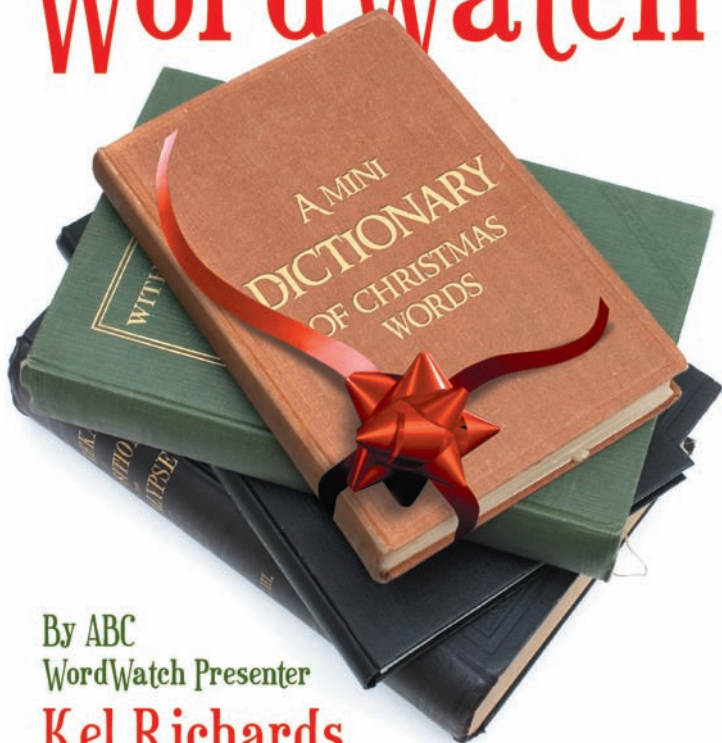


Christmas WordWatch



By ABC
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What's in a ((Christmas) word?

Christmas. What does it all mean?

No, really, what does it all mean? Christmas words like 'frankincense', and Christmas names like 'Bethlehem'... is 'Yule' short for 'Yule be sorry you spent so much this December?'

Kel Richards, resident word guru at ABC NewsRadio, puts us straight on some common Christmas words, and tells us some things about Christmas we may not have known.



ad•vent |'advɛnt|

'Advent' comes from a Latin source word meaning 'arrival' and is another name for the Christmas season. The word refers to the arrival of the Creator God on this planet (in the form of a human baby). This is why those little calendars with numbered flaps are called 'Advent calendars' and why Christmas is sometimes called the 'Advent season'.

an•gel |'ɛnjəl|

Angels play a role in the first Christmas that our modern, materialistic age can find a little embarrassing or awkward. The word 'angel' literally means 'messenger'. The Bible says

that just as the material dimension is occupied by sentient beings (us!), so the spiritual dimension is occupied by sentient beings (angels).

They play several roles in the events of the first Christmas: they announce the coming of Jesus to Mary, to Joseph, and to the shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem. It is to these humble farm workers that the angels announce the significance of the birth of Jesus:

“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke chapter 2, verses 10-11)

And then it is an angel who warns Joseph that King Herod (see ‘Herod’) is about to become homicidal, and that Joseph and his little family should escape quickly to Egypt until the danger is over.

Whether we like it or not, angels are a part of Christmas—which is why so many Christmas trees have an angel on the top.

Beth•le•hem |'be θ li,ħem; -lēəm|

Bethlehem lies a few kilometres south of Jerusalem. At the time of the birth of Jesus it was known as ‘the city of David’ because the family and ancestors of King David came from there. Because both Mary and Joseph were descendents of the royal line of David, they had to return to Bethlehem for the census ordered by the Emperor Augustus. That’s how Bethlehem came to play its famous role in the Christmas story—and to get a mention in so many Christmas carols.

Box•ing Day

This odd name for 26 December comes from an old English tradition in which a box containing a gift was handed out to servants or to the needy. The tradition required that the village squire and his family would, on the day after Christmas, box up the leftover Christmas food and goodies, and distribute these among the village poor.

cal•en•dar |'kæləndər|

Take a look at the number of the current year on your desk calendar. That number marks roughly the number of years since the first Christmas.

