

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

NMAR: You teach this class on the History of Christmas this semester. How did that come together? What drew you to Christmas studies?

Landau: Yeah, I mean, I think I had been sort of playing around with the idea of doing a class like this for quite a long time. I mean, I would say way back into my days as a doctoral student, as a sort of a New Testament/early Christianity person, my main area of study and concentration was on infancy narratives – traditions about Jesus's birth and childhood. And I was particularly interested in the apocryphal traditions about that.

I was also interested in the New Testament stories of Jesus's birth and Matthew and Luke, but I was and am also very interested in the apocryphal literature that wasn't included in the Bible. And so, the thought was to maybe do a class on the history of Christmas that would have a significant focus on the ancient material and then show how that evolves into the Christmas story that we know today.

At the time, I didn't know as much about the scholarship on the evolution of Christmas and the modern celebration of Christmas. But, I mean, I'm certainly a fan of Christmas. Like, that was one of the things that my wife and I, when we first met, when we were first dating, had in common – we were big dorks for Christmas. So we liked decorating the house, we liked the special foods, we liked Christmas music, all that good stuff. So yeah, it was definitely something that I had in mind for quite a while.

NMAR: Christmas has a 2,000-year history, give or take. So, when you talk about Christmas with your fellow scholars, or with lay people, or with students, what are people usually most surprised by?

Landau: One thing I might potentially take issue with is the idea that Christmas has been around for 2,000 years. Strictly speaking, you're not wrong insofar as Jesus was born approximately 2,000 years ago, and Christmas ends up being the day that is sort of marked out as his birth. But you could say Christmas is both younger than 2,000 years and that it's way, way older. I'll give you an example of both of those.

Even though Jesus is born in the first century, the earliest definitive evidence we have of Christians celebrating his birthday on December 25th isn't until the year 336 CE in Rome. So, it's more than 300 years after Jesus's death that we actually have, like, the first clear evidence that this is when Christians first started celebrating Jesus's birth on December 25th.

There do appear to be some Christians who celebrated Jesus's birth a little earlier than that, right around the year 200. We have reports about this from Egypt, but interestingly enough, those dates for Jesus's birthday are in April or May. So strictly speaking, in terms of the celebration of Christmas connected with Jesus's birth, that's more like 1,800 or 1,700 years old.

The way that you can also then say that Christmas is much older than that is the fact that it is a midwinter festival, and particularly in the northern hemisphere, people have been

marking time and having some sort of big blowout celebration in the early part of winter for at least 2,000 years — maybe even further back than that. So it gets a little tricky in Europe because, in terms of the pre-Christian evidence, we've got some evidence from Rome in the celebration of a holiday known as Saturnalia.

We've also got, in northern Europe, the celebration of something called Yule, either J-U-L or Y-U-L, and it's, of course, what we also then refer to as Yule today, which is kind of a synonym for Christmas. So both of those seem to have predated Christmas, and the other thing that's important to realize is that, today with our modern calendar, we celebrate the winter solstice, like, basically the first day of winter, which astronomically speaking is the day where there's the shortest amount of daylight and the longest amount of nighttime. The sun is the lowest, and it kind of gets just up and is pretty low most of the day and then sets down.

That's the longest night of the year, essentially, and the nice thing about that, looking forward to spring, is once you get past the winter solstice, every day thereafter has a little bit more daylight to it. So today our winter solstice is celebrated on December 21st, but in the ancient Roman calendar, it was actually celebrated on December 25th. So you had Jesus's birth being commemorated on the very same day as the winter solstice, when it was the darkest day of the year, but every day thereafter got a little bit lighter.

So, if you're celebrating somebody who is claimed by his followers to be the light of the world, or the son of righteousness as it's sometimes called, having a birthday on the winter solstice makes a lot of sense. So there seem to have been much broader celebrations of a kind of winter solstice, or maybe a little bit earlier in November, depending on which northern European culture we're talking about. And the same sorts of things end up being done in those festivals.

