

With the passing of Thanksgiving, Christmas season has now officially arrived (whether that brings you joy, despair, or indifference!). Here is a post that I made exactly four years, prompted in part by my decision to publish an edition of “other” Gospels (that did not make it into the New Testament, including some that deal with the birth of Jesus.

Right now I have the “other” Gospels on my mind. It’s true, I often have them on my mind, since they have been a focus for a good deal of my research over the past few years, and will continue to be for some years to come. But just now, they are particularly on my mind even though the book I’m currently writing ([How Jesus Became God](#)) is about something else.

They’re on my mind for three reasons. First, I’ve agreed with Oxford Press, to produce, along with my colleague Zlatko Pleše, an English-only edition of [The Apocryphal Gospels](#), which came out in a Greek/Latin/Coptic-English edition last year; this new edition will include only the English translations with new introductions geared for a general audience. So I have to rewrite all the introductions, and I am bound by contract to do it by the end of January.

Second, I have agreed to write a brief (2000-word) article for [Newsweek](#) this week, to be published in a couple of weeks, about the birth of Jesus, and this has made me think about the other Gospels (from outside the New Testament) that tell alternative accounts of Jesus’ birth and young life. And third, just as I was about ready to start writing the article I learned that the Pope has published a book on the birth of Jesus, where he, among other things, dispels many of the myths that people subscribe to about the Christmas story.

I have just gotten my copy today and will read it, hopefully, tonight. But it is clear at first glance that among other things the Pope wants to affirm many of the things that scholars have long known about the popular beliefs about Christmas.

- We don’t know what year Jesus was born. (It will be interesting to see if the Pope suggests a particular year.) None of the Gospels says. According to Luke (and only Luke) Jesus was “about thirty years old” when he began his ministry. According to John (and only John) the ministry lasted between two and a half and three and a half years. And according to all the Gospels he died during the governorship of Pontius Pilate. We know from other sources that Pilate was governor between 26-36 CE. So if (a BIG if: it’s not clear that either Luke or John really had biographically reliable data available to them on these matters) Jesus was 33, then he had to be born somewhere between 7 BCE and 3 CE. But if the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are right that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod then he would have had to be born by at least 4 BCE, since that is when Herod died. And so most historians indicate that Jesus was born in 4 BCE or so, which of course creates a nice irony, since it means that Jesus was born 4 years Before Christ. (!)
- The reason the calendars we use are wrong is because ...**FOR THE REST OF THIS POST, log in as a Member. If you don’t belong yet, JOIN BEFORE CHRISTMAS!!**
- 3. The reason the calendars we use are wrong is because the calculations made by the inventor of what became our modern calendar were off. Our modern calendars are based on the one devised by a sixth-century monk named Dionysius Exiguus (a Latin name that means, in English, “Dennis the Short”). He didn’t get things quite right.
- 4. We certainly don’t know what day of the year Jesus was born on. December 25 has been the traditional day in the West since the fourth century, chosen because the celebration of

Jesus' birth was to replace the annual Roman festival of Saturnalia. But it's anyone's guess, and anyone has a 1 in 365 chance of getting it right.

5. There is nothing in the Bible about the baby Jesus being surrounded by donkeys and oxen.
6. And there are lots of other things that I don't know yet if the Pope talks about, but will be very interested in seeing (I'll be *amazed* if he points any of these out!): whether he points out that Matthew and Luke are at odds with one another in almost all of the details, such as why Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem and whether they stayed there for long and whether they fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, and so on; whether he notes the physical implausibilities of the familiar stories (in Matthew a star leads the wise men to Jesus and stops over the house that he is in; how does a star stop over a house); and their historical implausibilities (In Luke Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem to register for a census because of a tax upon "the whole world"; the whole world? Even a tax on the whole Roman empire defies belief. Let alone one that everyone had to register for by returning to the homes of their ancestors.

In any event, the "myths" and "legends" that surround the modern retelling of the Christmas story are interesting (these are the things the Pope talks about, so far as I can see at this point). But there are also lots of interesting myths and legends in the other Gospels, which I may say some things about in future posts (for example, the Proto-Gospel of James and the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew - which were far more influential on Christianity in the Middle Ages even than many books of the Bible). And I would argue (here's where people start getting nervous) that there are myths and legends in the Gospels that did make it into the New Testament as well, especially in the stories of Jesus birth found in Matthew and Luke (the other two Gospels don't say a thing about it).



[Newsweek Article on Christmas: Part 1](#)
[Improving the Blog 2016](#)