

“This is the ideal book if you are a sceptic. Rebecca McLaughlin is very much in tune with the big questions many of us ask. She cuts her way through the common misconceptions surrounding the Christian message and demonstrates convincingly why the idea that God visited our planet is far from a *Star Wars* or Harry Potter fantasy.”

JOHN LENNOX, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics,
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“Rebecca graciously addresses our hesitations about the incredible claims of Christianity, and specifically Christmas. Her friendly and sincere tone complements her call for us to seriously consider and believe the greatest story ever told—a story that extends beyond Christmas.”

QUINA ARAGON, Author, *Love Made: A Story of God’s Overflowing*, *Creative Heart* and *Love Gave: A Story of God’s Greatest Gift*

“*Is Christmas Unbelievable?* is a highly accessible and crystal clear case for the historicity both of the written Gospels and of Jesus himself—and for why it matters. Presenting her essays as an explanation of the meaning of Christmas only makes her case more interesting and more likely to be read. A great gift book too.”

TIMOTHY KELLER, Author, *The Reason for God*

“Rebecca McLaughlin has done it again! Assuming nothing and explaining everything, she makes a brief but compelling case for how and why Christmas reflects the deepest truths of the gospel. Highly recommended.”

DANE ORTLUND, Senior Pastor, Naperville
Presbyterian Church

“If you think the Christmas story is a fairy tale for kids, I strongly recommend you read this book!”

RUSSELL COWBURN, Professor of Experimental Physics,
Cambridge University

“Rebecca McLaughlin has quickly become one of my favorite Christian apologists. If you are looking for a good book to give to an unbelieving friend at Christmas or are searching for answers yourself, this book will be a welcome friend.”

LIGON DUNCAN, Chancellor and CEO,
Reformed Theological Seminary

“So many people have been shaken by the COVID pandemic; we’re fragile, not in control, often lonely or angry, and longing for a God to believe in. But we have to know it’s true, and that is why Rebecca McLaughlin’s little Christmas book *Is Christmas Unbelievable?* is so timely. She tells the story of Christmas, gives the facts that ground it in history, defends the miraculous, and explains the relevance of it all.”

RICO TICE, Founder, Christianity Explored Ministries

“With lucid brevity and timely insight, Rebecca McLaughlin’s book wisely anticipates both the cognitive and emotional questions in the mind and heart of the skeptic. This is exactly the kind of cultural apologetics we need for today—one that is wise and winsome. Take up, read and then share.”

JULIUS J. KIM, PhD, President, The Gospel Coalition

“What a gift! This little book shows us that rational grown-ups don’t need to stop believing in Christmas. It’s the perfect thing to send with a Christmas card.”

PETER J. WILLIAMS, Author, *Can We Trust the Gospels?*

REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

IS CHRISTMAS

UNBELIEVABLE?



the**goodbook**
COMPANY

*For Carrie... because
“even atheists love a manger scene”!*

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Introduction

Dear Santa. Thank you for the dolls and pencils and the fish. It's Easter now, so I hope I didn't wake you, but honest, it is an emergency. There is a crack in my wall. Aunt Shie says it's just an ordinary crack, but I know it's not because at night there's voices. So please, PLEASE, can you send someone to fix it?

A seven-year-old (Amy Pond) is kneeling by her bed, praying to Santa, when the iconic sci-fi hero Doctor Who crash-lands his time-and-spaceship in her garden. If you're not familiar with Doctor Who, the Doctor is a human-looking alien with two hearts and a superhuman mind. He's hundreds of years old, and he travels through time and space making friends and saving worlds. Conveniently (both for the Doctor and for the show), instead of dying, he regenerates. In this episode, he's just regenerated into a new body. He eats half the food in Amy's house, but he doesn't fix the scary crack in her wall. He tells her it's a crack in the

skin of the universe, and then he goes away, promising he'll come back in five minutes.

But he doesn't.

Amy draws pictures of the "raggedy Doctor" to keep him fresh in her mind. She grows up clinging to the idea that the hero who dropped from the sky to save her world when she was a kid was actually real.

