

The X-Mas Files

Week One

The Perfect Time

What A Wonderful Story

I enjoy speaking about Christmas because the Christmas story says so much to people of all walks of life. Luke, the great physician, wrote primarily to the Gentile or unchurched mind set. He also talked to the common man. Just look at the genealogy. Instead of going back to Abraham as does Matthew, he goes back to Adam, the first man. So Luke is different. In the gospel of Luke's account of Christ's birth, we see how God intervenes and changes the lives of the rich and the poor; the Jew and the Gentile; the old and the young; the priest and the common laborer; the newly married and the widowed; those who are newly pregnant and those who have never been pregnant; the wise and the unwise; those who are with child and those who are childless.

But Let's Look At It In A Different Light

If you hadn't heard about the Christmas story when you were young or say you weren't raised in the church or had a relative who was a Christian or any of a myriad of reasons that would allow you to see it from a Biblical perspective. What would the story of Jesus' birth sound like? Well, it would sound like the world of the weird. An ancient god wants to become involved with his creation after they turned their back on him for thousands of years. To do this he impregnates a virgin who will have a child that will be all human, but all alien at the same time. This child will have special powers once he grows up, but for now he will be a helpless baby. And it gets even weirder. When this star child is born, there are strange lights in the sky, that are seen by simple people as well as learned men in another country. The astrologers however had known about this phenomenon and followed a light that traveled directly to where the hybrid human was born. Add to all of this some ancient prophecies about all of these things that were predicted from the beginning of man in an ancient text given to men by the higher power. It all begins to sound like a story worthy of Indiana Jones. In fact, two of the three movies actually were built around stories in that ancient text. I think we can see that it might seem a little strange. When you strip away all the Christianese, it would make for a tall tale, but it is all true and we have historians and archeologists confirming it all. But let's look at one other things before we start our investigative journey.

Taking Christ Out Of Christmas

I'm only talking about what appears to be an abbreviation of "Christmas" when we refer to it as "Xmas." I grew up thinking it was yet another way to take the real meaning of the time and separate it from Jesus and His birth. But that isn't the case although the separation is occurring in other ways. We need a simple Greek lesson to clear things up. First of all, you have to understand that it is not the letter X that is put into Christmas. We see the English letter X there, but actually what it involves is the first letter of the Greek name for Christ. Christos is the New Testament Greek for Christ. The first letter of the Greek word Christos is transliterated into our alphabet as an X. That X has come through church history to be a shorthand symbol for the name of Christ. You see, there is no "X" in Christmas – just a fish. It's not an attempt to "X" out Christ from Christmas as some have thought. In fact, the idea of X as an abbreviation for the name of Christ came into use in our culture with no intent to show any disrespect for Jesus. The church has used

the symbol of the fish historically because it is an acronym. Fish in Greek (*ichthus*) involved the use of the first letters for the Greek phrase “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” So the early Christians would take the first letter of those words and put those letters together to spell the Greek word for fish. That’s how the symbol of the fish became the universal symbol of Christendom. There’s a long and sacred history of the use of X to symbolize the name of Christ, and from its origin, it has meant no disrespect.

The World Was A Different Place

Now that that little bit of house cleaning is done, we can get back to this story of mysteries, of supernatural activity and worldwide intrigue. Because we do know that what happened in that little town of Bethlehem over two thousand years ago is still impacting our world today. And there are hidden meanings in all of the story’s details, keys that can unlock what really happened but also unlock hidden blessings for our lives. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew. He would have grown up with stories of conquest and oppression. These stories recounted the many waves of foreign invasion that sought to subjugate the Jewish people. The Roman occupation of Israel (63 BC) was the last in a long line of invasions beginning with the Babylonians (539 BC), then the Persians and the Greeks. Jewish identity also rested on stories of the Patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - as well as the founding story of the Moses-led liberation from the Egyptians at the Exodus. There were yet other stories that recounted successful self-rule under the Hebrew kings Saul, David and Solomon. However, history records that the Jewish people were more often the victims than the victors in their fight for national sovereignty.

The Miracle Of Identity

Hebrew identity was maintained - as it is with most oppressed peoples - through a deep spiritual conviction. This conviction was expressed in terms of Covenant theology: the belief that Yahweh had chosen them to play a unique role in the history of the world. In particular, the Jewish people had come to expect a Messiah who, they believed, would enable them to fulfill this divine mission. There were differing understandings of the mission and role of the Messiah ranging from the establishment of a Jewish political kingdom here on earth to the eschatological notion of a heavenly kingdom at the end of the world (which many Jewish people considered to be immanent). It goes without saying that religion and politics were deeply intertwined in Hebrew faith and self-understanding.