So there's a lot of food and drink to sort of binge on in excess, because early winter is when you would slaughter the animals. So you didn't have as many animals to feed during the lean months of winter. So all of a sudden you'd have all this fresh meat.

It would be when the harvest had come in. So you'd have all sorts of fresh produce, and it was the perfect time to make alcohol from them, or sweets, or things like that. So what we see as a sort of a characteristic of a lot of these midwinter festivals is sort of binging on food, just stuffing yourself silly.

And that still goes on today. People sort of indulge themselves around the holidays with cookies or roast beef or whatever. And part of that just goes back to the fact that this was a harvest, this was a sort of a clear turning point in the agrarian calendar where you harvested everything, and you slaughtered your animals, and you might as well eat it while it's all fresh, because otherwise you're going to just have to salt it and turn it into beef jerky, and it's not going to be quite as good.

So other things that they would do to sort of make that dark time of the year more tolerable is they'd have lots of light, whether it was bonfires or candles or things like that. They would have big parties. They would prominently display evergreen trees and plants, because those stay green year-round and sort of point to the fact that at some point this cold and darkness is going to go away.

One famous historian of Christmas, a guy named Bruce Forbes, who taught at a university in Iowa, has noted that a lot of what people love about Christmas doesn't really have anything to do with baby Jesus in the manger. It's just the sort of the general things that people do at that time of year; they're the predictable characteristics of midwinter festivals.

NMAR: As a New Testament scholar, what do you think is the message of the Christmas story as it's depicted in Matthew and Luke, and what does Christmas mean for us today?

Landau: So, yeah, on the message of the New Testament first stories in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke, I mean, one thing as a New Testament historian that I always have to emphasize — and it probably drives a lot of my students crazy — is that Matthew and Luke's stories of Jesus's birth are fundamentally different. They are not telling the same story. Yes, eventually you get a sort of amalgamation of both of them, a fusion that we call the Christmas story, and that's the thing you'll see, Christmas pageants put on and things like that.

But if you actually read Matthew carefully and Luke carefully, you realize they're not narrating the same stuff. Luke has the census where Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the census to pay their taxes. That's where Jesus is born and laid in a manger. It's where you get the angels that appear to the shepherds out in the fields. Luke is where you get the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and announcing to her that she is going to give birth to a son. So that's all in Luke.

In Matthew, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant and decides to divorce her quietly, and it's only an angel appearing to Joseph that explains to him, "Oh, you shouldn't actually divorce her because the child is from the Holy Spirit." In Matthew's gospel, you have the wise men show up, the magi, with their star, and they're looking for the king of the Jews. You have King Herod, who's really a pretty malevolent, bloodthirsty king who seems to have kind of stamped out any rivals to his throne, and the wise men sort of blunder in there and say, "Okay, where's the new king of the Jews that's been born? Not you, not the old king of the Jews, but the new king." And Herod's kind of troubled about all this, and as Matthew says, when Herod's troubled, everybody else in Jerusalem gets nervous, too.

So that's Matthew's story. And the magi end up not going back to Herod because an angel warns them, and then Herod goes and tries to kill all the kids in Bethlehem, and then Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus flee to Egypt.

So the stories are quite different, and the best way to understand the key difference is to see that both Matthew and Luke, when it comes to the question of, okay, how was Jesus, how did it happen that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he grew up in Nazareth, in Galilee, this little dinky village 80 miles north of Bethlehem? Well, according to Luke's story, which forms more of the core of our modern Christmas story, the reason that he's born in Bethlehem but grows up in Nazareth is that his parents live in Nazareth, but they only go to Bethlehem because of the census. And the census as presented in Luke doesn't actually seem to be the way that the Romans did censuses or taxation. Luke says that, for this particular census, everybody had to go back to their own ancestral home. Since Joseph is

from the line of King David, he goes back to Bethlehem, which is kind of the birthplace of King David.