I don't know how you think about the Christmas story. Perhaps you believed it at Amy's age. But now the story of the infant Son of God, cradled in a manger but born to save the world, sounds about as far-fetched as Doctor Who. Messenger angels. A virgin giving birth. A guiding star. Can anyone too old to believe in Santa really be expected to believe such things?

This book will answer, "Yes." It will look at four questions we should all ask about the story of Jesus' birth, and it will show that—while even some kids may be skeptical—some of the most respected scholars in the world believe the Christmas story to be true. What's more, it will suggest that if God really did become human just over 2,000 years ago, that's really good news for us here now. Because—like Amy Pond—we have an emergency.

December brings a heavenly host of emotions. I don't know if you relish Christmas or if you dread it, if you're full of joy and love or if you feel alone and lost. Maybe you're living your dreams. Or maybe life isn't quite turning out the way you'd hoped when you were seven.

Perhaps you feel no need of a Savior. Perhaps, if you're honest, you're ready to try anything.

However you're feeling right now, I hope this little book will help you think a little more about the man who landed in our world 2,000 years ago. I hope it will persuade you that he's more important than you thought. And I hope it will make you wonder if his unbelievable claim that he'd come to save the world—and you and me—from an emergency more serious than Amy Pond's might just be true.

CHAPTER 1

Was Jesus Even a Real Person?

“I told all my friends that Santa isn’t real, but Jesus is!”

When my five-year-old came home with this news, her teacher had already told me (with concern) that she’d been directing other kids to act out the Christmas story. “You’re Mary. You’re Joseph. You’re the angel.” I was torn between admiring her gumption and dreading awkward conversations with other parents!

For many kids, Santa is the real star of Christmas. It’s mostly the presents. But it’s also that sense of magic—the idea that someone with supernatural powers might just be listening to them. Amy Pond is not the only child ever to have prayed to Santa.

Is believing in Jesus just as naïve?

Plenty of people would answer, *Yes!* In fact, one survey in 2015 found that 40% of adults in the UK didn’t think that Jesus was even a real person, or weren’t sure.¹ 22%

thought he was “a mythical or fictional character.” So, before we look at the specifics of Jesus’ birth, we need to ask if he was born at all.

Did Jesus Even Exist?

In 2012, New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman wrote a book on this question: *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. Ehrman doesn’t believe in God. In fact, he’s made a fortune writing books that question the historic Christian faith. But as Ehrman explains, “The reality is that whatever else you may think about Jesus, he certainly did exist.”² Ehrman says this view “is held by virtually every expert on the planet.”³ Rather than it being naïve to believe that Jesus walked the earth 2,000 years ago, it’s actually naïve not to.

So, what evidence leads all these experts to conclude that Jesus did exist? The richest sources we have for Jesus’ life are the four biographies that we find in the New Testament part of the Bible: the so-called “Gospels” of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Ehrman calls these Gospels “the oldest and best sources we have for knowing about the life of Jesus,” and says this is “the view of all serious historians of antiquity of every kind, from committed evangelical Christians to hardcore atheists.”⁴ We’ll look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth in a bit. But even if we lay the Gospels aside entirely, multiple ancient documents by non-Christian authors also contain references to Jesus Christ. These

snatches of information are often given in passing in pieces of writing mostly concerned with other things. Nonetheless, from these non-biblical sources we can still piece together the basics of Jesus' life and death.

One such reference to Jesus is in a text written by the Jewish historian Josephus in around AD 93. Josephus reports that in AD 62 (about three decades after Jesus' death) the Jewish high priest "had a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others" stoned (i.e. executed).⁵ This fits with what the Bible says. At this point in history, God's people (the Jews) were living under oppressive Roman rule. But God had promised to send a special King—the "Christ"—to rescue them. In the Gospels, Jesus claimed to be that Christ. The New Testament also identifies James as Jesus' brother and as a leader in the early church.⁶ The Christians were seen as heretics by the Jewish authorities, so James getting executed by stoning makes sense.

