

## Christmas

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### I. New Testament

Neither the Pauline Epistles (see, e.g., Gal 4:4), the Sayings Source Q, nor the Gospel of Mark know a narrative of the birth of Jesus. It is Matthew and Luke that first expand the history of Jesus by adding to the beginning of his biography. Matthew 2:1–12 is not a birth narrative (2:1 only briefly takes note of the birth, prepared narratively in 1:18–25) but rather a report on the magi's bestowal of honor upon the king of the Jews, born in Bethlehem. While the path of the star does not describe an astronomically verifiable route, it does indicate Jesus' unique majesty and significance (2:2: "his star"). Two conceptions of kingship and two possible ways of receiving Jesus stand in contrast to one another in Matthew's narrative: whereas the homage mentioned in 2:11 is the adequate response – as opposed to the lack of welcome in 2:3–4 foreshadows the rejection of Jesus and his final death in Jerusalem, further superimposing the conflict with Judaism upon the narrative.

Even though the transmission histories of both narratives may intersect and while parallels appear in motives and forms alike, Luke 2:1–21 proves independent of Matt 2:1–12. Within the complex of Lukan prehistories, 2:1–21 represents a new beginning. In particular, the notion of the virgin (or "spiritual") birth (cf. 1:35; cf. Rom 1:3–4) seems relegated to a less important role. Luke opens the narrative with a synchronism (2:1–2; cf. 3:1) that correlates salvation history and world history: the census allows Jesus – for the sake of the narrative – to be born in Bethlehem, who together with his family originated from Nazareth in Galilee (cf. 1:26; 2:4). The historical background remains the subject of scholarly debate, however. Augustus reportedly carried out periodical censuses in the provinces but none empire-wide. (Besides, a census would have presumably occurred in the place of residence or the main location of the tax district.) Luke possibly expanded a census originally limited to Judea that took place after the deposition of Archelaos in 6 CE, casting it as encompassing the entire known world and further giving it a new date (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.355; 18.1–3.26; 20.102; *B.J.* 2.117–18; 7.253). In Luke 2:7, the author also emphasizes the very human conditions under which the birth of Jesus, like all humans beings (see esp. Wis 7:1–6), took place. Furthermore, 2:8–20 presents a shepherds' story rich in connotations.

Comparison with not only HB/OT and early Jewish metaphoric shepherd images (cf. 1 Sam 16:1–13; Ps 78:70–71) but also mythical stories from Hellenistic-Roman literature (cf. Virgil, *4th Eclogue*; Calpurnius, *1st Eclogue*) come to the fore. The form of 2:8–15a corresponds with that of an epiphany report, vv. 13–14 blending the model of the epiphany of a single messenger with that of the angels serving and praising God in heaven. Indeed, the central focus of the passage lies in the announcement of the birth of the "savior" for all of Israel (in this sense "men of good will/men with whom he is pleased" in 2:14c constitutes the original variant), who is called "Christ the Lord" (Gk. *χριστός κύριος*). Even more, the Lukan "today" (cf., e.g., 4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9) underscores this announcement as absolutely relevant for the present. Luke is the only Synoptic Gospel to call Jesus "Savior" (cf. 1:47; 2:30; 3:6; cf. Acts 5:31; 13:23), the corresponding Greek root being of crucial significance for Luke's theological and christological understanding: for readers of Greek, "Savior" not only implies the process of political redemption from oppressive situations (as in the case of, e.g., Plutarch, *Cicero* 22.5–6) but also includes an aspect of physical healing. The corresponding "salvation" – likewise initially determined exclusively for Israel – is now, through the Christ-event, offered and proclaimed universally as a joyous happening.

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### II. Christianity

- Patristics and Early Medieval Times ■ Medieval Times and Reformation Era ■ Modern Europe and America

#### A. Patristics and Early Medieval Times

**1. Introduction.** The oldest traditions concerning the date of the nativity of Christ point to spring (Förster 2000: 11–53). Indeed, the Feast of December 25, celebrating the nativity of Christ, was first introduced in the 4th century CE. While the older important feasts of the church (Easter and Pentecost) connect to the Jewish calendar, this feast uses the Roman solar calendar, which itself, then, suggests secular influence. However, two feasts of Christ's nativity were almost certainly celebrated in the second half of the 4th century CE: the Feast of December 25 originated in the West (*natalis Christi*) and spread to the East, changing in this process the content of the Eastern Feast of the Nativity of Christ (Förster 2006), usually called Epiphany, which was celebrated on January 6. The introduction of a nativity feast comes as a surprise since the popular practice of celebrating birthdays found

widespread disfavor among Christian communities (Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 8.3, remarks that only the birth-days of sinful and pagan kings receive commemoration).

The problem of Christmas' origins stands as one of the most puzzling questions of the ancient church's history. Essentially two different hypotheses exist: one argues that calculations led Christians to the introduction of the feast ("calculation hypothesis"); the other ("history of religions hypothesis") points to the parallel feast of the *natalis solis invicti*, the feast of the winter solstice, which was allegedly very popular in the Roman Empire (cf. Halsberghe 1972) and thus would have forced the church to fight against it by creating a Christian feast as its competitor.

**2. The "Calculation Hypothesis."** Using Luke 1:8–22, John Chrysostom (*In diem natalem Christi*), e.g., claims Zacharias was high priest on the Day of Atonement (i.e., the end of September; Lev 16:29–34) in the holy of the holies (Lev 16:2, 17) when the angel announced the conception of John the Baptist. Six months later (Luke 1:26), i.e., around March 25, Jesus must have been conceived, and 9 months later, the nativity of Christ is celebrated. This calculation, however, is used for other dates as well: Ananias of Shirak (7th cent. CE) argues it took some time until Zacharias went back to his wife (Luke 1:23–24), which means John the Baptist was conceived a few days later, thereby making January 6 the correct date. Yet Zacharias was certainly not a high priest; thus, the apparition of the angel to Zacharias does not relate to a date in the Jewish calendar.

**3. The "History of Religions Hypothesis."** At first sight, this hypothesis seems to be the more convincing explanation for the introduction of Christmas as a feast in the 4th century CE. Many homilies for December 25 use solar imagery. Thus, in a homily Maximus of Turin calls Christ the "true sun" that "has been born today" (*Serm.* 45.1: *Hodie verus sol ortus est mundo*). According to him, December 25 is called "new sun" in the vernacular (*Serm.* 52.1), which suggests a close relationship between a "Feast of the new sun" and Christmas. Indeed, Augustine, in his dialogue with Faustus, even quotes this follower of Mani, saying, "you celebrate the feasts of the pagans with them as, for example, the calends and the solstices." (*Faust.* 20.4: *Sollemnes gentium dies cum ipsis celebratis, ut kalendas et solstitia*). Augustine thus has to defend Christianity because of a parallel between Christian and pagan events. He even seems to point directly to this parallel in a Christmas homily, where he states that Christians should not – like the pagans – venerate this day for the sun but for the invisible creator of the sun (*Serm.* 190.1). In another homily, he again mentions a connection between the sun and the feast, declaring not the visible sun but the invisible creator of the

sun made this day holy (*Serm.* 186.1). Hence, current scholarly consensus unsurprisingly tends to favor the "history of religions hypothesis" (Roll 2003: 457–58), even calling it a "natural explanation" (Botte 1932: 61–62). The evidence, however, remains circumstantial, since no connection between the *natalis solis invicti* and the *natalis Christi* actually appears in the texts of this period. A mere gloss in a manuscript of a 12th century theologian from Syria (Dionysius bar Salibi) mentions for the first time a direct and intentional connection between these two feasts, but this rather curious note cannot serve as historical evidence because of its very late date.