But, of course, they're only there to pay their taxes, and that just happens to be when Jesus is born, and then they go back to Nazareth. So that's how Luke explains the Bethlehem-Nazareth conundrum. The way that Matthew does it, it's a little harder to understand, but if you read his gospel carefully, what he seems to be saying is that Jesus is born in Bethlehem because that's where his parents live, because when the wise men show up, it says that their star stood over the house where the child was.

So, they have a house that they live in. The reason they left Bethlehem is because Herod's trying to kill them, trying to kill the baby, and so they flee to Egypt, and *then* after Herod dies, they want to return to Bethlehem, but now Herod's son is in charge, so an angel tells Joseph to relocate up to Nazareth. So both Matthew and Luke's stories do say that Jesus is born in Bethlehem but grows up in Nazareth, but they have totally different, and I would say contradictory, explanations of how that actually happens.

So that's one thing is to be aware of those differences, and once you have those differences in mind, then it's helpful to think about, "Okay, what's the overall point of the stories that Matthew and Luke tell?" And I would emphasize that Matthew is communicating certain kinds of insights with his infancy narrative, and Luke is doing different things. So Matthew is a very Jewish gospel. It sees Jesus as being kind of a new Moses figure, and you see sort of some hints of the Moses story in the account of Jesus's birth.

So in the same way that Moses, when Moses is a baby, his life is threatened by a murderous king who's trying to stamp out the Israelites, that's also what happens to Jesus. He's threatened by a murderous king. You see lots of emphasis in Matthew's story about how certain events in the birth of Jesus fulfill scriptures from the Hebrew Bible. So he's very invested in the idea that events in Jesus's life were sort of foretold or hinted at in the Hebrew scriptures. So that's what I would say is sort of Matthew's point, is that Jesus is thoroughly to be understood as the culmination of Jewish history.

Luke, on the other hand, is probably not Jewish. He's probably a Gentile. I would say that there are a couple of themes that he emphasizes in the Christmas story. One would be that Jesus is born against the backdrop of Roman power. The very thing that causes Jesus to be born in Bethlehem is because you have a Roman emperor who says, "Okay, everybody has to go back to their own ancestral homes to pay their taxes."

But Luke is kind of ambivalent about Roman power. The author seems to view Jesus as being more or less in direct competition with the Roman emperors as political rulers, but also as individuals who are regarded as divine beings or gods. So that's part of it. The other part of it is that Luke seems to have a lot of emphasis in his infancy narrative on Jesus sort of emerging out of poverty.

So you have, for instance, in Mary's song, the Magnificat, which is a song that she sings after the angel Gabriel appears to her. There's all sorts of stuff about, "You're casting the mighty down from their thrones and raising up the poor and the lowly." You've also got the very first outsiders, according to Luke, who hear about the birth of Jesus are the shepherds.

Shepherds were considered pretty low class in Israel. There's even some evidence that shepherds couldn't even testify in a court of law. Their testimony wasn't considered reliable enough.

So you've got some emphasis on Jesus sort of emerging out of poverty. When he's born, he's laid in a manger, basically a trough for animals. And Jesus being on the side of the poor and oppressed, that's a theme that we see throughout Luke's gospel. And Jesus being sort the fulfillment of Jewish history and Jewish prophecy, that's something we see throughout Matthew's gospel.

NMAR: If you'll allow me to do a couple follow-ups on that, as a devil's advocate. You mentioned that basically scholars don't think that the census and the taxes situation really worked that way, in historical reality, as depicted in the opening to Luke's gospel. Why do scholars think that that's not historically plausible? And, I mean, why couldn't it be possible that it's, "Oh, that's how it worked that one year?"

Landau: Yeah, yeah, no, great, great questions. Okay, so we know enough about Roman taxation policy, because we've got lots of documents, lots of edicts about them collecting taxes.

There are a couple different things that stand out about the way that the Romans generally did this. One is that they don't conduct empire-wide taxation, and that's one thing that Luke claims is being done, that the Emperor Augustus decided to tax the entire empire, that he did all of this at one time.

