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Luke 2:1–14 New Living Translation

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ² (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴ And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David’s ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁵ He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child.

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”*

John 14:6 New Living Translation

⁶ Jesus told him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.”

When was Jesus born?

When I was in grammar school, I had a friend who was born in Mexico. We'll call him Miguel. He was adopted as a small child after he was found abandoned on the street. The only problem was that no one knew when he was born. So, his new parents gave him a birthday. I don't remember what it was. Let's say it was January 8 – the same as David Bowie, Elvis Presley, and well, Pastor Buzz.

But seriously, there is one thing that my buddy and Jesus Christ have in common – we don't know their true biological birthdays. There are some clues, though, that Jesus was *not* born on December 25. We just read that there were shepherds staying in the fields when Jesus was born, and from the original Greek it seems that they were *spending their nights and sleeping* in the fields, and they did not do this in December. In fact, even the sheep might not have been out at night in the winter: the shepherds would have found shelter for them. Believe it or not, but back then, sheep and other animals often stayed in people's houses, on the bottom floor, while the humans slept in a second-floor loft that overhung the ground floor where the animals lived. The humans climbed a ladder to their rooms up in the loft, and they could walk over to the balcony to check up on the

animals down on the ground floor. After all, those animals were their livelihoods: they had to be protected.

There's more evidence that Jesus was not born on December 25. In Chapter 2 of Luke, we're told that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, because the Roman government had decreed that there would be a census. But because the Roman roads were mostly dirt and would be in very poor condition at that time of year, and because temperatures were often below freezing at that time, historians do not believe that censuses were taken in the winter. Remember, Mary, who was pregnant, *walked* there – the distance is 70 miles. Now, it is indeed possible that the census was in the winter, that it was an oddly warm night, and the shepherds were sleeping with their flocks, and that indeed Jesus was born in the winter.

But there's another complication. Jesus and his parents were in Bethlehem for a census, supposedly. However, historians have not been able to nail down exactly what census Luke was writing about. The ones that are documented to have happened around this time do not mesh with the timeline in the Gospels.

Of course, though, the point is not when he was born, but that he *was* indeed born. I'm far from the first person to point out that the date is not the

issue, of course. His birthday isn't even stated in the Bible. The date of the 25th of December was chosen far after he was crucified and resurrected. We'll get back to this fact.

Now, while we are on the topic of what really happened historically, here's an interesting fact. There was a Roman official named Pliny – actually, he was called Pliny the younger – who was the governor of a Roman province around the year 110 A.D., seventy or eighty years after Jesus was crucified. There is a famous letter that Pliny wrote to the Emperor at the time; the emperor was named Trajan. Pliny was asking Trajan for advice on how to deal with these upstart Christians who were beginning to make waves. Pliny was putting Christians on trial for refusing to worship Roman gods. The punishment was execution. What's intriguing is that, in this letter to the Emperor, Pliny admits that the Christians weren't really doing anything wrong. His main concern was that Christianity was a rapidly growing threat to Roman rule. Remember, that Romans considered their emperor to be a god – so refusing to honor Roman gods was a challenge to Roman authority.

Pliny refers to Christianity as a “depraved, excessive superstition”. Here is a quote from this letter addressed by Pliny to the Emperor explaining why he is

looking for help: *For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.*

This is what we will be celebrating on the 25th: a man who was also God, and who refused to allow mere humans to raise themselves up to the same level of authority and power as God. The faith he let loose spread like a contagion. Indeed, we're here today to anticipate the joy of welcoming into this world a baby who was born under very humble circumstances, but who later proclaimed: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."*

