
Facts & the First Christmas, part 1

DAVE BAST

For most of us, Christmas is one of the happiest times of the year. For all of our complaining about the busyness of the X-mas season, and despite all the commercialism that has crept in, we have not yet quite managed to destroy the wonder and joy of this holy feast – this season when we celebrate the birth of God’s greatest gift of all, the savior, Jesus Christ; but did it really happen the way the Bible says it did, or is the Christmas story we know and love simply a fairytale? Stay tuned as acclaimed historian Dr. Paul Maier joins me to separate fact from fantasy as we explore the story of the first Christmas.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today is Dr. Paul Maier. Paul is Emeritus Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University. He has been a guest before on our *Groundwork* program, and it is wonderful to have you back. Thanks for coming, Paul.

PAUL MAIER

Great to be back with you, Dave.

DAVE BAST

So, I bought one of your books and I read it in preparation for this program (actually, I have read your books before), but the name you gave it is *In the Fullness of Time*, and that is a wonderful phrase, of course, from Galatians 4, where Paul talks about how in the fullness of time, God sent his Son into the world. What is it that you think made this time the right time for Christ to come?

PAUL MAIER

It’s particularly fascinating, Dave, to see that if Jesus were born according to human calculations only – if he had been born one hundred years earlier when Rome was in the midst of civil wars, you could not have had the peace in the Mediterranean Sea areas that were so perfect for the advancement of Christianity. There would have been all kinds of civil tumult in all the cities and Paul could not have taken his mission journeys and so forth. There are so many reasons that this was the perfect time. Augustus was the emperor. He had stopped the civil wars. He was solely in charge. The Romans had now policed the sea lanes and the highways, and so it was just an ideal time for the spread of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

And, you know, besides the government factor, and more ease of movement with Roman roads and so on, Greek language and culture really dominated the whole eastern end of the Mediterranean – even Rome itself, didn’t it? So there was a common language.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, you had a perfect international language at this time – a trading language. It used to be Aramaic, now it was common, commercial Greek. Later it would be Latin; later it would be French, and today it is English, of course. The common international language in those days was *koine* (common) Greek, and this is the language in which the New Testament was written, so it is a perfect medium.

DAVE BAST

So, for example, you mentioned Paul and the missionary journeys; he could go anywhere and preach in Greek and just about everyone would understand him.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, they would. Greek was useful even in the western Mediterranean, where Latin supposedly was supreme.

DAVE BAST

Okay, so we have these historical factors that seem to be lining up; probably, really, in God's plan it was the perfect time, too; that is what Paul is getting at from the standpoint of the whole prophetic history of the Old Testament preparing; but we don't exactly know when that full time was, do we? We don't know the year in which Jesus was born; I presume it was not zero or the year one?

PAUL MAIER

There never was a year zero, Dave. You go from 1 BC to 1 AD, yes.

DAVE BAST

All right; that makes sense.

PAUL MAIER

We wish we knew. There are several clues. We commonly say that Jesus should have been born in the year 1; our calendar is based on that; but actually, Jesus was born according to best calculation somewhere between June and December of 5 BC – five years before himself, you might say.

DAVE BAST

Yes, how do you get that, then?

PAUL MAIER

The reason is, our calendar calculation. Today our BC/AD system is based on the calculations of a monk named Dionysius the Little about 525 AD. Pope John I decided that it is really kind of strange to name the years after the founding of the city of Rome. All dates before this were AUC – *ab urba condita* – from the founding of the city...

DAVE BAST

Meaning Rome – from the legendary beginnings of Rome back in 700-something BC according to our...

PAUL MAIER

Why not pivot it about the birth of Christ instead? Great; so, who knew when Jesus was born? Nobody, except this little monk from Scythia – southwestern Russia; and he calculated that Jesus was born 753 years after the founding of Rome. In fact, he was born 748 years after the founding of Rome.

DAVE BAST

And how do we know that?

