Edited by Scott C. Lowe

CHRISTMAS
PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE
Better Than a Lump of Coal

Foreword by Stephen Nissenbaum
VOLUME EDITOR

SCOTT C. LOWE is Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. His current interest is in the political philosophy of Richard Rorty. He is the editor, along with Steven Hales, of Delight in Thinking: An Introduction to Philosophy Reader (2006).

SERIES EDITOR

FRITZ ALLHOFF is an Assistant Professor in the Philosophy Department at Western Michigan University, as well as a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University’s Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics. In addition to editing the Philosophy for Everyone series, Allhoff is the volume editor or co-editor for several titles, including Wine & Philosophy (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), Whiskey & Philosophy (with Marcus P. Adams, Wiley, 2009), and Food & Philosophy (with Dave Monroe, Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).
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To John Hirschi

“… it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well …”
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FOREWORD

Joining the Manger to the Sleigh?

Here’s a philosophical exercise of sorts. Imagine, first, the manger scene, set in Bethlehem. You will of course visualize the newborn infant Jesus, the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph, and perhaps several shepherds, angels and animals; possibly also the three wise men. All right, now place into that same scene, just in front of the holy infant, the kneeling figure of … Santa Claus.

Something wrong with this picture? Does Santa not quite belong in this scene? And why not? If you find this exercise puzzling, then you have entered into a Christmas problem that may be deemed philosophical. The nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson once recalled that as a child in the 1830s she secretly “loved Santa Claus” more than “the Lord Jesus Christ.” And in that preference (though perhaps not in the acknowledgment of it) Emily Dickinson was – and remains – far from alone. In their hearts, many people today probably love Santa Claus more than Jesus Christ. As certain Christians point out, the mere reversal of two letters turns Santa into Satan.

The contest between Santa and Jesus is not the only philosophical dispute that Christmas has ignited over the years. In the seventeenth century the Puritans actually banned the celebration of Christmas (it was illegal for a time both in Oliver Cromwell’s England and in the colony of Massachusetts). In Puritan eyes, Christmas was a pagan holiday, not a Christian one. They argued, quite accurately, that there is no scriptural basis for celebrating the birth of Jesus; indeed, there is no evidence at all that he was born in December. (The nativity scene so vividly described in the Gospel of Luke – the shepherds abiding in their fields, keeping watch over
their flocks by night, when an angel appeared to announce the birth “this day, in the city of David” of Christ the Lord – offers no clue about when “this day” happened to fall.) The Puritans were fond of saying that if God had intended for the birthday of his only begotten son to be observed, he would surely have provided some indication of when it occurred.

Actually, that dispute leads back to an earlier one, the very dispute that provoked the Church Fathers to decree the celebration of Christmas in the first place. This decree was levied as late as the year 395 CE, fully 400 years after Jesus’ birth. Why only then, and not before? The answer has to do with a certain philosophical idea that was winning many adherents in the fourth century; this was the idea that Jesus had never been a physical being at all, that he was instead a pure spirit who had only appeared to take on human form. (At the risk of committing sacrilege, you might imagine a parallel question about the identity of Santa Claus.) In the fourth century, when the nature of Christian “orthodoxy” was still being hotly debated, such an idea posed a real philosophical threat: it challenged the reality of Christ’s incarnation, even of his crucifixion. In order to suppress that dangerous idea (it was called Docetism, after the Greek word meaning “to seem”), the Church Fathers realized that nothing would make Jesus more physically human than having a birthday.