**4. The Historical Dilemma.** If this circumstantial evidence proves convincing, the paradox faced by the historian could not be more dramatic, even if this explanation has found wide acceptance in current scholarship. First and foremost, no clear evidence connects the two feasts. To make matters worse, close scrutiny casts doubt on many aspects. The seemingly overwhelming evidence that makes a homily of Augustine (*Serm.* 186.1) a clear and unshakable witness to a parallel pagan feast (Rahner 1945: 196) is, in fact, a mistranslation of a quotation (Ps 66:5 [LXX]; cf. Förster 2007: 278). Faustus' argument, already mentioned, is not as convincing as it seems, for the same Augustine preaches a very polemical homily against the Calends of January: Christians have to fast while the pagans feast (*Serm.* 198 = *Serm.* 26 Dolbeau). Even more problematic is Augustine's use of a Christmas homily as an opportunity to criticize pagan customs of January 1 (*Serm.* 196.4). Thus, Augustine probably did not know a pagan Feast of the solstice celebrated on December 25. The importance of this day as mentioned by Augustine may come from its astrological significance. For him, December 25 is the correct date of the nativity of Christ (*Serm.* 203.1), which had been chosen by divine providence (*Serm.* 190.1). Even more unsettling is Maximus of Turin's statement that no parallel Feast of December 25 is known (*Serm.* 98.1).

Quite surprisingly, despite the above-mentioned opposition to commemorating birthdays, no discussion emerges within the literature as to the appropriateness of celebrating the birth of Christ. Celebrating his birthday seems connected with the growing interest in the Holy Land and the effort to celebrate the mysteries of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in accordance with the biblical narrative: his birthplace in the Holy Land is well-known, it thus seemed almost "natural" to celebrate there a Feast of his birth following the biblical narrative. The very old solar symbolism for Christ likely influenced the date, since following the older traditions of his birthday and celebrating Christmas around the time of Easter would have proven impractical (Förster 2007: 306–7).

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### B. Medieval Times and Reformation Era

The celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 originated in Rome, spread to the East and West in the 4th and 5th century CE, and reached the Middle Ages with an extensive array of meanings. Among these were reminiscences of original biblical motifs such as the birth from a virgin (Luke 2), the adoration by the magi, and the massacre of the innocents (Matt 2), as well as pericopes proclaiming the entire Christ-event: the incarnation of the Son of God, begotten of the Father in eternity, as the “dayspring from on high” (Luke 1:78) and “the true light that enlightens every man” (John 1:9). To be sure, when in the 5th and 6th century CE the Western Church adopted the Epiphany feast (January 6), which originated in the East, the theme of the adoration by the magi (Matt 2:1–12) was transferred to this new date. In addition, the motif of the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem (Matt 2:16–18) determined the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), attested from the 6th century CE on. However, for the time being, the core christological message unique to the Christmas festivity was preserved.

In the early Middle Ages, a Christmas festive cycle in its own right developed in imitation of the Easter festive cycle: Advent, which was gradually reduced to four weeks, assumed a preparatory character, the feast itself initiated already on December 23 and 24 through the preliminary celebration known as *vigilia vigiliae nativitatis*. The octave of Christmas formed part of the festive cycle and comprised saints’ feasts, some quite ancient, such as those of St. Stephen, St. John the Baptist, and the Holy Innocents, who were now celebrated as “Comites Christi” (soon interpreted as types of Christian martyrdom); it also included the octave day on January 1, which commemorated the circumcision and naming of Jesus (Luke 2:21) and incorporated Marian ideas. The cycle was completed with Epiphany and then on February 2, the 40th day after Christmas, with the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (“Candlemas”), which commemorated the temple events reported in Luke 2:22–40.

The celebration of Christmas in the Middle Ages was initially influenced by the custom – adopted in the Gallo-Frankish realm and rooted in

the papal stational liturgy – of three Christmas masses: one at night (*in nocte*, “Midnight mass” or “Christmas matins”), another at dawn (*in aurora*), and a third during the day (*in die*, as the oldest Christmas mass). Thus the authentic Roman ensemble of texts substantially influenced by Gregory the Great found its way, along with its biblical and theological content, into the Frankish north. Drawing on the symbolism of light and sun, this liturgy offers thanksgiving for the birth of Christ and God’s revelation in his son and asks for the renewal and salvation of humanity. In this way, far from any historicization or romanticization of the manger, it bridges the gap from the incarnational to the paschal mystery.

The triad of scriptural readings – attested already in the 6th century CE and surviving in many local churches until the Middle Ages, in some cases even until the 18th century (e.g., Trier, Cologne) – combines prophetic witness (Isa 9:1–6 [MT]; Isa 61:1–3; Isa 62:11–12; Isa 52:7–10) with a christological and soteriological witness (epistle: Titus 2:11–14; 3:4–7; Heb 1:1–6; Gospel: Luke 2:1–14; 2:15–20; John 1:1–18). The christological interpretation also determined the choice of HB/OT Mass chants, which drew, e.g., upon Ps 2; Ps 98 (97); Ps 110 (109); Isa 9:6; Zech 9:9. Admittedly, the transformation of an originally paschal motif in Pss 2 and 110 (109) into an incarnational understanding is striking.

Medieval liturgists explained the unique character of each of the three Christmas Masses allegorically in terms of the three periods of the order of salvation (before, under, and after Mosaic law) or in correspondence with a threefold birth of Christ (bodily from the Virgin Mary, spiritually in the souls of human beings, begotten of the Father in the brightness of his glory), which fostered the custom, attested for the first time in 1156 by Peter the Venerable of Cluny, that required every priest to celebrate three Masses on this day.

The extensive night office (*Matutin, Missa in nocte, Laudes matutinae*) was complemented with an additional rite that probably grew out of the monastic liturgy, is mentioned already by Amalarius of Trier (d. 850/853 CE), was known in all churches of the West except in Rome, and constituted, in a certain analogy with the *Exsultet* of Easter, the culminating point of the Christmas feast: the solemn proclamation of the genealogy of Christ as found in Matt 1. In many places, the *Liber generationis* was sung with ornate melodies by an especially designated singer at the conclusion of the midnight mass, solemnly accompanied by bells, candles, and incense. Further musical and poetic elaborations of the Christmas liturgy can be found in the sequences (e.g., *Grates nunc omnes, Natus ante saecula*) and in the tropes of existing antiphons, for example, of the introit of the Christmas day Mass *Puer natus est*. The

further elaboration of this introit in the form of a dialogue (*Quem quaeritis in praesepe?*), following the example of Easter festivities, led to the development of the liturgical Christmas play, enriched with further dramatizations such as manger processions and singing roles (*Officium pastorum* and the similar *Officium infantium* and *Officium stellae* shortly after). The historicization of the Christmas liturgy beginning here already displays signs of the incarnational Jesus-piety of the High and Late Middle Ages. From now on, although the liturgy texts remained essentially unchanged, the Christmas feast would come increasingly under the influence of the traditions of the *Jesusminne* ("love of Jesus"), manger-centered piety, and the German Christmas song widely attested from the 14th century onwards. But the close connection between incarnation and the mystery of Easter as the heart of the church year became increasingly obscured.