PAUL MAIER

Well, from the recalculation on the basis of crucial chronological points; for example, the death of Herod the Great. Herod died about April 1, 4 BC. So, if Herod is going to have something to do with the visit of the Magi, we are going to have to have Jesus born before that.

DAVE BAST

And Herod is the king, of course, in the Christmas story in Matthew.

PAUL MAIER

Indeed; he is heavily involved in both Luke's version and Matthew's version.

DAVE BAST

Okay. So, all right, let's say 5 BC. We are pretty sure of that, right, historically speaking?

PAUL MAIER

Some say 4 BC, but you only get January, February or March of 4 BC in which Jesus could be born.

DAVE BAST

Okay, right; so, we've got...

PAUL MAIER

You've got too much going on: You've got the visit of the Magi at least 40 days after Christmas; you've got the flight to Egypt and so forth; and I think that is kind of hard to crowd into those three months.

DAVE BAST

So, okay; I will accept 5 – that is good enough for me; but what about December 25th?

PAUL MAIER

This came late, actually. The earliest celebration of Christmas in the early Church was Epiphany, January 6th; but it was another pope about 354 AD – that late – who decided that Christians ought to do something about this great, end-of-the-year festival celebrating the fact that the winter solstice had come – what do you know? The sun is not going to go further south and drop off the earth – it is going to come back. So they had a big celebration at the end of the year, and it was full of all kinds of carousal and whatever else; and so, to give a Christian spin on that he said: Why don't we celebrate the birth of the Son of God, not the son of nature? And so, four days, then, after the winter solstice comes December 25th. Jesus *could* have been born that day, but as I said, anywhere between June and December 31st will work.

DAVE BAST

So, a lot of what we think of as belonging to Christmas actually came from the Roman pagan feast of Saturnalia, which they used to celebrate sort of the dead of winter and the hope for the return of spring.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, the Saturnalia festival was there. There was a lot of exchange of gifts. Masters exchanged places with slaves; a lot of greenery and that kind of thing; so some of those trappings carried through. So, there was not only the Saturnalia, but the sol invictus festival – this unconquerable sun – what do you know; it is coming back.

DAVE BAST

Yes; a lot of feasting and carousing and parties.

PAUL MAIER

I think Christians sometimes... and non-Christians alike, you know; they say: it is only a pagan festival. The Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate it because of that. Hey, look, I am always pleased that if a pagan festival is Christianized, great; celebrate it. Who cares about the roots?

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; why not celebrate? We've got even more to celebrate, which is kind of the attitude that they took...

PAUL MAIER

Even down to the commercialization that everybody decries in our department stores; hey, I am proud to hear carols going through the secular merchandise – not a problem.

DAVE BAST

Okay; I can buy that. Incidentally, you mentioned January 6th, which is Epiphany, and many, many Christians, in the West at least, do not make much out of Epiphany; you know, they are kind of hung over from Christmas and they say: Let's get on with New Year's Day and the rest of the year; but this is the reason why the Eastern Church and the Western Church celebrate Christmas on different days, right?

PAUL MAIER

That is also because of the Julian calendar, which is still used by the Eastern Church. We have the Gregorian calendar. This is why even Easter celebration, which they agree now finally, ever since the Council of Nicaea, should be on a Sunday; before that the Eastern Church insisted it should be a *date* not a *day*, you get it? But even though they agree that it should be the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox, nevertheless, because of the Julian calendar, you still get it about a month later sometimes.

DAVE BAST

Okay; so much for the dating then; but let's look at the details of this story – the place and the event itself – after we take a short break.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me today is Dr. Paul Maier, professor of ancient history and expert in all things Christmas; and we are talking about the Christmas story, today specifically in the Gospel of Luke. I won't read it because I suspect it is familiar to just about everybody who is listening here; but it starts out – Luke does – in Chapter 2 with a reference to Roman history; specifically, the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus: In the days of Caesar Augustus a decree went out that all the world should be taxed, and so on and so forth. Do we know anything about that from history? Did that actually happen? Is Luke sort of making this up? Some critics have complained that he gets his details wrong.