Of course, by that time nobody had any memory of when Jesus was born, so a date had to be devised. And it had to be a date that Christians would be likely to celebrate. It was for this reason that the Church Fathers settled on late December, for this was a time of general celebration that long preceded Christianity. Late December was the winter solstice (thus the ritual of seasonal lights, practiced by Jews at Chanukah). Late December was also a season of extended leisure time and culinary bounty (the harvest work was finally completed, and there was plenty of fresh food and alcohol to be consumed). In Rome itself, at the center of Christianity, these very days of late December had traditionally been celebrated as the boisterous Saturnalia. So the Church Fathers in the year 395 CE chose to place the nativity of Jesus on December 25. But doing so involved a serious trade-off: on the one hand, the Church Fathers could be confident that the new holiday would be widely celebrated (and that Christians would come to accept the idea that Jesus was a real human being). On the other hand, it would be difficult to insure that the new holiday would be celebrated in a spirit of pious Christian devotion. There were simply too many powerful associations of this particular date, associations that had more to do with eating, drinking and being merry than with praying.
And so Christmas began with a kind of philosophical dilemma. I would argue that this dilemma has never been resolved (its modern form involving the battle between piety and presents, between Jesus and Santa Claus). I might even say, perhaps a bit provocatively, that Christmas has always proven extremely difficult to Christianize. That, at any rate, was precisely what the Puritans came to conclude, and so they decided to simply suppress it. And when Christmas finally did enter mainstream American culture, beginning in the 1820s, it was courtesy of the ever-bulging pack that Santa carried on his back. As one of the essays in this book points out, “The Night before Christmas” (first published in 1823) is a wholly secular poem. By the 1830s Santa Claus had already become established as a commercial icon, appropriated by shopkeepers in urban America. By the end of that decade it was already possible for a New England girl like Emily Dickinson to love Santa – and the presents he left – more than Jesus. It’s all too easy to conclude that Santa has won the battle for Christmas.

And yet. And yet if we moderns find it so difficult to imagine Santa kneeling down before the infant Jesus – so tough to join the manger to the sleigh – perhaps our very difficulty suggests that the sleigh has not completely won the battle after all. Early in the twentieth century some American merchants actually did insert the figure of Santa Claus into the elaborate manger scenes they installed to drum up business. It didn’t work and their efforts were ridiculed. Today, too, as I write this I have located an Internet website advertising 231 different products that show Santa kneeling before Jesus; these include figurines and Christmas tree ornaments. You wouldn’t buy any of these … would you?

Keep reading.
INTRODUCTION

Behold! The virgin will be with child and shall bear a son,
And they will name him Immanuel.
(Matthew 1:23)

The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.
(Clement Clarke Moore,
“’Twas the Night Before Christmas”)

The new fallen snow blankets the moonlit hills as sleigh bells jingle in the distance. Inside, the lights shine, the tinsel sparkles, all the ornaments are hung with care and presents are piled high under the tree. It’s Christmas and there’s magic in the air. Cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents gather together from far and near for feast and fellowship, and maybe a little football, too. There will be delicious food, sweet treats, and a few spirits (of the alcoholic variety) as well. And presents, yes, lots of presents. It’s the stuff of fond memories. It’s Christmas just like Norman Rockwell or Charles Dickens pictured it.

That’s what the holiday’s all about, isn’t it? Family, togetherness and, well, presents. Maybe, maybe not. For what’s supposed to be a holly, jolly holiday, Christmas sure stirs up a lot of controversy. There’s not much agreement about the origins, history, practices, point or purpose of this
holiday. *Wait a minute, you say, everybody knows that Christmas is about the virgin birth of baby Jesus, right? Everybody? Guess again. Well, at least it’s about the birth of some baby on a cold December night in a drafty manger. Hardly, that one’s pretty clearly not true. Well, then, it’s about that time honored Christian practice of decorating pine trees. Oh, come on now, what have you been smoking? It’s about Santa? Please, don’t get the fundamentalists started! Nativities on the courthouse lawn? Don’t get Bill O’Reilly started! You see what I mean?*

What does seem clear is that Christ’s mass has been part of the church calendar since about the fourth century, that the early Christian church moved the celebration to December to coincide with existing pagan (or maybe Roman) solstice celebrations, that we picked up decorating pine trees from existing pagan practices, and that it wasn’t until fairly recently that Christmas was accepted as the day of festive celebration that we recognize. (Did you ever notice that Bob Cratchit had to ask Mr. Scrooge for Christmas day off?) An interesting aspect of the history of Christmas is the degree to which this celebration of Christ’s birth was associated with existing non-Christian holidays as a way of winning and keeping converts. Presumably, early Christians weren’t willing to throw out everything old in adopting their new religion, so adapted existing holidays to new, Christian, purposes. The modern Christmas celebration has ancient connections with a number of winter solstice feasts, including the Roman festival dedicated to Sol Invictus (the unconquered sun) and Germanic and Scandinavian Yule festivals. Similarly, later Christmas celebrations picked up elements from non-Christian sources, such as the decorating of Christmas trees and the burning of Yule logs which also come from Germany and Scandinavia. In fact, the practice of decorating a Christmas tree is only about a century and a half old in the English speaking world. It was not until the 1840s that the practice became widespread in England, in part due to Queen Victoria’s adopting a custom from Prince Albert’s native Germany, and not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that Christmas trees caught on in the United States.