One unique aspect of medieval Christmas liturgy in monasteries and cathedral chapters manifested itself in connection with the saints' feast days following Christmas: deacons (St. Stephen), priests (St. John the Baptist), and students (Innocents) elected their own "abbot" or "bishop," who, appared in the appropriate liturgical vestments, was required to intone certain chants at vespers and Mass as well as take the lead in processions. The "Boy Bishop" was later shifted from the Feast of the Holy Innocents to St. Nicholas' Day (December 6), which was transformed into a "St. Nicholas Play" that included the handing out of presents. In this same context lay the dramatical presentation of the flight into Egypt (Matt 2: 13–15) on the Feast of the Ass (usually on January 14), accompanied by acclamations imitating the braying of a donkey as well as by a sequence recalling Balaam's donkey (Num 22: 21–35).

Luther and the Reformers opposed these frivolous and burlesque theatrical presentations and emphasized centering the Christmas feast on Christ. They did, however, accept the liturgical legacy handed down to them, albeit in a mostly vernacular form (reading, sermon, and especially hymns such as the *Quempas* carols), and they approved folk customs conducive to worship (manger, Christmas tree). In order to discourage "disorderly" conduct in the middle of the night, though, the night worship service was soon replaced with vespers in the early evening. In addition, the saints' feasts were given less importance, while the Protestant celebration of Christmas itself was expanded to also include the second and third day of Christmas – a process that already began during the Reformation period.

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### C. Modern Europe and America

Christmas' history in both early modern and modern Europe and America has been turbulent. The holiday has fallen victim to and yet profited from the cultural, social, political, and religious changes that have shaped and reshaped the West.

From 1600 into the 19th century, Christmas declined in importance in much of Western Europe, although the pace and character of decline was uneven and unevenly distributed. Three powerful developments contributed to Christmas' woes: the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution.

Although Luther celebrated Christmas and Calvin tolerated it, some of their more radical successors attacked Christmas on several fronts. There was no Christmas in the Bible and no indication in Paul's Letters that the earliest Christians concerned themselves at all with commemorating Jesus' birth. The unbiblical holiday was seen, then, as a pernicious combination of pagan practice and Roman Catholic fabrication. Most troubling of all was the misrule that characterized the Christmas season in many parts of Europe and North America. Rowdy elements of pre-Christian winter festivity had been blended with Europe's Christian celebration of the nativity, including drunkenness, sexual license, role reversal, cross-dressing, intimidation, and even occasional violence. Such misrule had become somewhat ritualized and thus controlled to an extent, but the pagan roots of the behavior, Roman Catholicism's (often reluctant) toleration of the season's license, and the behavior itself appalled Puritans. Cotton Mather efficiently summed up their disgust: "The Feast of Christ's nativity is attended with such profaneness, as it deserves the name of Saturn's Mass, or of Bacchus his Mass, of if you will, the Devil's Mass, rather than to have the holy name of Christ put upon it." Although Christmas survived the attacks and felt them only moderately in Catholic and Lutheran areas of Europe, it was nonetheless diminished and fragmented, and after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, something like *cuius regio eius Christmas* prevailed in much of Europe and in America's colonies, although it was never quite so neat as that. Ironically, the enemies of Christmas seem to have been more effective in purging religious observations than the bacchanalian aspects, which survived well into the 19th century.

Enlightenment thinkers cast doubt on Christmas from a different flank, replacing *sola scriptura* with *sola ratio*. For them, the issue was the NT na-

tivity accounts themselves, which, in the rationalists' view, were marred by the supernatural (that is, the superstitious) and the irrational. The virginal conception of Jesus (Luke 1:26–45) – and thus to many, by implication, the incarnation – was an embarrassment to be rejected. In 1745, William Whiston published a NT cleansed of virgin birth and incarnation; more famously, while serving as President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson took the time to excise (literally) from his rationalist NT (the forerunner to The Jefferson Bible) the virginal conception of Jesus and the annunciation (Luke 1:26–45), the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), angels and divinely inspired dreams (Matt 1:19–24, 2:12–15, 19–23; Luke 1:11–19; 2:8–15), Herod (Matt 2:1–19), the slaughter of the innocents (Matt 2:16–18), the flight to Egypt (Matt 2:13–15), and all prophecy, that is, Matthew's nativity narrative and key elements of Luke's. In the 19th century, historical-critical approaches, Protestant liberalism, and the impact of Darwin's and other scientific ideas further challenged Christian confidence in the Bible, and the questioning of the truth of the Gospel nativity accounts extended beyond the miraculous to the more mundane; differences and inconsistencies between and within the accounts garnered examination (such as where Mary and Joseph lived before Jesus was born and hence where Jesus was born [Matt 2:1–11, 16, 19–23; Luke 1:26; 2:1–12, 39–40], the genealogies [Matt 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38]) as did historical implausibilities (such as Augustus' census [Luke 2:1–5], Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents [Matt 2:16–18]). As literal interpretation of the Bible became one of the primary responses to these developments, it was natural that the perfect historicity of Luke's and Matthew's nativity accounts, and particularly of the virgin birth, be defended, as, for example, the Glaswegian minister James Orr did in *The Fundamentals* (vol. 2, ch. 11). Other Protestants, joined by Roman Catholics in the wake of *Divino afflante spiritu* in 1943 and *Dei verbum* in 1965, responded by reading Matthew and Luke as accounts that are theologically true but might contain literary and allegorical elements not intended to represent literal truth.

Industrialization administered what could have been the final blow to Christmas in many countries, particularly those in its vanguard. In much of Western Europe, the celebration of Christmas had depended on rural social relations and December's role in the agricultural cycle. December was a relatively dead time for both vegetation and agricultural labor, and midwinter festivities had been cheering and occupying idle people since well before the birth of Jesus. Many depended on their social superiors for a measure of unaccustomed bounty and tolerance of social transgressions. But as people flocked to the cities from the country (Manchester, for example, went from a population

of around 17,000 in 1758 to over 300,000 in 1851), the social relations and agricultural cycle underpinning these Christmas revels were undermined, while an emerging middle class found what remained of the old Christmas uncongenial.

The rapid and drastic changes in Britain and the United States, however, helped rescue the holiday, although the holiday the 19th century wrought was quite different from what Europeans and North Americans had experienced previously. The change started in New York, where in the first decades of the century a small group of the city's elite were looking for ways to tame the Christmas bacchanalia, to endow their raw city with traditions and cultural richness, and to navigate the radical developments New York was experiencing. By evoking a quaint Dutch New Amsterdam Christmas that had in fact never been and by lovingly describing a "traditional" British Christmas that no longer was, John Pintard, Washington Irving, Clement Clark Moore, and others laid the foundation for the modern Christmas, a tame, domestic Christmas replete with nostalgia, a focus on children, Santa Claus, and the exchange of commercially manufactured gifts. On the other side of the Atlantic, Charles Dickens, Harriet Martineau, and others helped spread and legitimate the gospel of the new middle-class Christmas, also under the guise of embracing tradition. Aspects of this Anglo-American Christmas spread throughout Europe, picking up appealing and easily adaptable traditions from other countries, such as the German/Baltic Christmas tree and the Italian crèche. The writings that inspired this reinvented Christmas ignore the biblical nativity accounts almost completely and thus helped create a multifaceted Christmas celebration that could be enjoyed without reference to or thought of Christ.