One more historical note: One of the reasons I used the New Living Translation in our quote from Luke is that it is probably more accurate than other translations. The NLT says that Jesus was laid in a manger *"..because there was no lodging available"*. Other translations say that *"there was no room in the inn"*. Inn is not the right translation of the original Greek. The word that is used in Luke is katalyma, and this means guest room, not inn. It was mistranslated long ago and this has led to the belief that Jesus was born in a barn. Most likely, Mary and Joseph were actually staying in a house. And it's probably true that the guest room was in the home of Joseph's relatives in Bethlehem, where they would

naturally have sought lodging in Bethlehem. And that house happened to be full of other visiting relatives because of the census. That meant that the living space for the humans – up in the loft – was full. So, Mary and Joseph had to sleep downstairs, in the house, where the animals were often kept in the winter. It's wasn't even an insult to put them there. Poor people, those who lived on the land and raised animals, often stayed with those animals. Jesus might have slept in a manger, a feed trough for animals, but in a house, not in what we would call a barn. So, the man who was God was born among the domesticated animals in a house, and he slept in a manger. And look at the impact he had on the world.

Jesus taught us much: that humans are not Gods, that we should be humble like children, that we should love our enemies, that with God all things are possible, that Jesus came to Earth to serve us, that the humble will be exalted, that we should embrace those who are marginalized, and that our sins are forgiven. We don't know exactly when he was born - but he scared the crap out of the Roman Empire, which, at its peak, spread from the British Isles to north Africa. And that was only the start of the Christian faith.

I'd like to get back to my buddy, Miguel. I remember one day in the schoolyard him being tormented by other kids. He had been asked in class what

his birthday was so that it could be recorded in the school records. He had innocently said that he was adopted, and that since they didn't know his birthday, they had given him the birthday of January 8. (Again, I'm making that day up.) Then later, at recess, he was taunted. Maybe you weren't even born, one kid yelled, as he pointed at Miguel, maybe you were made in a factory. Now, mind you, this is a rather silly insult, but it hurt Miguel's feelings badly and he fought to hold back tears.

Some weeks or months later, though, I was invited to Miguel's birthday party. His family owned a very large lot, and although the town I grew up in, Oxnard, California, is now almost entirely cement, blacktop, glass, and steel, back then, there were still many lemon and orange orchards. There were many small farms, growing beans and berries and lettuce. Miguel's family made a little money on the side growing vegetables. They had chickens, too. After we all sang Happy Birthday to Miguel, we went outside to a large tree on their property. There was a piñata hanging from a branch. I knew what it was but had never seen one before. We had a great time, getting blindfolded and swinging at the thing. When it broke open, we all went diving for the candy.

Miguel, as it turned out, was a true Christian: one of the kids he had invited to the party was that bully, who accused him of being born in a factory. I was standing near the remains of the piñata when that boy walked up to Miguel. He thanked Miguel for inviting him to the party and he said he was sorry for teasing Miguel. Miguel, in a very adult fashion, held his hand out and shook the bully's hand. Then, using a slang word that had actually been around for decades, but had only recently established itself as a fixture in American vocabulary, that bully said, "Anyhow, I think it's *cool* that you don't know when you were born." Miguel grinned at that.

I think it's cool that we have a savior whose birthday we don't really know. And I think this is all very deliberate. Because indeed, it's that Jesus *was* born that matters, not when.

Here's another interesting fact: the earliest documentation that dates Jesus' birth as being on December 25 is from a calendar dated 354 A.D., 350 years or so after Jesus was born. But December 25 was an important day for the Romans. It was a festival day celebrating the sun god Sol Invictus, which was formalized as a pagan holiday in the year 274. Did someone choose December 25th as Jesus' birthday because it was a major pagan holiday?

In the end, it's simply true that the Bible does not tell us what day Jesus was born. But our faith is derived from Scripture. Anything outside of that is not important. We don't care the day on which Jesus was born.

These are some of the names of Jesus, as written in the Bible: Jesus the Christ, Emmanuel, our Lord, the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Logos, the Son of David, the Lamb of God, and the Light of the World. That's whose birth we celebrate on a day the choice of which is, well, undocumented. And maybe it's great that his birthday was perhaps chosen to displace a pagan holiday. After all, Jesus was a rabble-rouser – and we are proud of it.