All of our other evidence from ancient Roman documents indicates that taxation was done on a province-by-province basis. Depending on what the schedule was of the governors – the governor of any given province – they would do taxation whenever it made sense for them. So it tended to be sort of less centralized that way. It wasn't as if everybody in the Roman Empire was getting taxed at the same time.

The other thing is that, just on a logical level, the idea that everyone would have to go back to their own ancestral home for the purposes of paying their taxes just seems really far-fetched. It's just a logistical nightmare. What do you do for folks who live in Egypt, who live in Alexandria, but they were born in Rome, or they were born in mainland Greece, or whatever; do they have to go all the way back across the Mediterranean just for the purpose of paying their taxes? And so, what we see is that the Romans would send around the military, send around tax collectors, and they would at least come to people's homes and villages. You had to pay your taxes to the Romans, but they at least had the consideration to come to you and collect the money, as opposed to making everybody kind of arbitrarily go to wherever their families were from.

So it just doesn't make any logical sense *unless* you're trying to get somebody like Jesus born in a particular place, like Bethlehem, that he doesn't actually appear to have lived in. So, those are the issues.

NMAR: You mentioned the extra-biblical evidence. What is that evidence?

Landau: So, yeah, I mean, it would be from a number of different places.

Some of it certainly is included in papyri that we've discovered from Egypt. So, in the papyri, there would certainly be evidence of taxation practices, and how that was done in Egypt, and that would be specific to the Egyptian situation, but you can, at least to a certain degree, extrapolate from some of how that's done. There are collections of Roman law.

There are the accounts of historians that will talk about this or that taxation period, particularly if there were any revolts or resistance to the taxation. Inscriptions, inscriptions might say something like "This statue of the emperor was paid for with the taxation revenues of this city," or something like that. So, yeah, you'd find it in a number of different written records.

NMAR: You mentioned how the stories of Luke and Matthew are essentially contradictory. They're doing two different things, but if you were to interview two eyewitnesses to the JFK assassination, you'd probably come up with two different stories. So, why can't they work together?

Landau: Yeah, I mean, the problem is trying to figure out how you get Jesus from, born in Bethlehem, but grow up in Nazareth. And part of the challenge is that, while some people moved around, a lot people, particularly lower-class individuals, lived in the same villages for generations. Like, they just didn't move around a whole lot.

So Mary and Joseph's family, particularly if they were both from Nazareth, they'd probably lived there for quite some period of time. And what some folks have tried to do, and what some students have done, when I raise these issues in my Intro to New Testament classes, they say, "Well, is it possible that both of them could be right, that Jesus was born during the census, went to Bethlehem because of the census, but then was there some other time when the Magi showed up, and they had to flee from Herod?" I mean, you can do it, but it involves a *lot* of back and forth.

Is it absolutely, logically impossible? Not necessarily, but it requires a lot more sort of back and forth than we've certainly got evidence for. In order to come up with a sort of scenario where Jesus is, basically what you would have to do, because what Matthew tells you about the Magi is that they show up when Jesus is two.

So that's an interesting piece of information. So essentially what you would have to do is say that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, that Mary became pregnant, that they had to go down to Bethlehem for the census. That's where Jesus was born.

Then you'd have to presuppose that they went back to Nazareth because that's what they usually do after the census, as Luke reports them doing. Then you would have to assume that at some point, between when Jesus is born and when he's two years old, that they'd say, "Hey, Bethlehem's a cute little town. You've got family back there, Joseph. Maybe we should go back there." So you would have to posit that they then move back there, which is something that Matthew and Luke don't tell us about, so that they're there when the Magi show up, when Jesus is two years old. And then they'd have to flee, and then they end up back in Nazareth.