Nonetheless, the religious observance of Christmas survived, aided perhaps by increased ignorance and indifference to the Bible. Many Europeans and North Americans are unaware that their conception of the nativity is, in fact, a stew composed of passages and ideas from Matthew, Luke, apocryphal nativity narratives, HB/OT allusions, postbiblical piety, exegesis, and imagination: an ox and an ass (Isa 1:3), an unusually large and bright star (*Protevangelium of James* 21), three magi (Origin's *Homiliae in Genesim* 14.3), shepherds and magi in attendance together (shepherds, Luke 2:8–18; magi, Matt 2:1–12), an elderly Joseph (*Prot. Jas.* 9), a beautiful, often blond, Mary (Birgitta of Sweden's *Bethlehem Vision* 1.4), a stable or a cave or both (stable by implication from "manger," Luke 2:7; cave, *Prot. Jas.* 18). The recent secularization of Western society, with its decline in church attendance and confessional membership, has made participation in Christmas services for many more an annual social ritual than a religious one, even in historically Catholic countries

like Spain and Italy, where in some regions the observance of Christmas had seemed less vulnerable to the impact of the Reformation, Rationalism, and the Industrial Revolution. Although tens of millions in the West observe Christmas with both prayerful, attentive worship and secular celebration, for even more, Christmas has become solely a modern mid-winter festival seasoned with a dash of nostalgia – important, yes, but only tenuously moored to the biblical roots of the holiday.

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### III. Judaism

Jews have engendered an extensive range of responses to Christmas, especially in the form of popular religion. Although some early rabbis argued that it is forbidden to mention Christmas (or Jesus) directly, European rabbis addressed the subject by the early modern period. For example, East European rabbis debated whether Jews should study sacred texts or have sexual intercourse on Christmas Eve. In addition, Jews in Eastern Europe evolved an array of popular practices marking Christmas – which include refraining from study, playing cards, and covering holy books and vessels containing liquids to protect them from *tum’ah* (ritual impurity) – as well as folklore about Jesus. Much of this lore was based on *Toledot Yeshu* (History of Jesus), a medieval counter-history of Jesus’ life that refutes his divinity. East European Yiddish bore over a dozen terms for Christmas, some simply voicing anxiety (e.g., *blinde nakht*, “blind night”), others using language play to disempower the holiday (e.g., *vey-nakht*, literally “woe-night,” punning on German “Weihnachten”).

In Western Europe, following the Enlightenment and the subsequent emancipation of Jews, celebrating Christmas as a national, rather than religious, holiday became a common practice for integrationist Jews, especially in German lands. Some German Jews imported their observance of Christmas to the United States upon immigration during the mid-19th century. By the end of the century, Jewish organizations began to call for increased and more public celebration of Hanukkah – the 8-day Jewish festival commemorating the Maccabean victories of 165 BCE, which typically falls in December – as a defense against the popularity of Christmas.

During the early 20th century, East European Jewish immigrants to the United States encountered Christmas customs – exchanging gifts, at-

tending holiday parties – as part of the challenges of Americanization. Over the course of the century, American Jews engaged Christmas through public debates over public school holiday programs, Yiddish-inflected parodies of Christmas carols, court cases on displays of crèches and other holiday symbols in public spaces, and social-science studies of Jewish Christmas practices, especially the presence of Christmas trees in the home, widely considered a barometer of assimilation.

At the end of the 20th century, the rising number of American Jews in interfaith marriages prompted new responses to what had been termed the “December Dilemma.” This issue was addressed on seasonal episodes of primetime television series and in greeting cards that variously bemoan or celebrate the interrelation of Christmas and Hanukkah. While Jewish and Christian organizations typically denounce this syncretism, some Jews champion the hybridization of these two holidays, occasionally referred to as “Weihnukka” in German and “Chrimukkah” in the United States. Other Jews have developed their own alternative Christmas practices, ranging from volunteering in hospitals and soup kitchens to seeing movies and eating Chinese food. Jewish museums and community centers now regularly offer public programs on December 25, as Christmas becomes an occasion for Jews to debate and enact their sense of difference.

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### IV. Islam and Other Religions

The roots of the Christmas celebration lie in pre-Christian mid-winter European pagan festivals such as the Roman New Year Saturnalia and the Norse Yule, which occurred in late December to early January. The Roman festival *Dies natalis solis invicti*, “the birthday of the unconquered Sun,” which took place in the dead of winter, kindled the imagination of Christian fathers such as Cyprian and John Chrysostom at a time when Christians were slowly beginning to celebrate the birth of Jesus in December or January. When Christmas caught on, extrabiblical customs such as merry-making, decorating with greenery, and the symbolism of light were introduced into popular understandings of the Christmas nativity stories from paganism.

Sometimes the courteous celebration of Christmas by non-Christian neighbors was sufficiently widespread to draw forth official disapproval. For example, the medieval Spanish Muslim scholar Yahyā ibn Yahyā al-Laythī (d. 849 CE), who played a leading role in establishing the Mālikī rite as the official legal school in Andalusia, thought it necessary to issue a fatwa against Muslims celebrating Christian festivals, including giving and receiving gifts at Christmas.

The Victorians gave Christmas a makeover and secularized it. From our present-day perspective, Charles Dickens' influential and ever-popular *A Christmas Carol* (1843) conveys its admirable message of individual transformation and social justice more through pagan than biblical themes: its origins are as much as, if not more, in the customs and over-indulgences of Saturnalia and Yule than in the Bible. First through the agents of the British Empire and then through the wider impact of globalization, this Victorian renovation turned Christmas into a secular feast, found in many countries of the world but with only the most tenuous of links to Matthew's and Luke's birth stories.

Recent patterns of immigration have also shown Christmas' ability to appeal to new audiences. Marriage can draw a non-Christian partner into a nexus of family events, including Christmas. In multi-faith societies where Christians are in a majority, people of different faiths often share in the major celebrations of their Christian neighbors. Furthermore, just as Jews in Christian-majority societies sometimes emphasize their minor Festival of Hanukkah, which is celebrated around the same time as Christmas, so also growing numbers of people of other faiths relate one of their own festivals to Christmas. For instance, many Hindu temples in Europe and North America that celebrate Dīvalī, their "Festival of lights," for five days in late autumn keep their decorative lights until Christmas and January 1st are over. Hindus naturally see connections between their own festival's traditions of, e.g., lights, the sharing of sweets, and the triumph of good over evil with Christmas customs and themes, which makes for excellent community relations, but specific influences from the Bible often seem far removed from such encounters. This dynamic is also true of the African-American Festival of Kwanzaa, created as a cultural holiday in 1966 at the height of the civil rights movement. Its roots in an African harvest festival and its celebration at the end of December have religious resonances but few or no direct links to the Bible.

