

The Jewish Roots of Christmas

Brant Pitre

Introduction

1. Christmas: from the Old English, “Christ’s Mass” (*Crīstes mæsse*) = Nativity
2. Why is the birth of Jesus so important? Center of human history? (e.g., BC/AD) So joyful?
3. Old Testament: three ways in which birth of Jesus fulfills OT (Christ, Star, Hannukah)

1. The New Christ

King David the “Christ” (1000 B.C.)

1. Jesse: prophet Samuel sent to Bethlehem find a “king” among seven sons of Jesse (1 Sam 16:1-4)
2. David: anointed by Samuel; the “Spirit” comes upon him (1 Sam 16:13)
3. Christ: David called “the LORD’s anointed” (Hb *mashiach*; Gk *christos*)” (1 Sam 16:6)
4. Kingdom: God promises David that his kingdom will last “forever” (2 Sam 7:14)

Prophecies of the Messiah

For *to us a child is born, to us a son is given*; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called “Wonderful Counselor, *Mighty God* [Hebrew *’el*], Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*... There shall come forth *a shoot from the stump of Jesse*... (Isaiah 9:6; 11:11; cf. “Jesse Tree”)

You, O *Bethlehem Ephrathah*, ... *from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days* [Hebrew *mimey ’olam*] (Micah 5:2)

The Birth of Christ (Luke 2)

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. ² This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. ⁴ *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,* ⁵ *to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.* ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. ⁷ *And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* ⁸ And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; ¹¹ *for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* [Greek *christos kyrios*]. ¹² *And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and *the babe lying in a manger.* (Luke 2:1-7, RSV)

The Prophecy of the Lord’s Manger

The Lord [Gk *kyrios*] has spoken: ‘*The ox knows its owner, and the donkey the manger* [Gk *phatnē*] *of its lord* [Gk *kyrios*] but Israel has not known me... (Isaiah 1:2-3; Greek Septuagint)

St. Jerome: Why in a manger? That the prophecy of Isaiah, the prophet, might be fulfilled: ‘An ox knows its owner, and a donkey, its master’s manger’ [Isa 1:3].’ (Jerome, *Homily 88*; trans. M. L. Ewald)

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2. The New Star

Balaam's Prophecy of the Future King's Star (ca. 1400 BC)

"I [Balaam] see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near:

a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.

it shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth.

Edom shall be dispossessed..." (Num 24:15, 17-18; cf. DSS, 7 Gentile prophets in *Baba Bathra* 15b)

Pagan Expectations of a Coming King (1st Century AD)

There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world. (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 8.4.5; trans. LCL)

The Star of Bethlehem (Matthew 2)

¹ When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, *wise men* [Greek *magi*] *from the East came to Jerusalem, saying,* ² "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel. [Micah 5:2]" ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; ⁸ and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹ and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-11)

The Magi, the Star, and Balaam's Prophecy

St. Thomas Aquinas: How were [the Magi] able to know from a star that a man-God had been born?... Because they were of the stock of Balaam, who said, "a star will rise out of Jacob" (Num 24:17). Hence they had it from his prophecy. (Aquinas, *Commentary on Matthew* no. 175; trans. J. Holmes and B. Mortensen)

What Kind of Star?

St. Thomas Aquinas: The star which appeared to the Magi did not belong to the heavenly system... [For] it could not have indicated the house distinctly, unless it were near the earth. Consequently, it seems that this was some invisible force made visible under the form of a star. Wherefore some say that... the angel who, under a human form, appeared to the shepherds, under the form of a star, appeared to the Magi. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 36, art. 8)

The Prophecy of the Gentile Kings' Gifts

¹ Arise, shine [O Jerusalem]; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth... ³ And nations [Hb *goyim*] shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising... ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, ... all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense... (Isaiah 60:1-6)

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3. The New Hannukah

The Pagan Roots of December 25th?¹

1. Roman Feast of Saturnalia = Dec 17-23, *not* December 25th! (doesn't work)
2. Birthday of Invictus ("Unconquered [Sun]"): Dec 25th (*Chronograph*, AD 336); however, "no proof" Invictus *preceded* Christmas; same book says "December 25, Christ is born in Bethlehem of Judea"!
3. St. Augustine: "He is believed to have been conceived on March 25, and also to have suffered on this same day... *But according to tradition He was born on December 25.*"² (cf. Hippolytus, *Daniel* 4.23.3)
4. New Hannukah: birth of Jesus fulfills winter Jewish feast of Hannukah (only in Catholic OT!)