PAUL MAIER

No, he did not make it up. This is a beautiful illustration of Luke's historical method. What Luke loves to do is always throw an anchor out into the mainstream of Greco-Roman history to point out to his readers that this is not a myth – this is not some fairytale – this is real stuff. This is what actually took place. Now, all of his readers would have known about the great Augustus. This fellow ruled for 44 years, as a matter of fact; and he was probably the greatest of the Roman emperors; too bad he was greatest and there were not more, but he was the first one.

DAVE BAST

He started out as Julius Caesar's nephew...

PAUL MAIER

Grand nephew.

DAVE BAST

Grand nephew, and then Caesar, who had no children – legitimate, at least – made him his heir, and when he finally came out on top amidst all of the Roman civil war... Did he take the name Augustus or was that hung on him, because that is kind of a compliment, right?

PAUL MAIER

No, his original name was Octavian, which means number eight. Not exactly the most dignified name.

DAVE BAST

Yes, not inspired.

PAUL MAIER

No; it was the Roman Senate; they asked him: Now, we cannot call you Octavian anymore, what would be a good name for yourself? And so, they decided on Reverend – yes, Reverend!

DAVE BAST

That is what Augustus means.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, that is what Augustus means.

DAVE BAST

Reverend Caesar.

PAUL MAIER

Yes, there you go.

DAVE BAST

Well, he did make himself the high priest, too, didn't he, of Rome?

PAUL MAIER

On his way up, sure, he touched base with that office. It was a very political office: the Pontifex Maximus – the highest priest – yes.

DAVE BAST

And he also began to style himself *Imperator* – commander – emperor.

PAUL MAIER

Imperator is the word for emperor, but it means really more of a victorious commander after a victorious battle, the troops would say: Ave Imperator.

DAVE BAST

Hail...

PAUL MAIER

Hail, exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, this is the most real of real historical figures, at least as far as the secular world would be concerned.

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely; and they all knew – any reader at that time would know about the censuses that Caesar took – Octavian took – I should say Augustus; let's agree on that name, okay. Before he died, he listed the 36 greatest accomplishments as far as he was concerned during his administration. Point #8: I took a census of the empire three times. And so, yes, the Romans loved censuses; yes, they regularly took them. In neighboring Egypt every 14 years they took a census. We have a census document, as a matter of fact, in

neighboring Egypt that comes only two or three generations after Jesus. It is now in the Hatcher Library at the University of Michigan. Every Christmas they bring it out. A fellow named Horos consigns himself and his family to this census procedure. What is so neat about this document is it is not a copy of a copy of a copy like everything else we have from the ancient world; it is the original document, yes.

DAVE BAST

It is the original – a census document from ancient Rome under Caesar.

PAUL MAIER

That is right – neighboring Egypt.

DAVE BAST

Do we know that he required people to go back to their ancestral home?

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely; this fellow named Horos, and that is H-o-r-o-s, named for the falcon god of Egypt, not as in Horace Greeley or something like that, okay? Yes, he goes to his hometown of Bacchias along the Nile there, and he registers himself and his family and his two sons. It is really very, very interesting. It is the kind of document that Joseph would have had to fill out in Bethlehem.

DAVE BAST

All the more stunning when you realize that almost nothing survived from the ancient world – nothing documentary. It was so fragile; you know, written on papyrus...

PAUL MAIER

Papyrus... it will flake off and parchment will corrupt; but this, for some reason, survived. If these ancient documents are sealed, they will survive. The Dead Sea scrolls, for example.

DAVE BAST

They survived.

PAUL MAIER

There we have a marvelous example of documents that have survived over 2,000 years. So, if they are sealed they don't decay because of the mixture of dampness...