Back in the sixth century a monk named Dionysius Exiguus (a Latin name meaning ‘Dennis the Little’) was given the job of sorting out the calendar. Up until that point years were numbered from when each Roman Emperor began his reign. You know the sort of thing: “Year such-and-such in the reign of the Emperor Blog”. That was very messy because with every emperor you started counting all over again.

What smart old Dennis-the-Little did was to say, “Let’s just have one set of numbers that starts at one and keeps on going”. And he decided to make the birth of Jesus Christ Year One. Actually he got his calculations out by a few years, and he failed to allow for a Year Zero—but he meant well.

And that’s why the number on your desk calendar is the number that it is: it’s approximately the number of years since the first Christmas.



card |kɑːd|

The first Christmas cards were designed by the artist JC Horsley, and printed and sold in 1844 by Sir Henry Cole. Cole's ambition was to improve public taste. To this end he opened an art shop in Bond Street, London, where he sold all kinds of objects intended to "beautify life". Having a flair for publicity, Cole did his best to publicize these new cards—not for personal gain but to "elevate the artistic taste of the general public".



car•ol |ˈkɑːrəl|

'Carol' came into English in the 14th century from an Old French word meaning 'a joyful song'. In fact, it meant a song so bright and joyful that you could dance to it. Originally, and up until about the 16th century, lots of different songs were called carols. But over more recent centuries it slowly became more specialized, and today only songs that celebrate Christmas are called carols.

Christ |krɪst|

It would be very easy to mistake 'Christ' for Jesus' surname. But it wasn't. If you'd sent a letter to "J Christ, c/o the carpenter's shop, Nazareth", the postman would have scratched his head and muttered, "Who does this mean?"

'Christ' is not a name—it's a title and a job description. It works a bit like the word 'doctor'. We give this word to our local GP as both a title and job description—and we put it in front of their given name. With Jesus, his title and job

description is stuck onto the end of his given name.

The English word ‘Christ’ comes from the Greek word *christos* which is the equivalent of the Hebrew word ‘Messiah’—and both mean the same thing: ‘anointed’. That word, in turn, means ‘to be appointed as either a priest or a king’. Jesus was, in fact, appointed to be both.

As priest, Jesus is the one who connects people to God. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John chapter 14, verse 6).

As king, Jesus is appointed by God to rule and ultimately judge the world. God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts chapter 17, verse 31).

Christ•mas |'krisməs|

The word ‘Christmas’ first appears in something called the *Old English Chronicle* almost a thousand years ago (in the year 1123 to be precise). It comes from the Late Old English expression *Cristes mæsse*. And this Old English word *mæsse* comes from a Latin word *missa* which dates even further back—way back to the fourth century (and from which we get our familiar English word ‘dismissal’).

Back in those days church services were in Latin, which was the language of the ordinary people of the Roman Empire at the time. They ended with this particular Latin word—basically meaning “church is over, you are dismissed”—although it was meant rather more politely than that.

And because that was the last word in the church service, it became the name for church services. So, Latin *missa* (in Old English *mæsse*) was the ancient word for a church service.

In other words, back when the word ‘Christmas’ was coined a thousand or so years ago, it literally meant ‘Christ’s

church service’—the church service celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.

So when you pop into church at Christmas, what you’re doing is keeping a bit of history alive.

Christ•mas Day

The Bible doesn’t actually tell us the date on which Jesus was born. So Christians who wanted to celebrate his birth had to pick a date, and what they picked was 25 December.

In other words, Christmas Day is a bit like the Queen’s Official Birthday. The Queen was born in April but her ‘official birthday’ is celebrated in June (in Australia). In much the same way, the early Christians didn’t know Jesus’ actual birthday, so they picked a day to be his ‘official birthday’.

It was back in the year 440 that this day was picked. And it was chosen because it was close to the date of the winter solstice, 22 December. That’s about the time when the sun reaches its most southern point and starts swinging back to the north. So in the northern hemisphere it was the mid-point of winter.

From the solstice onwards the days started slowly getting longer and warmer. Now that’s not a bad thing to celebrate: which the ancient pagans did with a big party.

When those pagans became Christians they said, “Hey, let’s keep our mid-winter party, and use it to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ”. Maybe not in exactly those words, but that was the idea.

And that’s how the date for Christmas Day was chosen.



Christ•mas tree

The tradition of the Christmas tree is German in origin. It came to England and the rest of the English-speaking world only because Queen Victoria married a German prince (her beloved Prince Albert).

