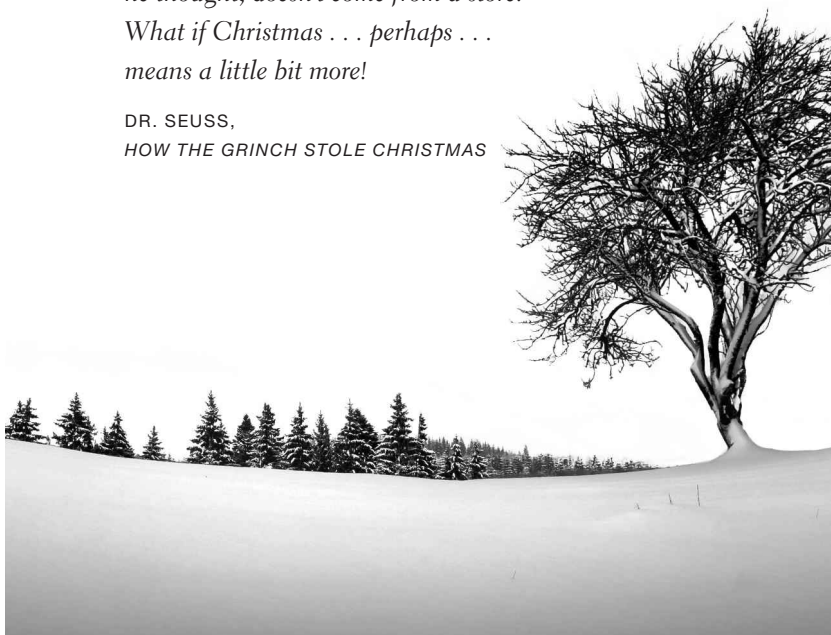


INTRODUCTION

Who Was in the Manger That First Christmas?

*Then the Grinch thought of something
he hadn't before! What if Christmas,
he thought, doesn't come from a store?
What if Christmas . . . perhaps . . .
means a little bit more!*

DR. SEUSS,
HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS



Even as an atheist, I loved the Christmas season. People seemed friendlier and more upbeat. Decorations sparkled. Children were bursting with anticipation. Santas in ill-fitting red suits evoked chuckles. There were bargains in the stores. Sugar-laden treats were delicious. We got a day off work. And all the parties, lubricated by free-flowing liquor, were fun to attend. In short, what's *not* to like about the December holiday?

So I went along for the ride and enjoyed it—until some true believer would insist it was based on something other than legend, mythology, or wishful thinking. That's when I'd jump in with scorn and ridicule. After all, virgins don't conceive babies. There's no god who became a man. And while Christmas is a great story, it wouldn't pass the scrutiny of someone like me, a law-educated journalist at the largest newspaper between the coasts. We were trained to ferret out fabrications and separate accurate accounts from tall tales.

Then I met the Delgados. And I suddenly got a new perspective on Christmas—and on myself.

Sixty-year-old Perfecta Delgado, crippled by arthritis, and her two grandchildren—Lydia, eleven, and Jenny, thirteen—were some of the most destitute people I interviewed for a thirty-part series I was assigned to write about the neediest families of Chicago. Burned out of

their tenement, they were living in a drafty two-bedroom apartment that was virtually devoid of possessions. No furniture, rugs, or appliances. Not a picture on the walls or a stitch of clothing in the closet. Just a small kitchen table and one handful of rice.

Lydia and Jenny owned just one short-sleeved dress each, and one thin gray sweater between them. When they walked the half mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for half the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

Yet despite their poverty, Perfecta still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned her. I never sensed despair or self-pity in her house; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace. Ironically, here was a family that had nothing but faith and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially but lacked faith—and the truth was that inside I felt as barren as their apartment.

A Christmas Eve Surprise

When I wrote the article about the Delgados, which was published on Thanksgiving Day, I intentionally included their address on West Homer Street. I hoped *Tribune* readers would respond by helping them. It seemed the least I could do. Then I went back to visit them on

Christmas Eve—and I was stunned when Jenny opened the door.

The Delgados had been showered with a treasure trove of gifts—rooms full of furniture, appliances, and rugs; a lavish Christmas tree with unopened gifts piled underneath; carton upon carton of food; and a dazzling collection of clothing, including dozens of warm winter coats, scarves, and gloves. On top of that, they received thousands of dollars in cash.

I was taken aback by the largess, but I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting. Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she responded in her halting English: “Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.”

I was astonished! If I had been in their position, I would have been hoarding just about everything and selling the rest. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the readers who had sent these goodies, and again her response amazed me.

“This is wonderful; this is very good,” she said. “We did nothing to deserve this—it’s a gift from God. But,” she added, “it is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.”

To her, this child in the manger meant everything—more than material possessions or even comfort. At that moment, something inside me wanted desperately

to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, I saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters.

