**CHRISTMAS MYTHS AND REALITY**

Christmas, like many other holidays, is a social ritual informed by a mix of religion and folklore. As you’d expect, many popular depictions of Jesus’s birth abound with inaccuracies that conflict with the story told in the Bible, for example, the supposed presence of “three kings”; Jesus’s birth in a stable; a fair-skinned Holy Family. Some are relatively harmless, the understandable result of centuries of obfuscation, speculation, and artistic reinvention. But it’s also time to let others go, or at least to acknowledge their divergence from history.

On the less troublesome side is the Nativity setting itself, which is usually a cave or a little stable constructed of twigs and peat moss. A bible passage describes how Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem to take part in the mandated census, but there “was no room for them in the inn.” But don’t let the English translation fool you: The word “inn” [doesn’t refer](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/23/jesus-christ-not-born-in-stable-theologian-new-testament) to some kind of first-century hotel, but rather something like a guest room for visitors. The Bible does say that Mary laid Jesus in a manger. In fact, in poorer places such as Bethlehem, they brought animals into the lower level of homes at night to keep them safe from bandits.

So the most likely scenario is that Jesus was born in the home of relatives somewhere on the lower level of the house where they often kept animals. Admittedly, it makes for a less compelling scene than the one most Nativities capture. There’s an appealing and fitting degree of vulnerability to these popular images: the Holy Family, huddled around a newborn, exposed to the elements, and illuminated only by the light of a bright star. The idyllic visuals may explain why the lyrics of some Christmas carols fixed this erroneous detail in the cultural consciousness.

Speaking of which: people often sing that the “[cattle were lowing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Away_in_a_Manger)” when Jesus was born. The lyric comes from “Away in a Manger,” a popular carol first published in the late-19th century that propagates many cultural Christmas myths, including the idea that animals surrounded Jesus at his birth. But this is a detail added by a songwriter, not a scripture writer. Many Nativities assume that sheep came with the shepherds and the wise men rode on camels, though this is conjecture. Even Pope Benedict XVI, in his book, [Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives](http://amzn.to/1NwGQqS), admitted, “In the gospels, there is no mention of animals.” If animals were present, there’s no way of knowing which kinds.

The most common animal in most Nativities is a donkey, which is based on the popular image of the Virgin Mary riding on the back of the beast that her husband Joseph solely led. Yet the Bible doesn’t say which mode of transportation they used. Scholars think Mary may have ridden a donkey due to her and Joseph’s meager economic means, but it’s also likely that they traveled in a caravan, which was common and much safer than traveling alone. Jesus’ being born into nature alongside God’s other creatures promotes a vision of harmony among all living things, but it’s possible there were no animals present at all.

The human characters in Nativity sets pose even more problems than the animals. Many Nativities feature a trinity of monarchs dressed in silken robes, elaborate turbans, and gaudy gold jewelry. But the Bible says only that “magi from the east” followed a strange star to visit the infant child. The word “magi” or “wise men” originally referred to a class of priests, probably from Persia. They were often students of astrology, which accounts for why they noticed a galactic anomaly, to begin with. If Jesus’s visitors had been royalty, the gospel writers would likely have included such a detail. Instead, Renaissance artworks, depicting king-like figures at Jesus’s birth, likely contributed to this misrepresentation.

It’s also not clear how many magi there were. The Bible says these wise men brought three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—which may have led to the idea that there were three. (Certainly, the beautiful Christmas hymn “[We Three Kings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_Three_Kings)” has helped circulate the idea.) Christian tradition has even given these “three kings” names: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar, but all of this is conjecture. The endurance of the image throughout history may stem, again, from its poignancy. The sight of earthly kings bowing to the infant “king of the universe” is a memorable one, if not historical.

But perhaps the most detrimental detail perpetuated by most of these scenes is the complexion of the human characters in most Western Nativities, which usually depict the Holy Family with porcelain-white skin and other Anglo-Saxon features, such as piercing blue eyes or rosy cheeks.

Though Renaissance depictions of Jesus often cast him in a European light, white images of Jesus weren’t popularized in the United States until the mid-19th century, according to Edward Blum and Paul Harvey in [*The Color of Christ*](http://amzn.to/1U0u4Gz). “The transformation of Jesus from light to white in the young United States made him, on one hand, a cultural icon of white power,” Blum and Harvey note. While the previous problems with popular Nativities are largely innocuous flourishes amassed over centuries, this one is more serious. It inadvertently reinforces the [damaging cultural framework](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/12/insisting-jesus-was-white-is-bad-history-and-bad-theology/282310/), where lightness is correlated with purity and righteousness, and darkness is linked to sin and evil.

The Bible is [silent on the matter of Jesus’s complexion](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/12/insisting-jesus-was-white-is-bad-history-and-bad-theology/282310/) (and the rest of the Holy Family’s), and the absence of these details is advantageous for the Christian faith. Some scholars have [posited](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/12/insisting-jesus-was-white-is-bad-history-and-bad-theology/282310/) that “the silence of the Scriptures on the issue of Jesus’s skin colour is critical to Christianity’s broad appeal with people of various ethnicities.” Still, historians do agree that Jesus was of Middle Eastern descent, which means he almost certainly had dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes.

All cultural traditions shift over time, especially those whose origins date back millennia. So it’s understandable that the standard Nativity scene today has some dubious connections with the moment it aims to capture. Yes, the gist of the scene is all there. But in replicating these moments mindlessly year after year, there’s a risk in accepting subtle inaccuracies and convenient assumptions as historical fact.

When it comes to donkeys or stables, the stakes seem fairly low. But in roundly dismissing these lesser flaws, it’s easier for believers and nonbelievers alike to also ignore the flawed, non-biblical, rewriting of Jesus’s background, which is to say that rituals both big and small, religious, or otherwise, deserve scrutiny.

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