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Martin Forward

## V. Literature

As a prominent religious feast that, in the course of the 19th century, became an integral part of Western civil culture, Christmas has continuously served not only to transform biblical contents into literature, and vice versa, but also to occasion literary texts whose ties with the Bible itself are by no means overt or actually altogether lacking. Basically, three dimensions distinguish between the interrelation of Christmas and literature:

(1) First of all, poetry has always been integral to the feast itself, framing and pervading the ecclesiastic and non-ecclesiastic ceremonies in the shape of *carols* or *noëls* for almost as long as Christmas has been celebrated. In medieval tradition, the carols were closely related to the adoration of the Virgin Mary, focusing on the Annunciation rather than the nativity, whereas the birth of Christ was mainly grasped by the eschatological figure of a "birth before all worlds." In early modernity, however, the poetic focus began to shift to the manger and its surrounding figures, signifying the paradox of the (self-)abased Redeemer, a tendency illustrated by the 15 carols J.S. Bach used for his *Christmas Oratorio* (1734). By stressing the secretive quiet of the Holy Night, the paradigmatic Austrian folk carol "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night," 1818) indicates the general transformation international Christmas poetry underwent in the course of the past two centuries. As the famous American "Jingle Bells" (1857), the German "Kling, Glöckchen" (1884, "Ring, Little Bell"), and "O Tannenbaum" (1824, "O Christmas Tree") illustrate, the contents of 19th-century Christmas carols gradually shift from nativity to winter scenes regardless of biblical or religious notions.

(2) Independent from the actual feast and its contexts, the nativity accounts of Luke and Matthew and the corresponding prophecies of Isaiah have served as a rich reservoir of motifs and themes for literary production throughout the modern age. Rare cases such as T. S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi* (1927) aside, most such works refrain from retelling the biblical episodes but rather take up single elements like the star, the manger, the holy family, or the massacre of the innocents. Many of these literary allusions owe less to the biblical texts themselves than to iconographic traditions such as the syncretistic composition of the crib.

(3) Finally, the currently most influential interrelation between Christmas and literature results from the fundamental change the feast underwent in the 19th century regarding its social practices and cultural implications. In the course of this transformation, Christmas became the epitome of family festivities, indissolubly connected with notions of childhood, memory, charity, and peace. As in today's classical Christmas novels such as Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and Hoffmann's

*Nußknacker und Mäusekönig* (*The Nutcracker Prince and the Mouse King*, 1816), the spirit of Christmas pervading literature has lost its ties with biblical reception nearly entirely. Literary texts of that ilk focus on secular Christmas customs and traditions instead, primarily concentrating on family scenes. In view of the innumerable stories specifically devised for the occasion each year, e.g., Paul Auster's *Auggie Wren's Christmas Story* (2004), Christmas today primarily serves to propel literary production as such, particularly in the field of international crime fiction such as Ian Rankin's *No Sanity Clause* (2000).

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## VI. Visual Arts

The modern celebration of Christmas is observed globally with cultural traditions that are both secular and religious in nature. However, since the mid-19th century, the Christmas celebration may be best recognized as a commercial phenomenon more than a religious observance. Without a doubt, Christmas as a holiday filled with family meals, gift giving, holiday music, greeting cards, church celebrations, special foods, and decorations including a tree, lights, garlands, mistletoe, holly, and nativity scenes is a 19th-century invention most often credited to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Many of the popular celebratory customs and practices, and thereby the iconography of Christmas as opposed to the iconography of the nativity, have both Christian and secular origins.

Perhaps the widespread cultural phenomenon of Christmas is rooted as much in economics as in spirituality for the practice of Christmas gifts morphed from an act of homage to the Christ Child by the magi or the exemplary charity of St. Nicholas into the key sales period for both Christian and non-Christian businesses. The Christmas shopping experience, so intertwined with the 19th-century restoration of the celebration of Christmas and the economic change wrought by the Industrial Revolution, remains the largest economic stimulus for many national economies. For example, the references to the last Friday in November as “Black Friday” with the purchasing of holiday decorations, party supplies, and holiday clothing as well as gifts is now a global phenomenon. This modification from the initial recognition of the nativity of the Christ Child to an international economic observance is related simultaneously to the evolution of Western cultural history and Christian theology, the social modification of the family, and the economics of the middle class, all of which have been recorded in the iconographies of both the nativity and of Christmas. The evolution of Christmas has

several historical references; the most significant are the Early Christian identification of the Feast of the Nativity in the 4th century CE and the restoration of Christmas in the 19th century.

During the 4th century CE, there were three distinct but thematically related events that solidified the Christian attitude toward the nativity. First was the renewed spiritual devotion to the birth event resulting from St. Helena's discovery of the birth site in Bethlehem, and Constantine's construction of the Church of the Nativity (begun ca. 325–26 CE). This identification of the cave/grotto initiated Christian pilgrimage to Bethlehem as well as devotion to the crib relics identified initially by Jerome and his companions. According to tradition, these six wooden boards were transferred to the sanctuary of Santa Maria ad Praesepe in Rome by Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, for protection during the siege of Jerusalem (634–36 CE).

Secondly, the Basilica of Santa Maria ad Praesepe had been situated by the “snow miracle” of 5 August 352 CE. According to this belief, the Virgin Mary confirmed her desire for a church to be built on the Esquiline Hill, the exact site identified by the August snow, and revealed in concurrent dreams to a wealthy Roman (Christian) patrician and his wife, and to Pope Liberius. The 5th-century CE basilica church of Santa Maria Maggiore built by Pope Sixtus III on the site of the original Liberian basilica was dedicated to Mary as the *Theotokos* (“God-bearer”) in accordance with the decree of the Council of Ephesus. At first glance, the curious absence of the nativity from the Gospel narratives depicted on the 5th-century CE nave mosaics of the triumphal arch might seem an iconographic lacuna; however, it reveals an early example of the interdependence of image and word in early Christianity. According to tradition, Pope Sixtus III celebrated the Mass of the Nativity in the chapel identified as the *Domus Sanctae Dei Genetricis* (“House of the Holy Mother of God”) in which was conserved the chief treasure of this basilica – one of the five icons of the Theotokos and her son painted by the Evangelist Luke. During the Midnight Mass, this sacred image was displayed to the chanting of the Lucan account of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a custom observed for ensuing centuries by Sixtus' successors. This practice within the Midnight Mass in Santa Maria Maggiore became the liturgical and devotional foundation for the nativity, or Christmas, play.

Beyond the archaeological discovery, church construction, and liturgical practice, the 4th-century CE church fathers discussed the cultural, liturgical, and theological rationale for the nativity to be the major emphasis of the liturgical calendar as an assimilation of several pagan practices. The visual and verbal metaphors for the winter solstice and the nativity event as a celebration of light com-

ing out of the darkness of the winter, the significance of the feast to honor Saturn in mid-winter, and the celebration of Mithras' birthday by the upper classes and military as the "unconquerable sun" on 25 December led Pope Julius I to select this date for the "Feast of the Nativity" in 350 CE. This revised calendar spread into Egypt by 423 CE and to England by the 6th century CE.