And then there’s that other part of our modern Christmas, the big man, that right jolly old elf: Santa. Where he came from and how he’s supposed to fit in has a long, uncertain and decidedly non-Christian history, too. There was (probably) a St. Nicholas, but even the little bit we know of him bears scant resemblance to our modern Santa. Rather, Santa Claus seems to be descended from a hodge podge of figures, none of whom have any connection to Christmas or Jesus of Nazareth. The Santa who brings gifts to good little boys and girls owes more to
Poseidon and Neptune, Odin and Thor, and a rather disreputable fellow named Krampus, than to any Christian saint. There's a lot more to be said about Jesus, virgin birth, Santa Claus and celebrating Christmas. The essays that follow will shed some light on all of this and more.

In the first part of the book, “Christmas: In the Beginning,” we look at the origins of Christmas. And in the beginning, there was the birth of Christ. Of course, Jesus was a man; Jesus, the Christ, Immanuel, “God with us,” was human and walked the earth. But humans are conceived in the familiar way and then “born of a woman” about nine months later. And these familiar events are exactly what happened according to Zachary Jurgensen and Jason Southworth in their essay “Jesus, Mary, and Hume: On the Possibility of the Virgin Birth.” A virgin birth would be a miracle, so would be completely outside what our experience tells us is possible. Following the works of the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, Jurgensen and Southworth argue for the impossibility of miracles and so the impossibility of the virgin birth of Christ. Obviously, their view holds important implications for what we are celebrating at Christmas time. In response, theologian Victor Lyons defends the miraculous conception of Jesus in “The Virgin Birth: Authentic Christmas Magic.” Contrary to Jurgensen and Southworth, as well as contemporary skeptics like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, Lyons points to the coherence of New Testament accounts of the conception and birth of Christ in Matthew and Luke. Further, reality as we know it does not have to be observable and repeatable as demanded by science. Perhaps there is room in our reality for extraordinary events, and perhaps the virgin birth is one of them. Medievalist Todd Preston rounds out this part arguing that those who want to put “Christ back into Christmas” may not understand what they’re asking for. In “Putting the ‘Yule’ Back in ‘Yuletide’” he shows us how the earliest Christians in the English speaking world won converts precisely by incorporating pagan practices and beliefs into the new Christianity. This early paganized Christmas was full of feasting and merriment, every bit as much as it was of religious ceremony. It turns out that Christmas has been a largely secular holiday even from its beginning.

In the next part, “Is Celebrating Christmas Really a Good Idea?” we look at some of the problems and controversies that surround our contemporary celebration of Christmas. Philosopher Scott Aiken takes the bull by the horns in his essay, “Armed for the War on Christmas.” Christmas has been caught up in the ongoing culture wars. Conservative commentators like Bill O’Reilly and John Gibson claim that the liberal
media are promoting the secularization of Christmas and liberal judges are suppressing the rights of the Christian majority. Aiken argues that the conservatives are confused on both counts and that there really has been no war on Christmas. But given how poor the Christmas message is both theologically and culturally, Aiken suggests that maybe there should be.

Guy Bennett-Hunter comes next with his take on the theological controversies surrounding the holiday. In “Christmas Mythologies: Sacred and Secular” he reminds us that there are two myths that are part of Christmas. On the one hand, there is the myth of Santa Claus, a myth which parents treat as myth, yet accept because of the message of generosity and giving which belief in Santa encourages in children. On the other hand, there are the religious myths of the stories from the Bible. These myths we are often reluctant to give up as we mature, remaining, as Bennett-Hunter puts it, “agnostic” about their literal truth. In his essay Bennett-Hunter pushes us to get off the fence about our religious myths. Appealing to the work of theologian Paul Tillich, he argues that the lessons of the Bible are to be found in its myths, and worrying about whether they’re literally true or not will just distract us from seeing those lessons. Just as we grow out of believing in Santa Claus, so we ought to grow out of regarding the Christmas story as literally true. Only then can we understand its true message.