They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material—and something made me long for what they had.

Or more accurately, for the One they knew.

I wish I could say my life was transformed at that moment, but it wasn't. Yet it was a step. Much as I tried to shake off the emotions coursing through me—reminding myself that I was a journalist driven by facts rather than feelings—memories of the Delgados stubbornly lingered over the following months and even years.

Surely a seed had been planted.

Embarking on an Investigation

Several years later, prompted by my agnostic wife's conversion to Christianity, I decided to take my cue from the way the Bible describes the reaction of a ragtag group of shepherders when an angel announced that a Savior who is Messiah and Master had been born in David's town.

Did they dismiss the astounding experience as being a hallucination? No.

Did they mill around and debate what had just occurred? No.

Instead, they were instantly determined to see for themselves what the angel was talking about. Like first-century investigative reporters rushing to the scene of an earth-shattering story, they ran to Bethlehem as fast as they could.

Essentially, that was what I did for a living—I checked things out. So I began to probe the real meaning of those nativity scenes I would see outside churches. I wanted to answer the most consequential question of history: *Who was really in the manger that first Christmas?*

What I found thoroughly fascinated me! I expected to discover that Christmas is built on flimsy legends that developed in the many decades or even centuries after Jesus lived. I thought the virgin birth would be exposed as a fanciful idea plagiarized from earlier mythology. I didn't anticipate that the opposite would happen—that a thorough investigation of ancient history would validate the Christmas narrative, based on reliable sources that are too immediate to be written off as mere legend and make-believe.

Turn the page and I'll share some of what I've learned. It's a journey that I'm convinced will stimulate your mind, warm your heart, satisfy your soul . . . and forever change the way you celebrate Christmas. It really is, after all, the greatest story of history—and, as you know, the greatest stories are the ones that turn out to be true.



CHAPTER ONE

Setting the Record Straight

*Simple and lowly are the swaddling
cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ,
who lies in them.*

MARTIN LUTHER,
"PREFACE TO THE OLD TESTAMENT"



The first step in investigating the validity of any historical event is to try to get a trustworthy report of what took place. Often, the story gets distorted by embellishment over the years—and that’s even true of the Christmas account.

For example, here’s the storyline we typically hear each December. In fact, I’m writing this on Christmas Eve, and this was the account shared by the pastor at church today:

To comply with a census conducted by the Roman Emperor Augustus, Joseph and the pregnant Mary set out on a donkey to go to Bethlehem, since Joseph was a descendant from the house of David. The baby starts to arrive as they approach the village. They urgently seek shelter, but the mean old innkeeper tells them there’s no vacancy—that is, there is no room for them in his lodge. This forces Mary and Joseph into a nearby stable or cave, where Mary gives birth among the animals. The child is then wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a hay-filled manger.

Sounds familiar, right? Yet, as I investigated Christmas, I found that this wasn’t exactly what Luke described in his gospel.

For example, it would have been inconceivable in the first century for anybody to turn away a pregnant Jewish woman seeking shelter. Hospitality was an extremely high value in those days. Scholars say to turn

away a descendant of David in the town of David would have brought unspeakable shame. The person turning her away would have been socially ostracized.

“Joseph had only to say, ‘I am Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar, the son of Eliud,’ and the immediate response must have been, ‘You are welcome. What can we do for you?’” said Kenneth Bailey, an expert on first-century Palestinian culture. “Furthermore, if he did not have family or friends in the village, as a member of the famous house of David, for the ‘sake of David’ he would still be welcomed into almost any village home.”¹

In addition, although I hate to mess with beloved Christmas carols, there was probably no inn or inn-keeper. Yes, commercial lodgings were available in the first century, though probably not in Bethlehem, which was a small community that wasn’t on a major roadway. Besides, most scholars doubt whether Luke was referring to a hotel at all.

The Greek word that many Bibles translate as “inn” is *katalyma*.² This word is only used two other times in the New Testament, where Luke and Mark describe the place where the Last Supper was held (Mark 14:14–15; Luke 22:11). In that instance, the word clearly means a spare room or upper room in a private residence.

If Luke had wanted to describe commercial lodging of some sort, he would have used a different Greek word, *pandocheion*, as he did when he told the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:34.

But Luke specifically chose the word *katalyma* in the account of Jesus' birth, which is best translated as "guest room." In fact, the New International Version translates Luke 2:7 as saying Mary gave birth, wrapped Jesus in cloths, and placed him in a manger "because there was no guest room available for them."

Many scholars say this is the most accurate translation. In fact, as far back as 1395, John Wycliffe's translation of Luke 2:7 rendered *katalyma* as a "chamber" or "room," not some sort of commercial inn. However, for some reason, subsequent translations—including the 1611 King James Version—used the word *inn*, which has gone on to become part of Christmas culture.