Commensurately, from this early Christian period up through the Renaissance, the iconography of the nativity developed in tandem with the religious celebration of the birth event. Eventually, the manger episode was expanded and conflated with the announcement to the shepherds, the adoration of the shepherds, the journey of the magi, the adoration of the magi, and even the massacre of the innocents. Devotional and legendary texts encouraged new iconographic motifs, as did the influential performance of liturgical plays and eventually the practices of Franciscan spirituality. For example, the development of vernacular French, German, and Italian versions of traditional holidays songs began in the late 13th century, and the humanization of nativity iconography are credited to the teachings and influence of Francis of Assisi. However his most significant effect on the popular celebration of Christmas was his renovation and popularization of the Christmas crèche. He considered his moonlit experience of the animals and mountains in Greccio as inspirational for the Christmas Eve birth event. In 1223, he orchestrated the presentation of a "living manger" for the Midnight Mass. This practice of including animals in the nativity play spread across Europe very quickly with local developments such as the Polish *Szopka*, Spanish *Pastorelas*, and the Provençal *Santons* influenced by both the liturgical use of Francis' "living manger" and the evolution of the Christmas crèche. The production and exhibition of these "nativity scenes" became a popular Christmas tradition throughout the world, so that by the late 20th century museums showcasing the "Christmas crèche" found examples from nearly 200 countries including Hong Kong, Rwanda, Turkey, Peru, and Thailand. However one of the most singular presentations of the crèche is the 19th-century Kraków *Szopka* which uses the historical buildings of Kraków as background.

Following the Reformation, concerns over the "trappings of popery" and the persistence of pagan elements in Catholic Christianity, the liturgical celebration and domestic festivities related to Christmas were discouraged, if not totally banned. This was particularly evidenced by the English Interregnum ban on Christmas and the later edicts by American Puritans and the Church of Scotland. So the practices of Advent, Christmas pageants, Christmas trees and decorations, Christmas music, Christmas gifts, and Christmas Mass were found only in Roman Catholic countries as was the religious iconography of the nativity.

However, in accord with the social and cultural changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution such as the expansion of a mercantile middle class, the romanticization of childhood, women's literacy, spiritual domesticity, and the promotion of motherhood, a restoration of Christmas occurred. This revival, which began in the 1820s as American and British authors began to imagine Tudor Christmas as a heartfelt and family celebration, reached an apogee in family Christmas celebrations promulgated by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The American author Washington Irving published a series of short stories, *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*, in 1819–20. These included a Christmas episode defending the celebrations by means of the 1652 tract *Vindication of Christmas*. This was followed in 1822 by Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (perhaps better known as *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*) which popularized the exchange of gifts, thereby invigorating seasonal Christmas shopping as critical for the emerging mercantile economies of Great Britain and the United States. By the time of the 1843 publication of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the traditional English holiday was reinvented into a season of family unity, consideration, kindness, and good will. However, the American abolitionist and writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe raised concern over the loss of the true meaning of Christmas given the growing emphasis on shopping for gifts in her *The First Christmas in New England*.

The celebration and traditions of Christmas as we know it in the 21st century remains mainly a Victorian legacy. While the Christmas tree covered with lights and decorations was a practice brought to Britain by an earlier generation of the monarchy, the youthful princess Victoria wrote in her diary of her delight in the lights on the Christmas tree, and she continued this practice in the early years of her reign. Following her 1841 marriage to Prince Albert, these celebratory aspects of Christmas expanded into a "family Christmas" as represented in the *Queen's Christmas Tree*, a print first published in the *Illustrated London News* (1848) and later in *Godey's Lady Book* (December 1850). This image of the happy royal parents and their children surrounding a tree laden with lights and decorations, and gifts captured the popular imagination in both countries. This illustration set a trend that would invade the popular press from the illustrations in holiday editions of newspapers and magazines to those for Christmas poems and stories, and the sheet music covers for Christmas songs.

A brief discussion of the Christmas card provides further insight into the earliest ways of depicting Christmas. The first Christmas card was designed by John Calcott Horsley and published by Sir Henry Cole from his Bond Street shop in London in 1843. This first British card was both controversial

and shrewd in its tripartite design promoting the practice of Christian charity with the central image that of a well-to-do family with a small child drinking wine. Typically, however, these earliest Christmas greetings cards emphasized the promise of spring following the darkness of winter with illustrations of spring flowers, small animals, and children dressed in light clothing. By 1875, Louis Prang earned his epithet as “Father of the American Christmas card,” emphasized by a visual move toward snow scenes and Christmas trees. The Christmas card with seasonally appropriate designs were found throughout Europe by the early 1900s, while by the 1960s the more generic holiday greeting card was exchanged by Christians and non-Christians on a more global and interreligious practice. To this day, it is not unusual for Poles to tuck thin, unleavened Christmas wafers (*oplatki*) in the Christmas cards they send to relatives and friends.

While popular in book and magazine illustrations, Santa Claus did not appear on Christmas cards until 1900. His familiar image, however, evolved from his first appearance on American soil in 1819 among immigrant communities who identified the giving-gifting figure with a variety of vernacular names and had lost his original connection with both the gift-gifting Magi and Saint Nicholas of Myra (or Bari). By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Santa Claus had morphed into a secular personality well known from Moore’s poem and characterized by his “bowl full of jelly” stomach, white hair and beard, and jolly twinkly eyes, and popular on Christmas cards and standardized advertising.

In the 20th century, Christmas card designs transformed in coordination with the changing social and economic times, so that during the First and Second World Wars, for example, their themes were either predominantly religious or patriotic, or some combination of the two. The designs for Christmas stamps, as official issues of a nation, have been hotly contested since the initial Christmas stamp was issued by Canada depicting a map of the world with the Commonwealth Countries highlighted in red in 1898. Hungary printed the first stamp with a nativity scene in 1943 while Cuba produced a Christmas stamp with poinsettias and stars in 1951. While these holiday imprints were initially printed irregularly, Australia began an annual presentation beginning in 1957. In light of the secular versus sacred design debate, the U.S. Postal Service issues two Christmas stamps annually: one with a secular design, and the other featuring a traditional painting of the Madonna and Child from the National Gallery of Art. By 1990, the international practice of issuing Christmas stamps had spread to 160 countries.

American politics vis-à-vis the American Presidency was engaged in this restoration of Christmas

as had British monarchy. President Ulysses S. Grant declared Christmas a formal U.S. holiday on 26 June 1870 while First Lady Grace Coolidge lit the first National Christmas tree on the Ellipse in 1923. The American process of secularization was operative in the modification of traditional religious processions and parades into secular activities such as the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day which is the “official” opening of the Christmas season as the parade concludes with the arrival of Santa Claus. The Spanish tradition of the nine-day journeying throughout a community of “Las Posadas” has taken on new patterns in Mexico and Latin America beginning with the starting date of the Feast of Guadalupe and concluding on Christmas Eve. While a similar practice of Joseph and Mary’s search for lodging is part of the Christmas rituals of the Philippines and is known as the *Panunuluyan* or alternatively as *Pananawagan*. Established in 1938 in Melbourne, “Carols by Candlelight” has since spread throughout Australia. These activities have become part of the visual iconography of Christmas through the modern arts of photography and television.