So you could do it, but it would be, I mean, to compare it to the JFK assassination, it ends up sounding a little bit like the magic bullet theory. Where all of a sudden you've got, at least for skeptics of the traditional assassination, Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, you've got to make sense of this bullet that seems to be going all over the place. And there are ways that you can iron that out, but certainly it requires a lot of back and forth.

NMAR: What do you find most fascinating about Christmas as we celebrate it here in the United States and its history?

Landau: Yeah, a couple different things. One is, certainly when I'm teaching the class, students tend to be shocked at how different Christmas was even just a couple hundred years ago. So one of the things that you see a lot of the celebration of Christmas in the early modern period — and by the early modern period I mean like 1600 to 1800 — what we see a lot is that it's not a domestic holiday. It's not a family-oriented, kids-centered holiday.

It's basically a time of year where people get really, really drunk, and act out, and behave in sort of transgressive ways that they wouldn't normally behave in the rest of the year. And so in Puritan New England, we've got a number of reports of essentially roving mobs of young men who, during the holiday season, would go to their wealthy neighbors and bang on their doors and insist that their neighbors provide them with their finest food and finest drink. It was essentially forcing your neighbors under duress to throw a party for you.

And you might wonder, “Well, why in the world did their rich neighbors go along with this?” Well, there was sort of a general expectation at that time of year that this was a time of role reversal, and that this was a time that at least the poor people thought this was the time of year where they could really expect to get all of the trappings, all of the luxuries of the wealthy people. And part of the reason that the rich went along with that is that it was like, okay, if you put up with this craziness around the holidays, then the rest of the year is fairly quiet. And you don't have the sort of resentment of the fact that you have way more wealth, way more resources, way nicer things than most of the poor people who work for you or are in the same town as you or things like that.

Because this was a holiday that involved a fair amount of drunkenness and sort of behaving badly, the Puritans were unsurprisingly actually quite anti-Christmas. They also believed that there wasn't really sufficient evidence in the Bible itself to celebrate Christmas because they were almost like biblical literalists. The Bible doesn't say anywhere when Jesus's birth is. And so they were essentially thought that there was no biblical basis for celebrating it on December 25th.

Even if this was supposed to be commemorating the birth of Jesus, the Puritans disliked that the way most people celebrated it was by getting drunk and making a lot of trouble and ruckus. You even see some hints of this in that song, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” There's the line, “now bring us some figgy pudding and bring it round here.” And then the next chorus is, “we won't go until we get some, we won't go until we get some.”

And basically, that, I think, originated as one of these songs that roving mobs would sing to people when they showed up at rich folks' houses. And they would do this, and they would intentionally make the songs as loud and off-key as they possibly could. These bands — they were sometimes known as Calithumpian bands — they would bring, like, pots and pans from the kitchen and bang them, and the whole point was to make as much horrible noise as they could.

And people would essentially placate them with a bunch of fancy food and drink, and they'd hope that as soon as possible they would go on their way and bother somebody else. So basically, Christmas as it was celebrated just even a couple hundred years before our time, was radically different and a much sketchier, much more violent holiday than certainly the domestic, kid-centered thing that we have today. And what starts to happen throughout the mid-19th century, throughout the mid-1800s, is that you start to get more of a shift to Christmas being celebrated as a domestic, family-centered holiday.

There's still a sort of role reversal angle. That was the whole idea behind the poor people, that this was the one time of the year that poor people could basically be on top of the social pyramid. And what families started to do as a way to keep that role reversal and keep that sort of different way of doing things at Christmas was that they directed their attention at their kids, who were kind of the lower class. Obviously, today, we're a very kid-centered society, kids are super important, but this was back in the day of "Children should be seen and not heard." And so what you did in terms of Christmas being a time to honor those, to treat well those who are of lower social status, well, kids were one of those big groups. So that's where you start to get that shift toward a domestic, kid-centered holiday. And that, over the course of the 19th century, that becomes more and more central.