In Germany the history of the Christmas tree cannot be traced back any further than the 17th century. However, there is a very nice legend about its origin.

According to this story Martin Luther, the great European Reformer, was returning home on a snowy Christmas Eve in the 16th century. He was struck by the glittering beauty of the stars overhead, seen through the branches of the fir trees.

He wanted to recreate this inspiring scene for his wife and children, so he dug up a small fir tree, took it into the nursery, and lit up its branches with candles—just as the starlight had glittered through the tree branches in the night sky.

It's only a legend, but it's a great little story.

crack•ers |'krækərz|

The Christmas cracker is said to have been invented by an English pastry cook named Tom Smith in 1846. He had earlier come across the French idea of giving sweets or bon-bons in twists of coloured paper. Smith developed this idea by adding small gifts, paper hats, and jokes or wise sayings on bits of paper.

But it is said that it was when he was sitting by his Christmas fire in 1846, listening to the crackling of the logs in the fireplace, that he conceived the idea of adding a small, crackling explosive to the paper tube that gave us the modern Christmas cracker.



Fa•ther Christ•mas

The potbellied, jolly image of Father Christmas seems to have been invented by American cartoonist Thomas Nast in a series of drawings he did for *Harper's Weekly* over more than 20 years, beginning in 1863. He said that he based his drawings on Clement Clarke Moore's poem, 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas' (see 'Santa Claus').

However, the title 'Father Christmas' is a good deal older than Nast's drawings and may have begun as a Christmas variation on 'Father Time'—pictured as a bearded old man who sees out the old year at the end of each December.



gift |gift|

The habit of exchanging gifts at Christmas can be traced back to the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus and the gifts they brought him of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

gold |gɒld| frank•in•cense |'frɑŋkən'sens| myrrh |mɜr|

Some months after his birth the infant Jesus was visited by a bunch of travellers from the East (see 'wise men'). They brought him three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold is familiar enough and probably symbolizes Jesus' status as a king (see 'Christ') and as a descendent of kings. But the other two are less familiar.

Frankincense was a whitish-yellow aromatic resin that was used in anointing priests. So its inclusion in this list of gifts probably symbolizes Jesus' priestly role (see 'Christ').

Myrrh is a resin from a tree native to the Arabian deserts and parts of Africa. It was valued for its aromatic and medical

properties. Myrrh was offered to Jesus as a mild pain-reliever when he was being crucified. So its inclusion in this list of gifts probably symbolizes the fact that this child was born to die a special and significant death.

Jesus understood this and described himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (John chapter 10, verses 14-15). Jesus' rescue mission consists of him dying our death, suffering our punishment, and purchasing our forgiveness (see 'Jesus').

Her•od |'herəd|

The ruler of the Roman province of Judea at the time when Jesus was born was a thoroughly nasty piece of work known as Herod the Great (he lived from 72 BC to 4 BC). When he was alerted to the birth of a potential royal child by visiting eastern wise men, he ordered the slaughter of all infants of the appropriate age. He was that sort of ruler. Mind you, he also had every possible rival to his throne, including his own family, murdered. Not a nice man.

in•car•na•tion |ɪnkər'nā sɪ ən|

The dramatic claim the Bible makes is that this is a 'visited planet'—that the God who made this world has visited this world on a startling rescue mission.

The word 'incarnation' comes from a Latin source and literally means 'to become flesh'. The claim the Bible makes is that in the birth of Jesus, the Creator God of the universe took on the form and flesh of a human being—entering the world as a baby, for the purpose of growing to manhood and then dying as a sacrifice to save—that is, to rescue—his people. He gave his life "as a ransom for many" (Mark chapter 10, verse 45).

Je•sus |'jēzəs|

It wasn't his mum and dad who picked out the name 'Jesus'—it was the angel who popped in to tell Mary that she was about to become pregnant: "...and you shall call his name Jesus" (Luke chapter 1, verse 31).

In Aramaic (the language Mary spoke), the name would have been 'Jeshua' or 'Joshua'—which literally means 'God saves' or 'God delivers'. In other words: 'God to the rescue!' When the New Testament part of the Bible was written down in Greek this Aramaic name became *Iesus*, which in English becomes 'Jesus'.

So, if Jesus **is** what his name says he is ('God to the rescue!'), what does he rescue people from?

