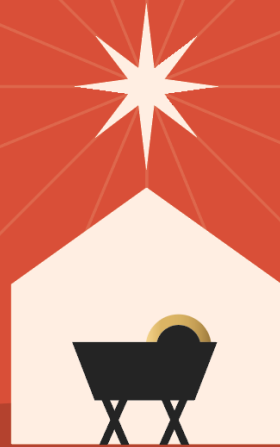


Nativity and beyond



THE CHRISTMAS STORY EXAMINED

Nativity and Beyond

Presenter's notes

The nativity is an **incredible story**: God, who cannot be seen, appears as a human. God cares enough *about* us to become one *of* us. Incredible indeed.

But this is **the issue** for many. To them the story is incredible – and not in a good way. Ask ten people in [insert the name of your village/town/city] about the boy in the manger, and statisticians will predict that four out of the ten are likely to declare, **Jesus never existed***. Never mind the Son of God, born of a virgin, serenaded by angels. No, what they mean is, the entire Jesus story is made up from start to finish. To 40 per cent of Brits, the Jesus story is the greatest hoax ever told.

* (Church of England survey, 2015)

The good news is – for once the majority, the 60 per cent, have got it right. Hardly any serious Bible scholar or historian doubts the existence of Jesus of Nazareth. There is, they say, simply too much **evidence**:

The four **Gospels** in the Bible. **Paul**, the Apostle. That makes five major, independent sources already. A lot, when you're dealing with ancient celebrities and their biographers. St Paul's letters were written about 20 years after Jesus. Compare that to two 'biographers' of Julius Caesar, Suetonius and Plutarch: they wrote about him a century after the events. The existence of Jesus and his followers is also acknowledged by **first century writers** who took no personal interest in Jesus whatsoever: Roman historian Tacitus, Jewish historian Josephus and Roman magistrate Pliny the Younger.

In other words, people who cared about Jesus as well as those who did not, friend and foe, wrote about him, not as a fictional character but a historical figure who had **made an impact** during his public ministry and was still making an impact, long after his crucifixion.

Going back to the nativity, did you know that about **97 per cent** of what the Gospel writers collectively say about Jesus is about **the man**? In other words, if we want to make sense of the nativity, we must look beyond it.

But, once again, how much can we know about Jesus' adult life? Christian or not, scholars widely agree that**:

** (Time permitting, consider using the longer version of the following five bullet points (see appendix below).)

- Jesus grew up in Nazareth
- He was baptised in the River Jordan by a firebrand nicknamed John the Baptist
- He became a public figure as he taught and healed people
- The Roman governor Pilate had Jesus crucified as a political troublemaker and ...
- Jesus' followers ended up telling people that he had risen from the dead.

In other words, the main headings of the Jesus story, from Bethlehem to Calvary, are widely acknowledged as historical facts.

Of course, the next question is, '**What does it all mean?**' This is where things get really interesting. But all we had time for now was the basic issue: if Jesus didn't exist, what's the point of asking about his significance?

So here's my invitation: when you leave this place, don't forget the all-important question: What's beyond the Nativity? What does it all mean? You may want to have a go at reading the New Testament. Start with the Gospel of Mark or Luke. Find out more about Jesus the adult. Find out why, year on year, Christians make such a fuss about the fact that *Christ is born in Bethlehem*.

Appendix

Longer version of the five bullet points (feel free to use these bullet points in place of the bullet points in the script if you have sufficient time):

- ***Jesus grew up in Nazareth ...***

When the Romans crucified Jesus, they fastened a sign to the cross, which read: *Jesus Nazarenus, Rex Judaeorum* (INRI) – Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Yet, neither Jesus nor his followers ever used the title ‘King of the Jews’. That was a Roman thing. In other words, the Roman authorities misunderstood Jesus’ true mission and accused him of trying to stage a political coup and lead his people against Rome. The sign on the cross included a reference to the place where Jesus had grown up: Nazareth.

- ***Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist ...***

Even scholars who are not Christians acknowledge that this must have happened. People asked John to baptise them as a sign of turning away from aimless living and devoting their lives to God. If the Gospel writers had made the story up, surely they would have told it the other way round: Jesus would have baptised John! Paradoxically, the fact that they included the counter-intuitive and even embarrassing account of a mere mortal baptising the Son of God makes the account historically plausible.

- ***Jesus became a public figure as he taught and healed people ...***

Religious teachers (rabbis) were common in Jesus’ day, as were faith healers. Therefore, historians take the Gospel record of Jesus the teacher and healer at face value.

- ***The Roman governor Pilate had Jesus crucified as a political troublemaker ...***

According to Roman sources, Pilate, the Governor of Judaea, ruled with an iron fist and got rid of potential rebels without batting an eyelid. Meanwhile, Jesus’ clash with the Jewish religious leaders is equally plausible, because his teachings challenged some of their core beliefs. The crucifixion is not only theologically significant, but also historically credible.

- ***Jesus’ followers ended up telling people that he had risen from the dead ...***

Historians agree that the obvious thing for Jesus’ followers would have been to disband after he was crucified, and to find themselves another leader. The fact that they didn’t is remarkable; but that’s another story ...