And Then There Was Rome

By the time of Jesus' birth, the Romans had established a two-tiered system of government consisting of Roman overseers and Jewish leaders who exercised control in the name of Rome. This was the system of power in which the family of Herod the Great grew to prominence. Although half-Jews, the Herodian family was detested by the Jewish people for its tyrannical rule and also because of its key role in selling out the Jewish heritage to a foreign power. One of Herod's sons, Archelaus, was so brutal in his exercise of power in Jerusalem, that Rome replaced him with one of its own governors, Pontius Pilate, who was to play a significant role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Another of the sons, Herod Antipas, was responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist. It was the same Antipas who is accredited with the mocking of Jesus at his pre-crucifixion trial.

Life For Jesus

Jesus was a Nazarene. He lived most of his life in the town of Nazareth within the province of Galilee. Although a small village, Nazareth was close to the metropolitan centers of Tiberias and Sepphoris. Unlike those predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) cities, Nazareth was a Jewish enclave. It was also relatively poor and overpopulated; there was a scarcity of natural resources such as water and fertile soil. In such a situation, there tended to be a fair amount of sickness and disease. Because Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish world male Jews were supposed to make a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple for the three major Jewish feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. However, since Nazareth was a three or four-day journey from Jerusalem (about a hundred miles), it is unlikely that Jesus made the trip often. Politically Judaism at the time of Jesus was a complex mixture of divergent social, political and religious ideologies. In general terms, we can speak of four distinct movements, ideologies or life-options. It is helpful to situate Jesus in terms of these social groups of his day in order that we can come to appreciate the distinctiveness of his own life and mission.

The Revolutionary Option

It advocated outward violence, even armed rebellion, to rid Israel of Roman oppression. Nothing else, they figured, would bring final liberation to the Jewish people. Depending on the point of view, Zealots were looked upon as freedom-fighters or terrorists. One thinks of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or activities of the Irish Republican Army during the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. Certainly Jesus had zealots among his followers, for example 'Simon the Zealot'. Moreover, Jesus came into conflict with both the Jewish temple and the Roman state. Finally, he was executed as a zealot revolutionary. However, few would argue that Jesus was a violent revolutionary. Like other non-violent figures in history, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus posed a more radical threat to the established order than any armed person might do.

The Sadducees Were The Great Pragmatists Of The Day

As wealthy lay-nobles, priests and aristocrats, they sought to conserve their wealth and power through compromise with Rome. Politically speaking, this was the most realistic option. Most of the members of the Sanhedrin were from the Sadducee group. In many ways, the Sadducees could be described as the least religious group as is evidenced by their non-belief in the resurrection from the dead. However, it would be wrong to see them as agnostics or atheists as some have argued. They were committed to the Jewish faith on the basis of the earlier books of the bible. Moreover, as the people at the top of the pecking order in the Jewish society of their time, they were much more concerned with present-day affairs than speculation on the life-to-come.

The Pharisees Were In Many Ways The Idealists Of Jewish Society

Most of the Scribes (the 'theologians' of the day) were Pharisees. In general, the Pharisees sought to live a life of spiritual purity by a meticulous following of the torah (Jewish law). They did not believe in compromise with the Romans (as did the Sadducees) nor in revolutionary activity (as did the Zealots). No doubt their emphasis on the law resulted in legalism which in turn, became a pretext for hypocrisy. Nonetheless, many Pharisees were highly committed and deeply spiritual people. They believed in the resurrection of the dead. But they were so legalistic they missed why Jesus was so upset with them.

It Was Into This World That God Sent His Son

4 But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal 4:4,5, NKJV)

In an article from gotquestions.org we see just how special that time was:

There was a great anticipation among the Jews of that time that the Messiah would come. The Roman rule over Israel made the Jews hungry for the Messiah's coming. Rome had unified much of the world under its government, giving a sense of unity to the various lands. Also, because the empire was relatively peaceful, travel was possible, allowing the early Christians to spread the gospel. Such freedom to travel would have been impossible in other eras. While Rome had conquered militarily, Greece had conquered culturally. A "common" form of the Greek language (different from classical Greek) was the trade language and was spoken throughout the empire, making it possible to communicate the gospel to many different people groups through one common language. The fact that the many false idols had failed to give them victory over the Roman conquerors caused many to abandon the worship of those idols. At the same time, in the more "cultured" cities, the Greek philosophy and science of the time left others spiritually empty in the same way that the atheism of communist governments leaves a spiritual void today. The mystery religions of the time emphasized a savior-god and required worshipers to offer bloody sacrifices, thus making the gospel of Christ which involved one ultimate sacrifice believable to them. The Greeks also believed in the immortality of the soul (but not of the body). The Roman army recruited soldiers from among the provinces, introducing these men to Roman culture and to ideas (such as the gospel) that had not reached those outlying provinces yet. The earliest introduction of the gospel to Britain was the result of the efforts of Christian soldiers stationed there... The timing of Christ's incarnation was such that the people of that time were prepared for His coming. The people of every century since then have more than sufficient evidence that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah through His fulfillment of the Scriptures that pictured and prophesied His coming in great detail.

You see, Jesus came at just the right time in world history, although we might think our time would have been better for the spread of the Gospel. And you can add that as yet another mystery of God's plan.