An important part of the “War on Christmas” is the push to remove Christian Christmas displays from public places. One argument for restricting Christmas displays comes from the perspective of multiculturalism, the view that societies should encourage different cultures and communities to live together in the same neighborhoods, towns and cities. Multiculturalists are often against the public display of explicitly Christian symbols like crosses and crèches because they “privilege” the dominant Christian culture. Mark Mercer, a philosopher at Saint Mary’s University in Nova Scotia, argues that such displays are not a threat to multiculturalism. In his essay, “The Significance of Christmas for Liberal Multiculturalism,” he defends a version of “liberal multiculturalism” that focuses on promoting the wellbeing of each individual in part through promoting their cultural identity. For such liberal multiculturalists, Christmas, especially in its contemporary more secular form, can play a positive part in bringing different cultural groups together in a well ordered multicultural society.

And speaking of the Christmas story, we close this section with a very popular part of our Christmas memories. In “Crummy Commercials and BB Guns: Son-of-a-Bitch Consumerism in a Christmas Classic,”
Erin Haire and Dustin Nelson show us the lessons of the much loved movie *A Christmas Story*. The Parker family is an absolutely typical American family in the 1940s Midwest who want to have the perfect Christmas. But for them the perfect Christmas has nothing to do with any Christian holy day. Haire and Nelson argue that consumerism was their religion. Sadly, between the Bumpus hounds and the fact that Ralphie really did shoot his eye out, that consumerism let them down on Christmas day. But after all that could go wrong goes wrong, they discover the value of Christmas in the togetherness they share as a family.

In the third part, “Santa: A Deeper Look,” the dark and mysterious side of the Man in Red is revealed. In “The Mind of Santa Claus and the Metaphors He Lives By” William Deal and S. Waller start us off discussing how we mere mortals can grasp how the mind of Santa works. He has great powers like the ability to read our intentions and know all of our actions. Not only that, he has inerrant moral knowledge, so he knows precisely what we deserve as reward or punishment for what we have done in the previous year. Drawing on current work in cognitive science, they show how we understand Santa and his powers in terms of metaphors such as the Moral Accounting metaphor or the Moral Authority is Parental Authority metaphor. Only by seeing Santa’s God-like powers through these very human metaphors can we grasp how Santa operates.

Richard Hancuff and Noreen O’Connor continue this theme of Santa as moral arbiter. In “Making a List, Checking It Twice: The Santa Claus Surveillance System” they examine Santa’s role as disciplinarian helping to keep kids in line, especially as Christmas approaches. How does he do this? By watching, all the time. We know he knows, even though we can’t see him. Hancuff and O’Connor argue that Santa’s power is an example of what the French philosopher Michel Foucault called “panopticism,” forcing compliance through the possibility that I’m always being watched by an unseen observer. If little Johnnie really wants that special toy truck for Christmas, well he’d better behave, just in case Santa’s watching.

Will Williams explains that we should probably watch out for the real St. Nick as well. His essay “You’d Better Watch Out . . .” takes us back to events in the life of St. Nicholas of Myra, a fourth-century bishop from what is now Turkey. In the year 325 Nicholas is reputed to have attended the Council of Nicaea, a gathering of early church leaders who were to decide on the divinity of Christ. One member of the council, Arius, argued that, having been created by God, Jesus could not be as fully divine as God. This claim so infuriated Nicholas that he did what any
true defender of the faith would do – he punched Arius in the face! Given how far our modern Christmas has strayed from its religious message, Williams wonders what St. Nicholas would do to us if given a fighting chance.

Finally, Matthew Brophy, a kind and caring soul, shows his concern for those little beings who work so hard to make Christmas possible for all of us. In his exposé “Santa’s Sweatshop: Elf Exploitation for Christmas” he takes us into the miserable world of the average toymaking elf. Hard work, low pay, dangerous conditions, no benefits – these poor elfs give their all for our enjoyment. What could justify their exploitation? Brophy, not afraid of the coal that is surely coming to him, considers several familiar arguments in support of treating elfs this way. But, of course, in the end we must just recognize that each of us is complicit in the evil of elf exploitation.

