

Reasons Ministries Newsletter Christmas 2010

Tis The Season To Refute Skeptics Fa la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la!

Dear Friend of Reasons Ministries,

This time of year most of us are enjoying the decorations, the festivities, the traditions and the message of Christmas. Unfortunately though, there are grinchers about. Perhaps you have seen on TV or on the Internet the campaigns by several atheist groups to counter the message of Christmas with a message that the story of Jesus told in Matthew and Luke is simply a myth, a fable, a nice fairy-tale. One billboard at the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel to Manhattan says: “You KNOW it’s a Myth. This Season, Celebrate REASON.”

The common objections to the traditional Christmas story include: you cannot trust the Gospels because they are simply fabrications and not actual history, the timeline of the census and Herod’s death do not match up, there is no mention of Herod’s massacre of baby boys in Bethlehem outside of Matthew’s Gospel, the genealogies of Jesus as found in Matthew and Luke contradict each other and there is no record outside of the Gospels of a star of the nature described in the Gospels.

Did you know that these objections are nothing new and they have all been answered successfully? While space does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of each of these objections, I want to touch on a few.

The Gospels As Historical

For instance, the frequent objection brought by the new atheists is the Gospels were biased fabrications and are not reliable history, but rather are mythological. This objection is false on several grounds. First, although the Gospels share some common material (Matthew includes most of Mark’s Gospel and Luke includes about half of Mark’s Gospel while John is mostly independent of the other three Gospels) they were written by different authors at different times with different purposes (Matthew wrote to demonstrate to the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah and John wrote long after the other Gospels were in circulation to fill in the gaps that they left out which explains his unique material). All of the Gospels were written in the first century (this is well attested today, even by most liberal scholars) with two being written by eyewitnesses; Matthew and John. Mark’s main source was Peter, who was an eyewitness and we know that Luke states he researched his Gospel carefully, utilizing eyewitnesses. We have to remember the first century authors were not 21st century Americans who value exactness. Rather, it was quite common for ancient authors to be less exacting, yet still be accurate. Secondly, consider Luke. We know that Luke was educated due to being a doctor. His second work called Acts, has been well attested for its accuracy and reliability by historians and archaeologists. Would an author be so exacting in one book yet careless and indeed, inventive, in his other work? So when the skeptics discount Herod’s killing of the boys two years of age and under in Bethlehem because it was not recorded in any historical record, they totally discount the fact that Matthew records it and links it to an Old Testament prophecy. Isn’t Matthew a historical book? In addition, since Bethlehem was a very small town, experts estimate that the number of boys under two would have been a dozen or so. This was no less tragic due to the small number, but such a small number killed in such a small town off the beaten path would probably not be noticed or noted. By the way, from where might Matthew get his information? How about Mary, the mother of Jesus?

Genealogies

Another common objection to the credibility of the Gospels’ account of the first Christmas are the differences between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke. If, however, the genealogies were exactly the

same, don't you think the skeptics would be shouting collusion? In addition, if the Gospels are fabrications, don't you think the authors would have done a better job of making sure they had all the details, like a genealogy, in agreement? So why are the two genealogies different? There are several possibilities. First, we know that ancient genealogies commonly had gaps in them due to the purpose of the genealogy and sometimes to leave out ancestors who were less than desirable. "... just as there are different emphases in the genealogies, so too there are different explanations for the dissimilarities between them. Matthew traces his genealogy through David's son Solomon, while Luke traces his genealogy through David's son Nathan. It may be that Matthew's purpose is to provide the legal lineage from Solomon through Joseph, while Luke's purpose is to provide the natural lineage from Nathan through Mary. It could also be that Matthew and Luke are both tracing Joseph's genealogy— Matthew, the legal line, and Luke, the natural line. As such, the legal line diverges from the natural in that Levirate Law stipulated if a man died without an heir his genealogy could legally continue through his brother (Deuteronomy 25:5–6)" (Christian Research Institute, www.equip.org). Matthew, a Jew, was showing Jesus to be the promised descendent of David while Luke was showing Jesus to be human by ending his genealogy with Adam. The fact that there are very good explanations for the genealogical differences tells us that the objection based on the seeming contradiction of the Gospel genealogies does not hold water. Once again the skeptic is forcing 21st. century, western standards on first century writings.