DAVE BAST

And oxygen, right.

PAUL MAIER

Right.

DAVE BAST

Okay; so, Joseph makes his way to Bethlehem with Mary. You suggest in one of your books that perhaps he took Mary with him – she didn't have to go, but given her pregnancy and the rather questionable circumstances surrounding it... We will save that for the next program, but maybe to spare her from being alone in Nazareth, he took Mary along.

PAUL MAIER

Well, don't forget also Mary was a pious woman and Joseph knew the prophecy of Micah, that it is Bethlehem where the Messiah has got to be born.

DAVE BAST

And at this point, he knows that she is carrying that very special child.

PAUL MAIER

Right; and so, let's not give fodder to the nosey neighbors in Nazareth about how many months she was pregnant. So let's go down there, fulfilling Micah's prophecy, and the other one, kill two birds with one stone.

DAVE BAST

Okay; they come on in riding on a donkey – traditional view...

PAUL MAIER

Traditional view, yes.

DAVE BAST

That could be.

PAUL MAIER

Well, if she is in advanced pregnancy, it would be easier for her to do that than to walk...

DAVE BAST

Yes, to walk the 80 miles or 90 miles, whatever it was.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Now, you know... no room in the inn – we all know that story, too. What are we supposed to picture here, like a Motel 8 or a Holiday Inn or...? It probably was not that exactly, huh?

PAUL MAIER

Well, I think there are parallels, you know; in summer nowadays if you had not made advanced reservations, you know, what happens? No room, no room, no room; no vacancy, no vacancy, no vacancy; and then the next night there is vacancy; so this could well have been a case of not phoning ahead – no, kidding – 2,000 years ago, okay; and so they arrive in Bethlehem without advanced preparation, and therefore, the place is probably full of members of the House of David there, all coming back to Bethlehem for the registration.

DAVE BAST

So, it is some kind of traveler's hostel, you think.

PAUL MAIER

I think so... I think so. Now, there is an alternate explanation out, which points out that Luke uses the term "upper room" – *kataluma* – also for the upper room where the Eucharist began, you will recall; and so, Ken Bailey's idea – Professor Ken Bailey – is the idea that Mary and Joseph would not have had to go to a stable, but rather kind of the garage under the house of relatives that would have provided shelter for them because there was no room in the upper room, only in the garage, so to speak.

DAVE BAST

The guest room...

PAUL MAIER

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, the guest room was full of Joseph's relatives. They end up where the animals are being kept down below; and it is actually a cave, not a traditional wooden stable?

PAUL MAIER

Well, this is one reason why I don't follow that idea because we do have the earliest reference in Justin Martyr – now, don't forget who Justin was. He was one of...

DAVE BAST

Well, just so... Of course, I remember Justin Martyr, but in case someone else might not remember Justin, when did he live?

PAUL MAIER

He is a wonderful defender of the faith. About 150 AD is his time; therefore, only three generations or so after the first Christmas. He was born in Nablus in Samaria, next door to Judea, so he would have been, of course, totally involved in the local traditions in regard to Jesus. He said that Jesus was born in a cave or grotto or cavern in Bethlehem, and the Bethlehem escarpment is full of these. The word *stable* is not used in the Gospels; nevertheless, we do know it was a stable or a grotto that was used as a stable because there was a manger there – a feeding trough for animals; and so I partially agree with Dr. Bailey's idea, but I think it was simply a typical sheltered area in the escarpment there in Bethlehem where the nativity took place.

DAVE BAST

Well, I want to talk a little bit more about that, but first we need to take another break.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast, and today I am joined by Dr. Paul Maier. We have been having a wonderful conversation about the Christmas story, and specifically, the historical details that Luke includes. It really happened in time and space. He ties it to the Roman emperor Augustus during his reign and to the little town of Bethlehem; and we were just talking, Paul, before the break about the place where Jesus was born, a grotto or a cave or a hollowed out place where animals were kept, where there was a stone manger for them to feed; and there is, of course, a famous church in Bethlehem that purports to enshrine that grotto. I have never been to Israel so I have never seen it, but you have.

