

WE THREE KINGS OF ORIENT AREN'T

NICK PAGE

Writer, historian and self-styled 'grumpy old bloke' Nick Page offers a humorous look at some of our classic carols.

Christmas. It's one of the best-known stories in the world. The innkeeper and the stable, the three kings and the shepherds are hard-wired into our collective consciousness. And nothing reinforces our image of Christmas so much as our favourite carols. We ding-dong merrily on high with gusto. We fa-la-la-la-la like mad. We rarely stop to consider that, when we look at the Bible accounts and consider the history, a load of our favourite carol lyrics are, well, just plain wrong.

I saw three ships come sailing in

No you didn't. Firstly Bethlehem has no major rivers, lakes, canals or other waterways. Secondly it's 35 miles inland. So if anyone really did see three ships sailing into Bethlehem, either the ships had built up a remarkable head of speed when they hit the Judean coast, or – and I think this is more likely – the witness had been drinking. (Apparently, the words of the carol actually come from a legend about three ships taking the supposed relics of the magi to Cologne in the 12th century. So I'm not quite sure why the song keeps going on about 'Bethlehem in the morning'.)

In the bleak midwinter

Er, probably not. The Bible doesn't tell us the time of year. The date of 25 December for Jesus' birthday was not agreed until the fourth century AD. Earlier traditions plump for November. (In 194 AD, Clement of Alexandria said it was 18 November.) The average temperature for Bethlehem region in November is 12 degrees Celsius. Not warm, exactly, but not much chance of 'snow on snow, snow on snow'. (And



while we're at it, it would have been November in the year 5 BC, assuming that Herod the Great died, as is generally agreed, in 4 BC).

Once in royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed

No it didn't. The Bible never mentions a stable. Nor does it mention an inn.

The Greek word Luke uses for 'inn' is *kataluma*, which more often means 'guest room', 'spare room', or anywhere you might put visitors. Luke says the Last Supper is held in a *kataluma* – a guest room. And anyway, this was Joseph's family home; they wouldn't need an inn, there would be relatives with whom to stay. What the story tells us is that the relatives were poor and their home was crowded with no more room for guests.

And as for the stable, the Bible says Jesus was laid in a manger, but this would have been inside the house in peasant homes of the time. They were on two levels and at night peasant families brought their animals into the lower level (their body heat acted as a kind of primitive central heating). There would have been mangers set into the slope to the upper level, and it was there that Jesus was laid.

So, no inn or stable. In Luke's account, Jesus is put downstairs with the animals, because the rest of the house is full.

While shepherds watched

Well there were shepherds, of course. But they were not the most reputable of characters. Jewish rabbinic literature says of herdsmen that 'their trade is the trade of thieves.' Another rabbinical list includes them alongside other low-lives such as dice players, usurers and tax collectors. 'For herdsmen, tax collectors and publicans, is repentance hard', it was said. As to washing their socks, the early sources remain silent.

We three kings of Orient are

No you aren't. The Bible doesn't mention kings. It talks of 'magi', a term associated with astrologers from Chaldea (the ancient name for the marshy lands in the far south of Mesopotamia, in modern-day Iraq). We get three from the number of gifts they brought, but no number of people is mentioned.

So, all in all, the carols have a shaky grasp on history. But let's not be too 'Bah! Humbug!'. They do remind us of the joy of the event. This was good news for all mankind. Forget the innkeeper and the stable, and the kings and the miraculous ships: for the Gospel writers and their first audiences, the story of Christmas was that the Son of God came into the world of ordinary, simple peasants. That is something worth singing about.

Oh and by the way, Good King Wenceslas? He was only a Duke.

Merry Christmas, everyone.

Nick Page is the author of over seventy books for adult and children, including *Kingdom of Fools*, a history of the early church, and *The Wrong Messiah*, a historical look at the life of Jesus. Either, frankly, would make an excellent Christmas present. www.nickpage.co.uk