And that sort of counter-cultural behavior does occasionally stick around and find some other expressions. Some of it sort of feeds into Halloween. And so you get, like, in the late 19th and early 20th century, we've got lots of reports throughout the United States of mischief-making and pranks and things like that at Halloween. Eventually, in the 20th century, Halloween starts to get domesticated through organized trick-or-treating and Halloween carnivals and parades and things like that. But yeah, it gets domesticated a little bit later than Christmas does. Christmas really starts to get domesticated by, like, 1850.

NMAR: You spoke to the 18th and 19th centuries. As we move into the 20th and 21st centuries, how is that, how has Christmas continued to evolve?

Landau: Particularly since the 1960s, one of the things that has sort of changed about Christmas is the question of sort of how multicultural it's going to be. And, I mean, this is a larger tension in American society between the sort of traditional Christian roots of a lot of our ways of thinking and imagery and things like that versus the fact that we are now a very religiously diverse society. So how does that change Christmas? I think that you've seen various debates over the constitutionality of nativity displays. Nowadays — and this has really only changed in, I don't know, since I was a kid in the 80s — we had Christmas vacation. We had Christmas break. That's what they called it. That's what the public schools called it. Now it's winter vacation or winter break. So Christmas has in some ways become more secular.

Although, the vast majority of people who celebrate Christmas associate it with this figure of Santa. Technically, he's a secular figure, but in practice, he's almost like a god. And certainly, he's got Christian roots. Santa Claus, as we know him, is ultimately based on this historical early Christian bishop, Nicholas of Myra from the 4th century, who we don't know very much about.

But even if we leave aside the Christian roots of Saint Nicholas, think about the Santa Claus that we know today, the attributes we claim for Santa. He knows when people are sleeping. He knows when people are awake. He knows if you've been bad or good. So he is what we would call omniscient, and that tends to be sort of a godlike state of knowledge. Also, he's regarded as being capable of delivering presents to every house in the entire world — or at least everybody who celebrates Christmas — in a single night. And he is able to magically get inside people's houses. He's supposed to be a big jovial guy, but he goes down the chimney.

Originally, in the poem, “A Visit from Saint Nicholas,” or “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” as some folks know it, it's important to realize when that is talking about Santa going down the chimney, if you read the whole poem, it's clear why Santa can do that: It's because he's an elf. He's referred to as a right jolly old elf. He has a miniature sleigh.

He has eight tiny reindeer. In the logic of the story, the reason that he can go down a chimney is not that he's sort of defying physics as a big jovial guy. He's a little person. But yeah, so Santa today, I would argue, has a fair number of what we might call supernatural or godlike attributes in this way.

NMAR: In my head, I'm thinking of how people would make offerings to their god, and we leave out cookies and milk.

Landau: We leave out cookies and milk the way people left out food for the gods and food for deceased ancestors and things like that. So in some ways, you might say that Christmas has become more secular, and lots of people object to that because they say, “Jesus is the reason for the season and all that stuff.” But if you look at the way that Santa Claus is treated in our culture, you could say it's actually still a religious holiday, even if we don't often think of Santa as a religious figure instinctively. Once we start to peel back the layers of the onion, though, it starts to, I think, make a lot more sense.

NMAR: We'll end on this. What do you want for Christmas?

Landau: What do I want for Christmas? Well, I was talking about this with my History of Christmas class. When you're a kid, you want all the toys. And then you get older, and maybe it's technology that you want, a new phone or Bluetooth speakers or something like that. Stuff that's more “practical,” like clothing or stuff like that. And that often happens when people get into their teen years and start paying attention more to fashion and things like that. Now that I'm 48, I'm asking for toys again.

And not just any sort of toys, but I've got a number of Lego sets, Star Wars Lego sets.

And so whenever my birthday comes around or Christmas comes around, I usually have one kind of big Lego set that I'm asking for. And so what's on my list, and both my wife and my in-laws know this, is the Ornithopter from Dune. The sort of flying thing that looks almost like a ship, almost looks like a dragonfly, something like that.

So that's what I've asked for for Christmas!