We find another reference to Jesus Christ in an early 2nd-century document by the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus. Tacitus reports how the Emperor Nero blamed the Great Fire of Rome of AD 64 on "a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd called *Chrestians*" (another spelling of Christians). Tacitus goes on to explain who these Christians were:

"Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by

sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in [Rome] itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and become fashionable.”⁷

Tacitus was no fan of the Christians! But his account confirms what the Gospels claim: that Jesus who was called Christ was executed during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius and under the authority of Pontius Pilate, who was governor of Judea from AD 26 to 36.

By the early 2nd century, Christianity had become a real Roman headache. Pliny the Younger (a Roman governor in Turkey from around 109-111) wrote a letter to the emperor, asking for advice on persecuting Christians. Pliny required those suspected of being Christians to worship Roman gods, offer adoration to a statue of the emperor, and curse Christ. He knew real Christians wouldn't do these things. Some who confessed to having previously been Christians said they had been in the habit of meeting early in the morning on a certain day of the week and singing “a hymn to Christ as to a god.”⁸ Unlike most of their religious contemporaries, Christians saw Jesus not just as one god to be worshiped among many, but rather as the one true God. Worshiping Jesus meant not worshiping anyone else.

To find out more about Christianity, Pliny tortured “two female slaves, who were called deaconesses.”⁹ His

picks were representative of the type of people who made up the early church; Christianity seems to have been particularly popular among women and slaves. In fact, the 2nd-century Greek philosopher Celsus quipped that Christians “want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, only slaves, women, and little children.”¹⁰ Pliny, however, is clear that the “contagious superstition” of Christianity had spread to people “of all ages and ranks and of both sexes.”¹¹

These three early texts give us evidence from outside the Bible that Jesus was a Jewish leader in the early 1st century, that he claimed to be the Christ, that he was executed by the Romans between AD 26 and 36, and that he was subsequently worshiped by his followers as God.

At this point, you may be thinking, “Ok, I get that Jesus was a real person, who claimed to be the Christ and was executed by the Romans. But the Bible asks us to believe much more than that.” You’re right! Like the young Amy Pond drawing pictures of her “raggedy Doctor” while everybody thought she was delusional, believing in the Christmas story *does* mean believing some truly unbelievable things—things that Greek philosophers thought only uneducated slaves, women, and children would buy! We’ll get to some of those in chapter 3.

But not everything you may have heard about Christmas comes from the Bible. Over time, Christmas

has grown to include all sorts of extra details in our popular imagination—like the idea that Jesus was born in the bleak midwinter, that it was snowing at the time, or that his nativity involved a little donkey, a grumpy innkeeper, a stable, and a little drummer boy. (*Pa rum-pum-pum pum.*) None of this is in the Gospels. So, what *do* the Gospels say?

What Is the Christmas Story?

Matthew's and Luke's Gospels introduce us to Mary: a young Jewish woman, living in 1st-century Judea. Mary was betrothed (a legally binding form of engagement) to a man called Joseph. But, as Matthew euphemistically puts it, "Before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18*). Luke tells us that Mary was forewarned of this by an angel called Gabriel. Gabriel told Mary to call her son Jesus and said he was the promised King, who would reign over God's people forever (Luke 1:26-38). Mary was understandably surprised—both by the angel and by his message! But she believed what Gabriel said and went on to voice one of the greatest poems of praise to God in the whole Bible (Luke 1:46-55)!

Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective. When he found out Mary was pregnant, Joseph assumed she'd cheated on him. But then Joseph met an angel in a dream, who told him the baby's father was God himself.

* That is, the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 1, verse 18.

The angel told Joseph to call the baby Jesus (which means “God is salvation”) and explained, “For he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

This is a surprising twist.