In the fourth part of the book, “The Morality of Christmas,” we examine important ethical issues raised by the way we celebrate Christmas. For most of us, Christmas started with a lie: “Look what Santa brought you!” A pair of philosophers from colleges named Kings debate the acceptability of this lie. In “Against the Santa Claus Lie: The Truth We Should Tell Our Children” David Kyle Johnson of King’s College in Pennsylvania argues that any good that comes from the Santa lie is more than outweighed by the ills it promotes. Encouraging children to believe in Santa will only contribute to poor moral decision-making, such as being good only to get a reward, and intellectual laziness and poor critical thinking skills from believing in something without sufficient evidence, indeed in the face of significant counter-evidence. Era Gavrielides from King’s College London takes a different approach in her essay, “Lying to Children about Santa: Why It’s Just Not Wrong.” She agrees that the way we talk to kids about Santa is a lie. Unlike what we tell them about fictions like unicorns or Snow White, talking about Santa includes encouraging children to believe that he’s real; in other words, we lie to them. Yet, some lies are not wrong. Not because the evil of the lie is outweighed by its benefits, but because some types of lies are not wrong, they are actually good and noble. Gavrielides argues that the Santa lie is such a falsehood. Appealing to Plato in the Republic, she argues the lies that are part of our cultural storytelling and mythmaking aren’t wrong and may be part of developing good character in children.

Santa gets a further boost from philosopher Steven Hales. In “Putting Claus Back into Christmas” Hales maintains that celebrating Santa is exactly what Christmas should be all about. Santa is generous and
INTRODUCTION

selfless, and, at least for adults, a way to practice these virtues and more. In this way Santa is a *myth*, valuable and useful without any pretense that he’s real. This is where believing in Jesus has gone wrong. The nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche criticized Christianity for losing sight of the value of gods as part of mythmaking, of cultural definition; we go off track when we start thinking of the gods as real. Belief in Santa avoids this problem; he’s a myth that keeps on giving. Hales concludes that it’s Santa, not Jesus, who is the better role model for generosity and giving at Christmas time.

We close this part with a visit to another Christmas classic. Ethicist Dane Scott helps us see the virtue in generosity through the life of Ebenezer Scrooge. A central theme in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is the need for us to be generous to one another. But generosity is a quality of character that takes nourishing and practice, which has long been lacking in Scrooge’s solitary life. In “Scrooge Learns it All in One Night: Happiness and the Virtues of Christmas” Scott explains how Scrooge’s magical Christmas eve transformation not only changes the lives of those around him, such as his impoverished clerk Bob Cratchit, but serves to save Scrooge from a sad and morally bankrupt end. In surrendering his greed, he gains those virtues that make him a good man.

In the closing part of the book, “Christmas Through Others’ Eyes,” we look at Christmas from some very untraditional perspectives. Ruth Tallman defends a view that at first glance might seem paradoxical. In her essay, “Holly Jolly Atheists: A Naturalistic Justification for Christmas,” she explains why the rejection of Christianity doesn’t demand the rejection of Christmas. Christmas themes of peace and love of humanity don’t depend on religion, and the traditions of “cultural Christmas” are valuable to us from generation to generation. Following the work of George Santayana, Tallman explains how an atheist Christmas is coherent and valuable. Marion Mason approaches the holiday from the perspective of the psychology of religion. In “Heaven, Hecate, and Hallmark: Christmas in Hindsight” she offers her own spiritual journey as an example of the Stages of Faith model of religious development advanced by James Fowler. Moving from agnosticism to fundamentalism to Unitarianism to paganism, patterns of spiritual development reappear, each with its own approach to celebrating Christmas.

Yet, some people really would give up on celebrating Christmas. For some, the consumerism and hassle and stress are just too much. Surely there’s a better way. Caleb Holt thinks he’s found a superior December holiday. In “Festivus and the Need for Seasonal Absurdity” he explains
the odd attraction of a holiday devoted to an unadorned metal pole, the airing of grievances and wrestling. Rather than making the season too hectic, a time when we do too much, Festivus offers us catharsis, release from all the holiday craziness. OK, sitting around the living room explaining how your loved ones have wronged you or pinning the head of household to the floor may seem a little odd. But, as Holt points out, at least that way we reduce the guilt in our lives, not just pile on another year’s worth.