What Really Happened in Bethlehem

In his book *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, New Testament professor David Croteau describes what first-century homes looked like in the Middle East.³ There was generally one large room, separated into two parts—the family room, where cooking, eating, and sleeping took place, and then a few steps down into the animal room, where the family donkey, cow, and two or three sheep would spend the night.

The animals were brought inside the last thing at night and taken outside the first thing in the morning. This floor was slanted to the outside for easy cleaning.

Sometimes the larger animals would wander up the stairs into the family room, and so each area had its own manger or feeding trough, usually built into the floor and filled with hay for them to eat.

However, some houses added a guest room off the family room, with its own exterior entrance. This was the *katalyma* that Luke was referring to—there was no room for Mary and Joseph in the *katalyma*.

What's more, Mary wasn't necessarily on the verge of giving birth as she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. This idea can be traced to the apocryphal work of fiction called *The Protoevangelium of James*, a work not written until about AD 200 that has no connection to James, the half brother of Jesus, or to James the apostle. The document is mostly legendary in nature. In that fanciful account, Mary and Joseph were about three miles from town "when Joseph found a cave for Mary to give birth in, not ever reaching Bethlehem," said Croteau.⁴

Again, we should pay close attention to what Luke reports because, as we'll see, he was writing much closer to the events after interviewing eyewitnesses. Luke 2:6 says, "While they were there [in Bethlehem], the time came for the baby to be born." Did the birth occur on the day they arrived? Two weeks later? A month later? The text could allow for any of these possibilities. There is nothing to suggest that immediacy or panic was involved.

What about the idea that Mary gave birth in a cave? There's no evidence for that either. The Gospels don't

mention a cave at all; in fact, the idea of a cave can be traced back to Christian apologist Justin Martyr, who was writing much later, in the middle of the second century.

So what really happened on that first Christmas? Joseph and the pregnant Mary arrived in Bethlehem to register for the census. They went to the house of a friend or relative, but there was no place for them in the guest room, probably because of the crowd of people that had already arrived for the census.

They were invited to stay in the family room, where Mary gave birth—and the child was placed in the clean hay of a feeding trough, where he was subsequently encountered by the shepherds who had been alerted to his birth. Oh, and a couple of the family animals might have wandered up the stairs to see what all the commotion was about.

Bearing the Earmarks of Accuracy

It's legitimate to ask whether we can trust the gospel accounts. How do we know they are trustworthy when they describe the birth, teachings, death, and ultimate resurrection of Jesus? I started out as a skeptic, thinking these were fairy tales about imaginary events that supposedly happened “once upon a time.”

However, I soon learned that scholars classify the gospels as “ancient biographies,” which were intended, to

one degree or another, to report what actually took place in the life of a notable person. After studying the views of scholars on various sides of the issues, I concluded that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John bear the earmarks of historical accuracy.

Authorship. As I discuss in *The Case for Christ*, I believe there is sufficient evidence that two disciples of Jesus—Matthew, the tax collector, and John, one of Jesus’ inner circle—authored the gospels bearing their names. The first gospel to be written, Mark, is based on the accounts of the disciple Peter, who also was among Jesus’ confidants.

Luke, who wrote both the book of Acts and the gospel bearing his name, is my favorite. He was not only a traveling companion of the apostle Paul, who was an eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus, but he also was sort of a first-century reporter who checked things out for himself.⁵

He begins his report in Luke 1 by saying he “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” so he could write “an orderly account” about “the certainty” of what had taken place. He was stressing that this wasn’t “once upon a time” or a tall tale disconnected from reality.

In fact, Dutch scholar W. C. van Unnik pointed out that the Greek word translated “account,” *diegesis*, is a “technical term for the well-ordered, polished product of the historian’s work.”⁶

Dating. As a skeptic, I thought the gospels were written so long after the life of Jesus that they had become hopelessly contaminated by legendary development.

But then I discovered that wasn't how things actually unfolded. The key is to discover when Luke wrote the second of his work, the book of Acts, which is the story of the spread of Christianity.

This book finishes with its central figure, Paul, still under house arrest in Rome. We don't find out what happened to Paul, who we know from other sources was later executed in AD 64 or 65. Beyond that, Acts doesn't describe several other major developments that occurred in the 60s, such as the martyrdom of Peter and James, the Greco-Roman War, and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70.

Why? Because Acts was written before these events occurred, which means we can date its writing to about AD 62. We know Acts was the second part of a two-part work, the earlier one being the gospel of Luke, which can confidently be dated to about AD 59. Keep in mind that Jesus was crucified in either AD 30 or 33, so we're talking about a very short time gap between his death and the writing of Luke's gospel. Plus, we know that one of Luke's sources was Mark, which means that Mark's gospel was written even earlier.

