Historically speaking, we've got thousands of accounts of people seeing angels," says Witherington.

We usually think of the shepherds and the wise men arriving moments apart. But if the wise men began their journey the night Jesus was born, their trip would have taken months, and Matthew tells us they went first to Jerusalem for a meeting with King Herod.

Witherington also believes King Herod, after meeting the wise men, did order the slaughter of all male infants in Bethlehem. But he's not persuaded by bones underneath the Church of the Nativity.

"I think it's very possible we're looking at the skulls of monks," he says.

Instead, he points to King Herod's obsession with power – which can be seen clearly with a visit to the Herodion, his mountaintop fortress.

"He shaved off four or five hills around here to build up this artificial mountain here. Can you say 'Fear Factor' times ten? That's who Herod was," Witherington explains.

And Witherington says King Herod even executed wives: "His own wives. He executed some of his children when he thought they got too old and were likely pretenders to the throne. So, the paranoia was deep."

Witherington says there's no record of the slaughter simply because it was a minor event by the standards of the time.

"From what we can tell from the archeological ruins of first century Bethlehem, a few hundred people lived there. I think we're talking between six and ten children max," he says.

Did the Holy Family really go to Egypt? To investigate, **48 Hours** traveled to Cairo.

Though rarely noticed in the West, there is a large population of Christians in Egypt. They pray at over a dozen sites where, according to legend, the Holy Family stopped along their journey.

The church of St. Sergius in Cairo, for example, is revered as a spot where Mary, Joseph and Jesus sought refuge.

Professor Witherington doesn't have proof the family came to that particular spot, but he took **48 Hours** to an ancient synagogue nearby to make a point.

"This is the largest cluster of Jews outside of the holy land, anywhere in the world. There were 100,000, 200,000 Jews down here," he says. "If you believe you're the parents of the Messiah, then you need to go to a safe haven. And you want to go to a Jewish one."

From here, traditionalists believe Jesus and his parents eventually returned to Nazareth, though his ministry would not begin for almost 30 years.

But how much of the Bible's account do we need to prove before we have faith? Can the biblical story of Christmas still be true, even if it's not entirely accurate?

"At the end of the day, there's always going to be a question mark or a mystery to this," says Witherington.

"We don't know what really happened," says White. "The fact is, we will never know."

For many Christians, it is crucial that the nativity story be based in fact.

"It's important that there's a reason for why you believe," says Witherington.

For him, the journey to the Holy Land only gave his faith more grounding.

"The more that we've dug up, the more confirmation we've had for the historical veracity of these stories," he says.

But it is clear that many of the earliest Christians had no trouble worshipping Jesus without believing his birth was anything special.

Pagels says even if you don't believe the story of the birth, it doesn't negate the miraculous nature of Jesus. "Apparently the author of John and the author of Mark would say, 'We don't need those stories to affirm the uniqueness and the power of Jesus,'" she says.

Whatever the particular circumstances of Jesus' birth, his life undoubtedly began in exceedingly humble surroundings. Yet what Jesus did with his life inspired a religion that would alter the course of history. By any standard, human or divine, that's an amazing accomplishment. If nothing else, Christmas reminds us that the birth of a single child can change the world.

"So we're not just talking about a dusty old story about an ancient historical figure. We're talking about somebody who's still influencing human lives 2,000 years later," says Witherington.

Some fear that Jesus' influence is being drowned in a flood of crass commercialism.

"We are carefully ignoring the central message of Christmas, which is that there's a new way suggested to bring peace on earth. And we take it out every Christmas and we admire it, make the decorations, and then we tuck it away. And in the meanwhile, there is no peace on earth," says Crossan.

But if there is any cause for hope, it's that the message of Christmas has traveled across the timeless sands of the Middle East and arrived intact at Holy Spirit Elementary School in Pequannock, New Jersey, where the kids are performing the nativity play.

Asked what the real meaning of Christmas was, one of the students says, "It's the celebration of when Christ was born. It's not all about the presents and all the gifts you get."

"The Christmas story reminds us of family, reminds us that God cares about us," says Witherington. "It teaches about what it means to be truly human."