Further, the family Christmas idealized in those American and British literary sources, and the images of these celebrations, like that of Victoria and Albert with their happy children around the Christmas tree, was accessible to every family through the “miracle” of modern printing. Prints and engravings became popular among middle class families who could afford these inexpensive works. Presentations of the American (or British) family engaged in typical Christmas season activities were produced and circulated through the auspices of Nathaniel Currier and James Merritt Ives, whose company issued these works for domestic use, publications, and Christmas cards from 1857–1907. This visual pattern of Santa Claus entering a home where sleeping children lay near a fully decorated tree or of a wintery landscape with a highlighted tree or of an American family engaged in gift-giving or the pronouncement of grace before that special Christmas meal was expanded into the 20th century by the American illustrator, Norman Rockwell, whose depictions of Americana graced the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post* (322 original covers over 47 years 1916–63), and also *Life Magazine* and *Country Gentleman*. In more recent years, these visual images of the celebration of Christmas have found their way as the illustrations for e-Christmas Cards, media holiday stories, and contemporary cinema.

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## VII. Music

In music for the Christmas festival, whether for use in or celebration outside of church, many biblical settings in various genres and of varying dimensions appear. The texts cited, paraphrased, or referred in this context are mainly – and unsurprisingly – excerpted from the birth narratives of Jesus in Luke and Matthew as well as from the OT prophets (seen to point forward to Christ's birth) and NT texts reflecting on Christ's birth (as the prologue to the Gospel of John). For a fuller treatment of this, see the music article under "Nativity of Jesus."

In modern times, for many people of various religious or cultural backgrounds, the Christmas festival is mainly relevant as a seasonal event without particular religious significance or with a generalized religious significance loosened from its traditional doctrinal Christian contents. Thus, Christmas has also in some measure come to be a cultural referent making its appearance in various kinds of music with the biblical background beyond the main focus, though it may still be referred to or appear indirectly.

Two comic operas of the 19th century, both based on the same story by Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), Tchaikovsky's *Cherevichki* (1885, a revised version of his *Vakula the Smith*, 1876) and Rimsky-Korsakov's *Christmas Eve* (1894–95), do not relate to the birth of Christ apart from taking place on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning but feature young people singing (Ukrainian) Christmas carols. Similarly, the action in Tchaikovsky's famous 1892 ballet *The Nutcracker* (the music also condensed into an orchestral suite) takes place on Christmas Eve. In modern times, the performance of the ballet has in many countries become a secularized Christmas ritual only referring to (secular) Christmas traditions in the form of the Christmas party and Christmas gifts, which form the point of departure for the plot of the ballet.

The reception of biblical tradition into a broad culture of Christmas music emerges in Bob Dylan's 2009 album *Christmas in the Heart* featuring well-known secular and religious Christmas songs (from various times and backgrounds), which contain some biblical references, not only in the traditional religious songs but also, for instance, in "Here Comes Santa Claus" (1947) by Gene Autry (words) and Oakley Haldeman (music). Earlier, other famous artists such as Bing Crosby and Elvis Presley performed this song as well – a (mainly) secular song that in the fourth stanza (given on Dylan's album but otherwise often left out) includes the line "Peace will come to all" in a context where the peace referred to may well be an individual feeling of peacefulness rather than a religious or political notion of peace. Still, it is undoubtedly a – generalized – reception of Luke 2:14.

Altogether, songs known as Christmas carols form an important and highly irregular group of Christmas songs where the individual items include biblical references to a higher or lesser extent, as seen from a website of Christmas Carols Lyrics where traditional Christmas hymns such as "O come all ye faithful" – an English traditional version of the Latin hymn *Adeste fideles* – are juxtaposed with completely secular songs like the almost universally received "Jingle Bells." The site also includes songs that are basically non-biblical but show some connection to Christian and biblical traditions, as, for instance, "Snoopy's Christmas Lyrics," where Charles M. Schulz' famous cartoon figure, the dog Snoopy and The Red Baron, fight as usual on Christmas night before the Red Baron suddenly exclaims, "Merry Christmas, my friend," whereafter the song goes on, "The Baron then offered a holiday toast / And Snoopy, our hero, saluted his host / And then with a roar they were both on their way / Each knowing they'd meet on some other day. / Christmas bells those Christmas bells / Ringing through the land / Bringing peace to all the world / And good will to man" (Christmas Carols Lyrics homepage).

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## VIII. Film

The number of Christmas movies is overwhelming. Yet aside from those movies involving Jesus, they hardly ever address the Christmas story itself. Indeed, Christmas as a family holiday has always had its own drama and dramaturgy. One classic Christmas movie is the adaptation of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (dir. Brian D. Hurst, 1951), where the greedy and stingy businessman Ebenezer Scrooge has no place in his life for the spirit of Christmas. Only the ghost of his deceased business partner, Marley, along with the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come, reveal to him his pitiful existence. Eventually, Scrooge is able to feel empathy and remorse. Cinematic variations of this literary theme include Richard Donner's *Scrooged* (1988), *Ebenezer* by Ken Jubenvill (1997), and – especially exhilarant – *The Muppet Christmas Carol* by Jim Henson (1992).

The happy ending of all Christmas movies proves virtually inevitable. Thus, the story of the decent banker from the small town of Bedford Falls, who due to a misfortune gets into dire straits and attempts to commit suicide, provides the material Christmas dreams are made of. In Frank Capra's 1946 movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, a Christmas miracle happens, and philanthropy gains the upper hand over the ruthlessness of daily business.

The common pattern of most Christmas movies is the antagonism of generosity and hard heartedness, the triumph over which marks the beginning of caring and reconciled relations and constitutes the Christmas message. Hence, the mandatory Christmas movie stands as much an essential element of the Christmas season as Christmas fairs, eggnogg, or commercial Christmas decorations. Christmas movies respond to the sentimentality that, since childhood, is associated with this season. In general, Christmas in movies evokes a certain and well-intended atmosphere, combining kitsch and emotion with loving kindness and harmonious family conceptions. Movies such as *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (dir. Ron Howard, 2000), *The Santa Clause* (dir. Jermiah S. Cechik, 1994), or *Ein himmlisches Weihnachtsgeschenk (A Heavenly Christmas Present)*; dir. Karin Hercher, 2002) concern mores and customs that center around presents, Santa Claus, and Christmas Eve family traditions. Resolved familial conflicts, social hardship cushioned by solidarity and benevolence, and the message that happiness and peace can be achieved all render most Christmas movies into cheesy dramas, which in cinematic history range among the rather conventional movies as far as aesthetics are concerned. The orientation toward the "holy family," which mirrors the conventional family, is pivotal for this kind of family movie.

Even satiric attempts to portray Christmas pay their tribute to this common familial pattern. In spite of their criticizing the Christmas cult with its promise of happiness, movies such as *Weihnachtsfieber (Christmas Fever)*; dir. Paul Harather, 1997), *Christmas Vacation* (dir. Jermiah S. Cechik, 1989), and *Single Bells* (dir. Xaver Schwarzenberger, 1998) eventually satisfy the audience's emotional expectations.