Well, I hate to mention an unpleasant subject, but a recent survey of doctors shows that ten out of ten people die. Life is a fatal condition. None of us gets out of here alive. What we need rescuing from is death—and from the bit that comes after death: "...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement" (Hebrews chapter 9, verse 27).

And Jesus' name reveals that he is God's long-promised rescue plan: "...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew chapter 1, verse 21).

Jesus, then, is what his name says he is: God's rescue mission to Planet Earth. (And it might be a good idea to investigate the Jesus rescue mission and latch on to it, before you get hit by a passing bus.)

Ma•gi |'mājī| (the Magi)

See 'wise men'.

man•ger |'mānjər|

The first man to translate the New Testament part of the Bible



from the original Greek into English was William Tyndale (1492-1536). (He was, by the way, burnt at the stake for his attempts to make the Bible available in the language of the people.)

When he came to the story of the first Christmas he wrote, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke chapter 2, verse 7).

As a result the word ‘manger’ continues to turn up in many Christmas carols, and even in some modern translations of the Bible.

A manger was just a food trough—a box or trough in a stable or cow shed that held hay for the animals. In the absence of a crib or cot, using it for the baby was probably an inventive piece of improvisation.

na•tiv•i•ty |nə'tivitē; nā-|

‘Nativity’ is a word that means ‘birth’. It’s used these days to mean ‘the birth of Jesus Christ’. The word came into English from Old French back in the 12th century (blame William the Conqueror and his French-speaking Normans for that).

And behind the Old French word was a Latin word for ‘birth’ from which we get our familiar word ‘native’—because ‘native’ refers to your birth (if you were born in Australia, then you’re a ‘native’ of Australia).

No•el |nō'el|

Another word for a Christmas carol is a ‘noël’ (sometimes spelled ‘nowell’). In fact, one of the best known carols is called ‘The First Noël’. Why? Because Noël is another French name for Christmas. But how did that come about?

Well, there are several theories. One is that it's just a French twist on the Latin word for 'birth' (see 'nativity'). Another is that it can be traced back to the French word *nouvelles* meaning '(good) news'.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that originally 'noël' was "a word shouted or sung as an expression of joy... to commemorate the birth of Christ".



San•ta Claus |'santə klɔz|

Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in Lycia (modern Turkey) sometime before AD 350. Little is known of his life, but he was associated with kindness to children. For this reason, Saint Nicholas' Day (6 December) became the traditional day for giving gifts to children in the Netherlands.

This custom was taken to America by early Dutch settlers, and Santa Claus is merely an adaption of Sinter Klaas, the Dutch version of the name 'Saint Nicholas'.

He was popularized by a poem called 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas' by Clement Clarke Moore, published in New York in 1823—the one that begins with the famous line, "Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house...".

swad•dle |'swädl| cloth |klɒθ|

To 'swaddle' is an old word meaning 'to wrap'. So when older translations of the Bible say that the infant Jesus was placed in swaddling cloths, it just means that the baby was wrapped up, for warmth and security, in cloth used for that purpose. Remember, this happened in the days before you could pop down to your local store and buy a bunny suit for baby!

wise men

Some months after his birth, the infant Jesus was visited by a group of wise men from the East. This expression translates the word ‘magi’ meaning mathematicians, astronomers and/or astrologers—roughly the ancient equivalent of scientists.

They were non-Jews, or Gentiles, and their visit symbolizes the fact that the arrival of Jesus was good news for all people, everywhere—not just the people of Israel.

The exact number of these visitors is not given in the Bible, but it’s often assumed there were three of them because they brought three gifts (see ‘gold, frankincense, myrrh’).

Xmas |'krisməs; 'eksməs|

This is simply an abbreviation of ‘Christmas’ using the Greek letter *chi* (which is written like an X)—the first letter in the title ‘Christ’.



Yule•tide |'yoʊl,tɪd|

‘Yule’ appears to come from an Old English word—possibly from an Old Anglian name for the December and January period. This changed over time, and by the tenth century ‘Yule’ was being used for Christmas Day and for Christmas festivities in general. Hence, the log that burnt in the fireplace on Christmas Day was the ‘Yule log’.

Why do we have Christmas trees?

Where did 'Boxing Day' get its name? And what is a 'Noël'?

Join **Kel Richards**, the *ABC WordWatch* presenter, and take a closer look at the weird and wonderful words we use at Christmas.

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