The Jewish Roots of Hannukah/Festival of Lights (164 B.C.)

1. Antiochus IV "Epiphanes": Greek king, claimed to be "equal with God" (2 Macc 9:12)
2. Desecrated Jerusalem Temple: on "25th day" of Chislev; offered sacrifice on altar (1 Macc 1:59)
3. Judas Maccabee: rebuilt temple and "consecrated" (Gk *hagiazō*) it (1 Macc 4:48)

⁴⁹ They made new holy vessels, and brought *the lampstand* [= the Menorah], the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. ⁵⁰ *Then they burned incense on the altar and lighted the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple.* ⁵¹ *They placed the bread [of the Presence] on the table...* ⁵² *Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in [164 B.C.]...* ⁵⁴ *At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals...* ⁵⁶ *So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days...* ⁵⁸ *There was very great gladness among the people...* ⁵⁹ All the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication [Greek *engkainismos*] of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev. (1 Maccabees 4:48-59; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.325: "we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights")

The Incarnation and the Light (John 1)

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... ⁵ *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...* ⁸ *He [John] was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.* ⁹ *The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world...* ¹⁴ *And the Word became flesh and dwelt [Greek *skēnoō*] among us...* (John 1:1, 8-9, 14)

Jesus, Hannukah, and the Divinity of Christ

1. Hannukah: Jesus in Temple during "feast of the Dedication [Greek *engkainia*]" in "winter" (John 10:22)
2. Divinity: Jesus reveals his divinity: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30)
3. Birth: "him whom the Father consecrated [Gk *hagiazō*] and sent into the world" (Jn 10:36).

Feast of Hannukah

1. 25th Day of Chislev [Winter]
2. New Temple Consecrated
3. Light Comes into Darkness
4. 8 Days of Celebration

Coming of Jesus

1. 25th Day of December [Winter]
2. Jesus "Consecrated" and "Sent"
3. Light of the World
4. 8 Days of Christmas Octave

¹ See Michael Patrick Barber, *The True Meaning of Christmas: The Birth of Jesus and the Origins of the Season* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press; Greenwood Village, Co.: Augustine Institute, 2021), 152-166.

² Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 4.5.9. In St. Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Stephen McKenna; Fathers of the Church 45; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 141, 142.

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The Births of John and Jesus

St. Augustine: *Christ was born when the days were already beginning to grow longer, Joh was born when the days started to decrease. So creation itself... confirm John's words, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [John 3:30]*³

<i>Birth of John the Baptist</i>	<i>Birth of Jesus</i>
Birth of John the Baptist	Birth of Jesus
June 24	December 25
Summer Solstice (daylight decreases)	Winter Solstice (daylight increases)
Nativity of John the Baptist	Feast of Christmas (Nativity)

4. Christ's-Mass and the Eucharist

The House of Bread

St. Jerome: The fruit of our earth is *the bread of life, who was born for us at Bethlehem. Bethlehem, in fact, means "house of bread,"* and this is the bread that came forth in Bethlehem, that coming down from heaven, was made for us; the bread into whose mystery angels desire [to look]. (Jerome, *Homily 65*)⁴

The Manger and the Altar

St. John Chrysostom: Let us draw near to him then with fervency and with inflamed love... This body, even lying in a manger, Magi revered... Let us, then, at least imitate those barbarians, we who are citizens of heaven. *For they indeed when they saw him merely in a manger... drew near with great awe; but you behold him not in the manger but on the altar, not a woman holding him in her arms, but the priest standing by.*⁵

The Coming of God on Earth

Pope Benedict XVI: [December 25th] was the day on which the feast of the Dedication of the Temple, inaugurated in 164 B.C. by Judas Maccabeus, was celebrated. *The date of Christ's birth, his coming the light of God rising in the darkness of winter, would therefore at the same time symbolize the real dedication of the Temple—the arrival of God upon this earth.*⁶

³ Augustine, *Homilies on John* 14.5. In Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1-40* (trans. Edmund Hill, O.P.; Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009), 264.

⁴ In *Homilies of Saint Jerome (60-96)* (trans. Sr. Mari Liguori Ewald, I.H.M.; Fathers of the Church 57: Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 54.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 24.8. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (14 vols.; ed. Philip Schaff; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 12:143.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Seeking God's Face: Meditations for the Church Year* (trans. David Smith and Robert Cunningham; Providence, R.I.: Cluny, 2020), 134 (emphasis added).