

INTRODUCTION

From a religious perspective December has been a very busy month. The month began with the Christian festival of Advent on Dec 2nd followed within a few days with the eight days of the Jewish festival of Chanukah. During this time the Buddhists celebrated Rohatsu, the day the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment. Then on Dec 18th members of the Muslim faith began the Haj – the pilgrimage to Mecca, and as usual, the festival of Eid followed the Haj on Dec 20th. The winter solstice on the 22nd (or Yule) was celebrated by adherents of Wicca/Neo-Paganism. On the 26th the death of the Prophet Zarathushtra was remembered by members of the Zoroastrian tradition. In the middle of all this Christmas Day will roll around again with all the usual commercial trappings to obscure its real meaning. On this day Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus the Messiah, the only son of God. Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel announced his coming to Mary,

Luke 1:31-33 *"And behold, you [Mary] will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."*

The Religion Supermarket

You could be excused for confusing this array of religious beliefs with the experience of buying breakfast cereal in the supermarket. There are so many brands to choose from - each claiming to be more nutritious and tasty than the other. In the end it is not too important which brand you choose.

The question I want to look at this evening is, *"Does it matter which belief you choose or, like the breakfast cereals, are they all alike?"*

DOES IT MATTER?

There is a popular myth that, in essence, all religions are the same and ultimately are all serving the same God.

If this were so, it would not really matter which one you chose.

You have probably heard the parable that is often used to illustrate this claim: Five blind men discover an elephant. Since these men have never encountered an elephant, they grope about, seeking to understand and describe this new phenomenon. One grasps the trunk and concludes it is a snake. Another explores one of the elephant's legs and describes it as a tree. A third finds the elephant's tail and announces that it is a rope. The fourth man finds one of the elephant's ears and concludes that it is like a fan. And the fifth blind man, after discovering the elephant's side, concludes that it is, after all, a wall.

Each in his blindness is describing the same thing: an elephant. Yet each describes the same thing in a radically different way. According to some, this is analogous to the different religions of the world--they are describing the same thing in radically different ways. Thus one should conclude that no individual religion has a corner on truth, but that all, like the blind opinions, should be viewed as essentially equally valid.

If God is infinite and we are finite, it is reasonable to believe that none of us can fully capture His nature.

But does this elephant analogy demonstrate that all religious claims are equally valid? To conclude that it does would ignore several points:

1. First, **there is the reality of fact** : the elephant.
What the blind men were attempting to describe is in fact an elephant, not something else. If you have ever faced an elephant you will know how important getting this fact right can be!
Just so, there are factual questions regarding God. "Does God even exist?" is a question of fact, much like, "Was there a winner in the contest for the ANC presidency last week?" These things are true whether anyone wants to believe them or not, and to deny them, would render one mistaken. Thus, not all opinions, whether concerning elephants, presidents or the nature of God, are equally true.
2. Second, **all five blind men are, in fact, mistaken**. It is an elephant and not a wall, or a fan, or a rope, or a tree or a snake. Their opinions are not equally true--they are equally, and actually false. At best, such an analogy of religious pluralism would show that all religions are false, not true.
3. Third, and most important, the analogy **does not take into account any kind of special revelation**. If a sixth man were to arrive on the scene, one who could see (and who was able to demonstrate his credentials of having sight), and he were to describe the elephant as an elephant, then it would change the analogy entirely.

Jesus Christ, unique among all religious leaders of history, in that He claimed and demonstrated that He was a definitive revelation of God. **John 6:46** *"Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.*

Many of the people who watched Jesus' miracles and heard Him speak were offended by His statements about His divine identity.

John 5:18 "This was why they were seeking all the more to kill Him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

WHAT CLAIMS ARE MADE IN THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE?

When the gospels introduce Jesus they do so with great care. They draw on Old Testament symbols and titles that may not mean a great deal to the modern reader at first, but were unmistakable to the first recipients of the message.

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures foretold His coming. There are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament, written over a 1000 year period, which were fulfilled in the life of Jesus the Messiah. The most recent of the prophecies having been written at least 250 years before Jesus' birth.

Micah 5:2 *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*

Isa 53:4 *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.*

Isa 53:5 *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

Then angels – a group that is enjoying a resurgence of popularity at the present time. There are four appearances of angelic beings directly associated with Jesus' birth and they give us important information about Jesus' identity and ministry.

Luke 1:31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

Luke 1:32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,

Luke 1:33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Mat 1:20 But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

Mat 1:21 "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Luke 2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people;

Luke 2:11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour, who is Messiah the Lord.

The Third set of witnesses were the shepherds who went to see sign in response to what the angels had said about Him

Luke 2:17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,

Luke 2:18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

The devout at the Temple. Jesus was taken from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to be presented and circumcised. When He was brought into the Temple precincts the following things were said about Him.

Simeon said

Luke 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 2:26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah (Anointed or Chosen One).

Luke 2:27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,

Luke 2:28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

Luke 2:29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

Luke 2:30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,

Luke 2:31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

Luke 2:32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:33 The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him.

CONCLUSION

The Light has shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it

John 1:5

This light still shines today – you can know this Light in your life. Why not ask Jesus to come into your life today?

There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

That's what we celebrate at Christmas