And then there are those who celebrate Christmas, but not in ways familiar to many of us. In closing this part of the book, Cindy Scheopner explains how the Hawaii Santa with bare feet and a shaka wave welcomes holiday visitors to downtown Honolulu. The crowd that this Santa greets is as ethnically and religiously diverse as any in the country. Many Islanders are not Christians, so what does Santa have to offer them? In her essay, “Common Claus: Santa as Cross-Cultural Connection,” Scheopner argues for the usefulness of Santa as a cultural icon who can unite a diverse society around common values. Santa’s generosity, and his ability to keep children from misbehaving, can be worthwhile for everyone. At a time of year when our religious differences seem so sharp, Santa welcomes all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike.

The afterword to this collection comes from a very special contributor. Santa found out that this book was in the works (you were paying attention during the discussion of panopticism above, right?) and wanted a chance to respond. How could I refuse? Well, in his afterword Santa makes it clear that he’s not altogether pleased with what he’s read here. Sure, there are bright spots praising his generosity, extolling him as a role model and even placing him above a lot of ancient gods. But he’s more than a little miffed that despite all this praise, there seems to be broad agreement among the other contributors that he doesn’t actually exist. (One of the few authors who takes his existence seriously accuses him of elf abuse, so that’s no help.) Using his ability to accurately assess who has been naughty and who has been nice, and then dole out presents or coal in perfectly just proportions, Santa is prepared to stick it to us this Christmas. So, despite our sincere efforts to only speak the truth as we know it and offer insights as we see them, your authors and editor are going to suffer for their love of wisdom. (Pretty virtuous, don’t you think? Kind of like Socrates and the hemlock.) I suppose I’ve had worse Christmases before, but, really, this one’s not looking very promising. Lumps of coal all around!
Some wise men, a stable, sheep, and a young virgin giving birth to the mortal son of a perfect God. Ask anyone, and they will tell you Jesus’ virgin birth is an essential part of the Christmas story. We talk about it so often there is even a shorthand way of referring to it – the Christmas miracle. Given how important this extraordinary claim is to people around the world, and how often we hear it made (almost every day for no less than a month every year), it is surprising how little attention and reflection is paid to establishing the truth of the claim. In this essay we set aside our yuletide spirit in order to evaluate the truth of the Christmas miracle.

Miracle on Definition Street

Before we get too far, we need to be clear on what we mean by a miracle and how exactly the virgin birth of Jesus is supposed to be a miracle. When we use the term “miracle” we are using the definition given by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76). Hume defines a miracle as “a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent.” This definition seems to capture the commonsense meaning of the word. To put it in
terms of an often used example, if God interceded and cured Grandma’s terminal cancer, that would be a miracle. If, on the other hand, Grandma gets better without God’s intervention, no miracle occurred – she was just lucky.

Essential to Hume’s account of miracles is his understanding of laws of nature. A law of nature, as Hume understands it, is formed by consistently observing a regularity in a series of experienced events. It is the goal of the sciences to discover and explain these laws of nature. Hume’s paradigm example of a law of nature is that “all men must die.” As evidenced throughout humanity, we experience with uniform regularity that if you are mortal, then you will die at some point. Although it may be very surprising to see a young person of good health suddenly die, it is by no means a miracle, as Hume notes, because it has been observed to happen in the past. Such an event would not constitute a violation of a law of nature because it conforms to past regularities. However, Hume agrees that it would be a miracle if a mortal person were to die and then come back to life. There is uniform regularity in our experience that points to the fact that death is irreversible. So, if a person were to come back to life after being dead, this event would violate a law of nature that has been firmly established from past, uniform experience. Notice this is perfectly in keeping with how the term is normally used. Christians say that it is a miracle that Jesus rose from the dead because such events are outside regularly established natural laws.

What the Bible Says

If you ask believers why they think Jesus was born to a virgin mother, they will tell you, “It’s in the Bible.” So it seems like the Bible is a reasonable place to start our search for truth about the virgin birth. While most readers no doubt know the basics regarding the structure and organization of the Bible, let’s do a quick review. The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old and New Testaments. The dividing line is the life of Jesus. Everything about Jesus is in the New Testament. The New Testament itself is divided into four gospels, each written by a different person. The names traditionally ascribed to the gospel writers are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, although authorship was not assigned until considerably after the texts themselves were written. All four of the gospel writers offer what they see as the important highlights of Jesus’ life. Just like with