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3. and the similarities and differences between their respective accounts.

Both Matthew and Luke agree that:

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod the Great
- His mother Mary was married to a man named Joseph
- Joseph was descended from King David and was not Jesus's biological father
- Jesus's birth was a direct result of divine intervention.

Matthew's Gospel is the sole source for:

- The arrival of the Magi ('Wise Men') from the East bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh though (top bluffer fact) Matthew doesn't say how many Magi there actually are. The common figure of three comes purely from the fact that the visitors brought three gifts with them.¹
- King Herod's massacre of the innocents, the order to kill all first-born children
- Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt after being warned in a dream.

Luke's Gospel is the sole source for:

- The census which forces Joseph and Mary to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem

¹ There could easily have been two Magi with a present each and arguing incessantly about who was going to hold the third; equally, there could have been a dozen Magi buckling under the weight of the enormous gold bar and jumbo-sized urn of frankincense they'd brought, because *someone* hadn't checked the item size before they hit 'Buy Now' on the Amazon website.

- There being no room at the inn (hardly surprising, to be fair: everywhere's booked solid at Christmas), meaning that Mary has to give birth in a stable and lay the baby Jesus in a manger²
- The shepherds watching their flocks by night who go to see the baby because an angel tells them to.

Basically, Matthew's Gospel is all bling and international intrigue, while Luke's is the social realist one. Matthew is James Bond; Luke is Ken Loach.

Most scholars assume that Jesus was born sometime between 6 BC and 4 BC: that is, between six and four years before himself.

YEAR ZERO

No one knows for sure exactly when the two Gospels were written or how much deliberate overlap there was between them,³ but the scholarly consensus is that they were written independently of each other around AD 75–85. Neither Gospel gives a date for Jesus's birth, though the one thing that can be said with certainty

² Not to be confused with Pret A Manger, whose campaign for domination of the global sandwich market was still a couple of millennia away.

³ Bringing to mind an image of the two men in an exam hall with one curling his arm protectively around his paper to stop the other from cribbing his work.

as a symbol of (better and more enjoyable) times past.²⁸ This character concerned himself chiefly with eating, drinking and having a good time.²⁹

AMERICAN MAKEOVER

As with Christmas in general, Father Christmas only began to take on the characteristics we recognise during Victorian times. But where other changes had come from home-grown writers such as Dickens³⁰ or the German influence brought over by Prince Albert, Father Christmas's Victorian evolution was most heavily influenced from across the Atlantic.

For the Americans, the personification of Christmas was called Santa Claus, himself derived from the 4th century Greek bishop St Nicholas who was well known for his benevolence in giving gifts to the poor.

In 1822, the American writer and academic Clement Clarke Moore wrote 'Twas The Night Before Christmas'. Bluffer klaxon! 'Twas the night before Christmas' is the first line of the poem, but not its title, which is 'A Visit from St Nicholas'. Bonus bluffer points for knowing that Moore owned the Chelsea country estate just outside

²⁸ Their message, in effect, was 'restore the monarchy and be merry'. Nowadays they'd have to go through endless focus groups and a client who kept changing their mind literally minutes before sign-off.

²⁹ Definitely not Jeremy Corbyn, then.

³⁰ Curiously, Father Christmas does appear, sort of, in *A Christmas Carol*: more specifically, in John Leech's illustration of the Ghost of Christmas Present, who wears a holly wreath and a loose, furred gown (albeit in green rather than red).

New York (and made a mint when it was developed as part of the city's expansion) and also compiled a vast dictionary of ancient Hebrew. He wrote 'A Visit From St. Nicholas' for his children, never expecting it to go beyond the family, let alone become globally famous; but every Christmas Eve millions of parents read it to millions of children. The ancient Hebrew dictionary, less so.

Historically, Clement Clarke Moore has been credited with the poem, but many scholars now believe the occasional poet and New York grandee Major Henry Livingston Jr to have been the author. Bluffers don't have to take sides, but should nonetheless be aware of the controversy.³¹

Livingston/Moore's poem contains many of Christmas's modern-day tropes:

- Santa's sleigh is pulled by eight reindeer, though Rudolf and his red nose are not among them (these ones are called Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner und Blitzen). The latter two, translated as 'Thunder and Lightning' earned worldwide recognition as a popular exclamation denoting surprise and disbelief.
- Santa himself has 'a broad face and a little round belly/That shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly'.
- He comes equipped with presents: 'A bundle of

³¹ It's a little like the whole Shakespeare/Earl of Oxford thing, but with more reindeer and fewer witches/star-crossed lovers/choice of which pencil to use (2B or not 2B).