PAUL MAIER

High time; you better go.

DAVE BAST

I know; I know I should. What do you think? Does X mark the spot, because there literally is a spot there where they say here is the place.

PAUL MAIER

Dave, I have got to confess, this is a fascinating item because the first seven or eight times I was in Bethlehem I was very skeptical. I knew Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but to identify a particular place – how do we know? So I was kind of skeptical about it until I examined all the evidence, and believe it or not, there is a lot of authenticity there. Let me tell you why. When you are trying to go back to the Holy Land and decide did this really happen here? Is this spot authentic or not? There are a couple of rules that you use. First of all, how far back does the paper trail go identifying this as the place?

DAVE BAST

So, who first said in writing: Here it is. Yes.

PAUL MAIER

How long has the Church regarded this?

DAVE BAST

Was it 400 years later, then problems; but if it goes way back...

PAUL MAIER

Exactly. This is one of the reasons I cannot get excited over the shroud of Turin. Everybody thinks this could be the burial shroud of Jesus – maybe it is, but I am really not interested in it because the paper trail on the shroud goes back only six centuries.

Now, in the case of the Church of the Nativity, let's go back 17 centuries for openers, okay? We have the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine. He wants to hallow the place where Jesus was born. His engineers, his architects, interviewed Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem as to where Jesus was born. Did he know? And he said: Of course, it is a living tradition; and so he showed them exactly where the church ought to go...

DAVE BAST

People have passed this down for 300 years; "Of course we know," unbroken.

PAUL MAIER

Absolutely; and today you can see in Bethlehem the very mosaic on the floor of the Constantinian church that he built. It was rebuilt by Justinian 200 years later, but nevertheless, the original floor there is Constantine's time. So, that is kind of thrilling; but now let's go back further. How about Origen, the greatest mind in Eastern Christianity, as you know. He lived the last part of his life in the Holy Land, and he said whenever he went to Bethlehem, even the pagans there were willing to tell anyone who would listen where the great Jesus was born. Okay? Now, that is in the 200's AD. Now, let's go back again to Justin, who says he could point out in Bethlehem the grotto where Jesus was born. So, what do you find under the high altar of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem the grotto of the nativity 18 feet down. It really fulfills all the parameters of these clues; and so, there is a lot of truth there actually.

DAVE BAST

Which is pretty amazing – pretty astonishing; but let's bring it down, now, to our faith. You know, someone has said that politicians like all religions because they maybe keep people peaceful; and skeptics reject all religions because they think they are all false; and the average person says, well, they are all the same; but, they are not really all the same, are they? There is one faith that says this actually happened in history. This is not false.

PAUL MAIER

Exactly. You know, one of my seminars is called: Christianity and the competition, in which we compare holy books – our holy book with the holy book of all of the other world religious systems, whether it is Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, Judaism... You just name it all the way through. There is only one other faith which has a holy book that comes close to ours for authenticity; that would be our parent Judaism.

DAVE BAST

Right.

PAUL MAIER

They have a holy book called The Hebrew Bible. We call it the Old Testament, okay? I think so many people, Dave, have the idea that because these other holy books are full of myths and fantasies and fables, gods and demigods and multiplicity of deities, they think that all religions are really based on myth; and they think the same about the Holy Bible. Dead wrong!

DAVE BAST

Right.

PAUL MAIER

I was always so concerned to do the same thing Luke did; that is, to compare sacred – the material inside the scriptures – with the whole secular context; and I am telling you, you can build all kinds of bridges between the two there. So many points of tangency between the two, showing that this really happened.

DAVE BAST

Thanks very much, Paul, for joining us. Dr. Paul Maier has been my guest on *Groundwork*. Don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/facts-the-first-christmas-part-1>

Printed on February 22, 2025