The 1st-century Jews were waiting for someone to save them from the Romans. But the angel’s words suggested they had a bigger problem. In *Doctor Who*, the crack in Amy’s bedroom wall turned out to be a crack in the universe itself—a crack that was gnawing away at her family, her city, and her world. And according to the Bible, there’s a crack in our universe too—a crack that cuts us off from God and from each other, a crack that passes right through every human heart: a terrible crack called sin. According to the angel, this baby had come to save his people *from their sins*. He was the prophesied “Immanuel,” which means “God with us”—in the person of Jesus, God himself came to earth to make it possible for his people to be *with* him again (Matthew 1:22-23). This was Jesus’ mission: to bring sinful people back into God’s embrace.

Unlike the virgin birth of *Star Wars* character Anakin Skywalker, the Gospels don’t set Jesus’ birth long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away. They pin it to an actual time and place. This is no mythological account. But the precise dating is also not straightforward. Matthew and Luke both talk about Jesus being born during the reign of King Herod, who died in 4 BC. But Luke also claims that while Mary was pregnant, Joseph had to

report to his hometown—Bethlehem—to be registered as part of “the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:2). Based on the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, many scholars date the census under Quirinius to AD 6—roughly ten years after Herod’s death. Some critics say this means we can discount the Gospels as historical documents. Jesus being born in Bethlehem was significant, as Israel’s archetypal king—King David—had been born in Bethlehem too. So (the argument goes), Luke must have invented the census to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth.

But it’s not so simple. You see, by all the usual tests for historical documents, the Gospels stand up very well. We’ll look at this more in the next chapter, but in ancient historical terms, they were written very soon after the events they describe, and the manuscript evidence we have for the Gospels is extraordinarily good by comparison with other documents that we take to be historical.¹² What’s more, the Gospel writers show remarkable depth of local knowledge about the region and time in which Jesus lived.¹³ Scholars have proposed various potential solutions to the apparent discrepancy between what Luke and Josephus each say about the census. One is that Luke was right, and that Josephus was unaware of an earlier census.¹⁴ And when you think about it, if Luke had wanted to invent a reason to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for the birth, he could

have claimed something much less problematic than a census: like Joseph's favorite uncle inviting them to stay! So, we can't reasonably dismiss Luke's Gospel just because of this challenge.

Once they got to Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph didn't head to the best hotel in town, as would befit the birth of a King. Instead, Luke tells us that there was "no place for them in the inn," so Jesus ended up sleeping in a manger: an animal feeding trough (Luke 2:7). This doesn't have to mean he was born in a stable. It was not uncommon for village houses at that time to feature mangers. But the manger detail does show us that Jesus wasn't born into wealth and privilege: quite the reverse. Luke also tells us that an angel appeared to some local shepherds (who would have been seen as riffraff in that culture) to tell them that the Christ had been born and where to find him: in the aforementioned manger (Luke 2:8-20).

Matthew introduces more impressive visitors. Wise men from the east had been led by a star to Jerusalem. Rather tactlessly, they asked the then current Roman-sanctioned king of the Jews—King Herod—"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). Herod was troubled and asked the leading Jewish theologians where the Christ was meant to be born. They said Bethlehem. So, Herod dispatched these wise men to find Jesus, claiming that he wanted

to worship him as well. (In fact, Herod wanted to kill Jesus; he was quite happy with the existing king of the Jews, thank you very much!) The star went before the wise men, “until it came to rest over the place where the child was” (Matthew 2:9). When they found Jesus, they fell down and worshiped him, and they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). These three gifts led to the later Christmas tradition of calling these wise men “three kings.” That’s not what the Bible says. But Matthew does imply that these stargazers were outsiders in Israel. Jesus hadn’t come only for the Jewish people. He was worshiped by foreigners from the first.

There’s something very touching about this story of a divine child lying in a manger, heralded by angels and hated by rulers, but worshiped by both rich and poor, by fellow Jews and foreigners, by stargazing scholars and uneducated shepherds. It’s a lovely Yuletide tale for the kids—so long as you stop before Herod has all the boys under two years old in the region killed! But it’s also a story rooted in history.

So, despite being only five, my daughter wasn’t naïve to tell her friends that Santa isn’t real but that Jesus is. Even if we exclude the evidence of the Gospels, Jesus was undoubtedly a real person in history, and his birth, life, death, and claimed resurrection undeniably changed the world.