In Jean-Luc Godard's *Hail Mary (Je vous salue, Marie)*, 1984) the motif of the virgin birth was applied to a modern love story. The motifs of Matthew's Christmas story (Matt 1; cf. Luke 2) – Joseph's dream, the encounter with the angel, and the birth of the Son of God – are adapted in an unusual manner, as the movie focuses on the mystery of womanhood and the mystery of life in general, mediated particularly through those scenes depicting the naked and pregnant body of the female protagonist. Furthermore, Mary's virginity and her non-sexual relationship with Joseph are artfully interlinked with the issues of the cause and purpose of

existence. The movie triggered severe protests especially among Catholics, as the nude depiction of Mary was considered a violation of the religious feelings toward the mother of God. "In den Handlungsparallelen von Gegenwartserzählung und christlicher Heilsgeschichte liegt die theologische Brisanz und Tiefe des Films. Wer jedoch die beiden verschiedenen Zeit- und Bedeutungsebenen gleichsetzt, gerät in eine fatale Sackgasse, die zu Fehldeutungen führt. 'Maria und Joseph' ist keine aktualisierende Paraphrase zum Neuen Testament, sondern der Versuch, das Irdische, das Leben, die Liebe und die Mutterschaft in gebrochener biblischer Metaphorik wieder neu zugänglich zu machen." ("The theological brisance and depth of the movie is manifested in the parallelism of a contemporary narration and the Christian Salvation History. An equation of both the time and interpretational level would, however, lead to an impasse, that would entail serious misconstructions. *Hail Mary* is not an updated paraphrase on the New Testament, but an attempt to 'customize' the worldly, life, love, and motherhood in a refracted biblical imagery" [von Hassenberg: 153]). The complex construction of the "holy family" allows Godard an unusual way of looking at a materialistic world bereft of meaning. Beyond family idyll, spending sprees, and sentimentality, the biblical Christmas story including the virgin birth seems surprisingly up-to-date in Godard's movie. The director is primarily concerned with the "Wiederentdeckung des Wunderbaren in der alltäglichen Lebenswelt" ("rediscovery of the miraculous in daily life" [von Hassenberg: 153]).

In his movie *Smoke* (1994), Wayne Wang shows just how the "Christmas story" might become the center of a cinematic masterpiece. The movie is based on a short story by Paul Auster called "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story." Wren works as a sales clerk in a cigar store on Court Street in Brooklyn, NY. Not only does he photograph a nearby intersection at the same time every day, while pointing out to the attentive observer the slight differences distinguishing each photograph, but he also tells an author about an encounter he once had with a blind, elderly lady on Christmas Eve, who was awaiting her grandson for dinner. As the grandson never shows up, Auggie stands in for him and prepares Christmas dinner. Furthermore, he steals a camera, with which he will take said photos of the intersection. This Christmas may have been the old lady's last, as a few months later she disappears, most likely having died of old age. Wayne Wang portrays this encounter in a very unpretentious way, which adopts an essential aspect of the biblical Christmas story: the incarnation of God manifests itself in his benevolence toward humankind. Indeed, "peace on earth among those" who are not ignorant of others is not only the message of the

angels but should also be the unsentimental credo of such movies, which portray the allegories of his incarnation. For this purpose, no hypocritical kitsch is needed to give away most Christmas movies as pipe dreams, as pseudo fairy tales for grown-ups. Such movies are products of a movie industry that aims to benefit commercially from the emotional atmosphere of Christmas time. An aesthetically and theologically ambitious adaption of the biblical Christmas story has yet to be realized.

The nativity stories associated with the celebration of Christmas (Matt 1; Luke 2) have been repeatedly represented in film throughout the history of cinema from short silent films (e.g., *From the Manger to the Cross* [dir. Sidney Olcott, 1912]) to recent biblical epics (*The Nativity Story* [dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2006]). These range from the reverential treatment of Franco Zeffirelli in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) to the farcical approach of Monty Python in *Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones, 1979).

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See also → Advent; → Birth Narratives; → Feasts and Festivals; → Kwanzaa; → Nativity of Jesus

## Christological Titles

- I. New Testament
- II. Islam

### I. New Testament

**1. Introduction.** For a long time, christological titles (esp. Son of God, Son of Man, Kyrios, Christ/Messiah, and Son of David) were considered the primary interpretative key for Christology. While this assessment overestimates their potential, they do remain crucial to comprehending the NT. In many cases, such titles draw on traditional language but do not reveal their explicit meaning apart from their respective contexts, thereby making such contexts as important, e.g., to the understanding of the title of Christ as the complex traditions on the Messiah.

The later so-called titles include metaphors and abstractions emanating from various language fields (“shepherd” evokes agriculture, “savior” social activity etc.). Motifs referring to Jesus’ work turn into predicates or else influence them (cf. Jesus’ mighty teaching and “teacher”). That renders a clear distinction of titles and predicates (emerging designations of a general nature) unfeasible.

Indeed, each stream of early Christianity sets its own priorities (e.g., the metaphor of the lamb occurs as passover offering in 1 Cor 5:7, as “Lamb of God” in John 1:29, 36, and differently in Rev 5:6 etc. as ἀρνίον, i.e., as a powerful young ram ready

for attack). Throughout the NT, new predicates develop (ἐπίσκοπος, “overseer,” in 1 Pet 2:25; ἀπόστολος, “messenger,” in Heb 3:1; “high priest” in Heb 5 and 7 are late). As a result, titles and predicates reflect of the conceptual variety represented within the NT.

**2. The Earthly Jesus.** According to extant evidence, Jesus desisted from referring to himself by a traditional title familiar to his environment. The people who met him, however, experienced a connection between his work and his person and attempted to provide appropriate descriptions. Since all the sources are written down later, it cannot be discerned if one or two of the predicates were already developed prior to Easter. The impressive picture portrayed in the Gospel tradition arises in the post-Easter period: Jesus is the “Holy One,” as he personifies God’s holiness (Mark 1:24; John 6:69). He is called “rabbi” (Mark 9:5; John 1:38) and “teacher,” as his proclamation (including his powerful deeds) is of divine authorization (frequent in the Gospels from Mark 4:38 to John 13:13); and sometimes he is referred to as “prophet” (an ambivalent designation; cf. Mark 8:28; John 6:14). He is as close to the father as a child, and as the anointed one, who served God in a unique way; here we encounter the roots of the titles “Son of God” and “Christ” (Mark 8:29 par.).

However, Jesus never referred to himself by any of the above predicates. The seeming exception – his apparent self-designation as Son of Man – did not contradict the tendency, as its meaning was polyvalent (against a definite title). It could designate a “human being per se,” “a special human being,” or “one like a human being coming with the clouds to appear before the deity.” The post-Easter congregation picked up this complexity developing words of the present, suffering, and coming Son of Man and concentrated it on Jesus’ exceptional glory (this development reaching its peak in John 1:51; 3:14–15; cf. the variant in Rev 1:13). The later systematic distinction of Son of God (for the divine nature) and Son of Man (for the human nature of Jesus) disrupts the high dignity of the latter predicate.

After Easter, further abstractions evolved from narratives. Jesus’ words on shepherds facilitated a Christology of the Shepherd (with a peak in John 10:11 and 1 Pet 2:25), while the phrasing in Luke 5:31 enabled his description as a “physician” etc.

**3. “Majestic” Predicates.** Titles such as “king” (Gk. βασιλεύς, which could also refer to emperors), “the illustrious/manifest one” (Gk. ἐπιφανής), “benefactor” (Gk. εὐεργέτης), “savior” (Gk. σωτήρ), and “Son of God” (Gk. υἱὸς θεοῦ; Lat. *D[ivi] F[ilius]*) were common epithets at the time the NT scriptures developed. Applying them to Jesus did, however, affect their meaning:

According to the NT, Jesus descended from “the seed of David” (Rom 1:3), but this dynasty had not