The Star

What about the star the Magi saw? While there are many possible explanations they break down along two main lines of argument, a natural or supernatural phenomenon. The natural explanation seeks to find either the merger of planets, a comet, a supernova, or some other celestial possibility as the explanation of the star. I must admit that I am often uncomfortable when I hear evangelical scholars attempt to explain biblical miracles with a natural rationale. Yes, God created the natural world and he can use it as he pleases. But to explain the crossing of the Red Sea, for instance, via a tsunami or unusual tidal phenomenon seems to discount God constantly reminding the Israelites of his direct intervention on their behalf. While some naturalistic explanations may have merit, it seems to me that, if indeed, Jesus was the eternal Son of God who was incarnated as a human in the womb of a virgin (both miracles), why wouldn't God use a supernatural event to lead the Magi to Bethlehem? Luke points out that the "star" guided the Magi to Jerusalem and then to the very house where Jesus and his parents lived. How could a natural phenomenon do that? It makes much more sense to credit a miraculous act of God. Since atheists reject God, the supernatural and the miraculous, they cannot allow for such an explanation, even though it may be the best explanation. But it seems quite credible to me. It makes sense that the miracle of the incarnation be announced with a miracle of a bright light coming from heaven (not unprecedented, remember the light that Saul saw on the road to Damascus?).

December 25th

Finally, perhaps the most common objection brought by the skeptics about Christmas is that the church simply stole the winter solstice celebrations from the pagans and Christianized it due to needing a date for the birth of a mythological figure. While it is true that we do not know the exact day or year of Jesus' birth, the overall consensus of historians is that Jesus was born between 6-4 B.C. most likely in the Spring (due to the Shepherds being typically in the fields with their flocks, when the ewes were giving birth). Moreover, the Bible does not instruct us to celebrate Christmas or even Easter for that matter. It is certainly not wrong to do so, but we are not instructed to either. We celebrate those two occasions to celebrate God's incredible grace and love toward us by sending his Son to become one of us and then to later die for us and be raised victoriously over sin, death and Satan!

So why did the church choose December 25th? Why not March 18th or April 21st.? Hank Hanegraaff points out, "We don't know the exact day of the year Jesus was born. We do know, however, that the December 25 date was advocated as early as about A.D. 220. The church may have chosen to celebrate on December 25 as a triumph of Christianity over paganism because it came right after the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, one of the popular pagan winter solstice holidays (December 17-24)" (Christian

Research Institute, STATEMENT DC336). The point was not to Christianize a pagan holiday but to replace it! How many today worship the Roman god Saturnalia versus worshipping Christ? It looks like Christmas won. Even if Christianity borrowed certain symbols or rituals from other cultures or religions, the origin of something does not negate its current meaning.

Getting back to the claim of the skeptics that Christmas is a myth. Even from this brief treatment of their common objections, we can see that there are very good answers to the atheists' points. In addition, there is every reason why we should have great confidence in the historical accuracy and reliability of the Gospels' account of God's Son being born of a virgin in the city of Bethlehem. If the skeptics will apply reason as they encourage believers to do so, they will end up at a totally different conclusion. Yes, as John points out, "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." What a tremendous reason for celebration! May all of you have a very merry Christmas!

In Christ,

David

P.S.: I thought I would mention on more common objection to the Christmas story: **The Census Given by Quirinius**

What about the census that Luke describes? Two objections brought up by skeptics in Luke concerns his mentioning of the Roman census during the rule of Quirinius in Syria. The skeptics maintain that neither are correct. Quirinius was not governor in Syria and, perhaps, never was. Secondly there is no record of a Roman census when Luke says there was, instead, there was one that Quirinius officiated at in A.D. 6 or 7. So is Luke incorrect? And if he is what else is he incorrect about and, even worse, maybe he is making it all up! How do we answer this objection? First of all, the technical word for governor is not used by Luke. Rather it is a word that can mean a special assistant to Caesar. Luke points out that this was the first census under Quirinius. We know that Quirinius did oversee a census in A.D. 6 or 7. We also know that the Romans would census their empire about every 14 years. That would mean a census around 6 B.C., is well within the time frame of Christ's birth (6-4 B.C.) and could be the "first" census that Luke talks about. In addition, without the modern technology we have today, a census in ancient times could take a few years to complete. We also know that before 5 B.C. Rome had decided that their censuses would be empire wide. All of these points together make Luke's record credible. What skeptics are really saying, it seems to me, by this and other objections is that any time the Bible, particularly the Gospels, records a historical incident that other contemporary sources do not, the Gospels are automatically wrong. All this does is demonstrate their bias against the Bible. Time after time the Bible has proven to be accurate historically and archaeology. When examined fairly and in context, Luke's record seems thoroughly plausible and true.