In his book *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament*, scholar Jonathan Bernier determined that Mark was written no earlier than AD 42 and no later than 45; Matthew was penned no earlier than 45 and no later than 59; Luke was written in 59.⁷ Bernier added, "We conclude that John's gospel was most likely written no later than 70."⁸

New Testament scholar Brant Pitre, who earned his doctorate at the University of Notre Dame and is a research professor at the Augustine Institute, determined that the gospels are “ancient biographies written by the students of Jesus and their followers, written well within the lifetimes of the apostles and eyewitnesses to Jesus. As such, they provide us with a sound basis for investigating the historical question of what Jesus did, what he said, and who he claimed to be.”⁹

He added, “There’s no evidence that the four Gospels are the end products of an anonymous chain of storytellers. There’s no evidence that the Gospels are the last link in an ancient game of Telephone. *Instead, the evidence is that the Gospels are based on the testimony of ‘eyewitnesses’ to the life and ministry of Jesus.*”¹⁰

Archaeology. Discoveries of modern archaeology have repeatedly established that Luke, who wrote the most extensive account of Jesus’ birth, was a first-rate historian. “The general consensus of both liberal and conservative scholars is that Luke is very accurate as a historian,” Professor John McRay, author of the 432-page textbook *Archaeology and the New Testament*, told me in an interview. “He’s erudite, he’s eloquent, his Greek approaches classical quality, he writes as an educated man, and archaeological discoveries are showing over and over again that Luke is accurate in what he has to say.”¹¹

In fact, sometimes skeptics have believed Luke was wrong about something, only to have later archaeological

discoveries prove he had been right all along. For example, Luke reports that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he grew up in Nazareth, yet doubters claimed for years that Nazareth never existed in the first century. They point out that Nazareth isn't mentioned in the Old Testament, by the apostle Paul, or in the Jewish Talmud. Actually, no historians outside the Bible mention Nazareth until the beginning of the fourth century.

However, in 2006, the Nazareth Archaeological Project began excavating beneath the Sisters of Nazareth Convent—and guess what they found? A house from the era of Jesus. What's more, they unearthed limestone vessels in the home, which Jews believed could not become impure, suggesting this was a Jewish house.¹² Three years later, another home from Jesus' day was discovered nearby.¹³ Once again, Luke was shown to have been correct—Nazareth *did* exist in the time of Jesus.

Consequently, there are good reasons to trust Luke—and the other gospels as well—when they tell us about Jesus. But why didn't Mark and John describe the birth of Jesus? Some skeptics claim that the absence of birth narratives in those two gospels, as well as in the writings of Paul, undermines the historical record of how Jesus entered the world.

This is an argument from silence—and arguments from silence are notoriously unconvincing. After all, not all the gospels report each event in Jesus' life—in fact, John, being the last gospel, doesn't repeat a lot of the

material that had already been made known in the earlier accounts.

But interestingly, someone who may have been mentored by the apostle John boldly proclaimed the truth of the virgin birth. His name was Ignatius, and he became the bishop of Antioch. In around AD 108, he wrote a letter in which he clearly says that Jesus was “truly born of a virgin.” *Where did he learn that?* I wonder. Could it have been from the author of the gospel of John?

As for Mark, he simply doesn’t deal with Jesus’ early years in his gospel. However, he does implicitly refer to the unusual nature of Jesus’ birth when he quotes someone in Mark 6:3 as referring to Jesus as “Mary’s son.”

Normally, a Jewish person would be identified with his father’s name, even if his dad were deceased. Here we have tacit acknowledgment that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. Indeed, there was something unusual about his birth.

As for why the apostle Paul doesn’t mention the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, the answer is that it simply wasn’t germane to the issues that prompted him to write his epistles. Besides, Paul doesn’t mention a lot of details about Jesus that are covered in the Gospels. For instance, he never mentions Mary, Joseph, or Nazareth—so are we to presume they didn’t exist? Of course not.

In the end, while Luke’s journalistic approach resonates with me, I’m also inspired by the grand theological sweep of John’s gospel. He wrote eloquently about how

Jesus, the Son of God, came into our world to become our redeemer and king.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” he declared. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1, 14).

What have we learned so far? That the historical record of the birth of Jesus must be taken seriously. The gospels are our best source about what really took place two thousand years ago when Jesus was born to a virgin named Mary.

“Nearly two and a half centuries of assiduous study, research, and discovery by archaeologists, historians, textual critics, and other scholars searching for an alternative Jesus have failed to turn up a scrap of evidence that contravenes what Christians have traditionally said about Jesus,” said historical researchers Robert Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski. “The lack of any well-supported facts that contradict the biblical portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels . . . is no minor matter.”¹⁴

If this were all a fairy tale akin to that of Santa Claus and the elves, we could easily dismiss it as merely a childhood fantasy without any practical application for our lives. But if it’s true, the case for Christmas cannot be ignored.

