

“History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme”

To paraphrase Theodor Reik, History doesn't repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.

Story 1: Emmanuel, Immanuel: the maid, the virgin

What difference does an "i" make?

Matthew tells us to behold the virgin who shall conceive, and give birth to Immanuel – with an 'i.'

He says this is because of the prophecy of Isaiah - which is behold, the young woman shall conceive and give birth to Emmanuel -- with an 'e.'

Does that e to i mean anything?

We sure make a lot out of the other change - Young woman to virgin.

What you see here is translation choices thousands of years old. The old Hebrew prophecy was translated into Greek. Then from Greek to old Aramaic. Then back into koine Greek! And then into modern English.

It's sort of like the kids' activity of taking something and having Google Translate run it through 100 times to give some weird poetry.

Words have more than one meaning. And the more often that word is translated, the greater the risk one of the other meanings is picked up.

Consider the word "Kid." In English, kid can mean a human child, or a baby goat, or to tell a joke. So, "I ate a kid," is already ambiguous in English. But when you translate it, some people are going to have, "I eat human babies" and others are going to have "I eat young goats" and others, "I eat telling jokes."

When Isaiah went into Greek and back, the translator chose the Greek for "a woman who hasn't had intercourse." The original Hebrew had this meaning, but it could also refer to a female who wasn't a girl, nor middle aged. Sort of like kid can mean a human child or a goat. So young woman, or young maid is pretty appropriate for a translation in English of Isaiah.

Indeed, 'maid' is really similar. Maid used to mean virgins only. But then we have maids of honour and milkmaids and handmaids and it came to mean... young woman.

But in Matthew, now we're translating the Greek translation of the Hebrew. So the Greek word is virgin, so we use that in English, even though it is one of several meanings in Hebrew.

But what of that e-i i-e switch?!

That's evidence of the translation. Ancient Hebrew said Immanuel with an ׁ, which isn't in Greek letters. But sounds like an "e." So Koine Greek said Emmanuel with an E. Today, Hebrew is romanized with the letter ׁ being an I. Both spellings mean the same thing: immanu (with us) el (God). With us is God. God with us.

But history likes to rhyme. My second story...

Story 2: Homoousia, homoiousia

The first world council of churches is gathering. The first ecumenical dialogue. Bishops from all over the known world are gathering at the call of the Emperor. 300 years ago Jesus walked this

earth physically. And in 300 years we have become a diverse and divisive lot - in no small part because of translation issues.

Up from Libya comes Arius. He teaches that God the Father is eternal. God chose to create the divine being called Jesus. Therefore, Son Jesus is subordinate to Father God. And although similar, they are not the same. God is the only God. Jesus is divine, but not God. Substance, essence, "God-ness" in Greek is ousia. So Arius taught homoi-ousia, similar substance. You'll find some of his teachings in Jehovah's Witnesses today.

Arius' Nile Delta student Athanasius is here. He's listening intently to the arguments. In 3 years time he'll split from his mentor and take charge of the Trinitarian Movement. We're part of that movement today. The Trinitarians teach God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all eternal, never having been made, all of the same essence, substance, God-ness, and together make the Godhead. 3 persons in 1 God. 3-in-1. This in Greek is homo-ousia.

Oh what a difference a single letter makes!

At this council the Nicæan Creed is developed. And homoousia -- without the i-- is considered "orthodox," as in the standard. With the i is considered heretical.

But both still continued then and continue to today. History likes to rhyme. How we were in the past is similar to how we are today.

Story 3: Jesus, Isa

I remember being young and being taught there is power in the name of Jesus. My great aunt had JESUS all in big capitals in all kinds of different decorations around her house. I knew just saying 'Jesus' was a complete prayer. It was a sacred, set apart, specific name.

And then I met my first Jesús (pronounced Hey-zeus) Jesús' family is from Mexico, and Jesús is a pretty common name there. Yes, it is the same as my Jesus.

And then my other great aunt taught me the song "Pie Jesu" (pronounced pee-aye aye-zoo) which in English is Pious Jesus. Aye-zoo... hey-zeus...

One more step along the translating foreign words or names we go and Jesu becomes Iesus in Latin. That same "I" that is found in church art everywhere with the IHS abbreviation. Remember us trying to get that Hebrew letter into Greek? Now from Greek we're going to Latin.

So when we dig all the way back to ancient Hebrew we find the really, really common Biblical name "Yeshua" in Hebrew, and "Isho" in Aramaic. Both meaning "YHWH Saves." We, in English, hear Yeshua as Jesus or Joshua, depending on who we're speaking about. And modern Arabic speakers say Isa, from Isho.

Language is living! It changes and moves. Pronunciations change. Meanings change. And then there are mistranslations. And one language may evolve along a different path than another, so two translations no longer agree with one another.

This happened in Nicæa. Each Bishop showed up and had to work through translators and translations. Through regional differences and traditions. Tensions got incredibly high.

Story 4. And Santa Claus arrived.

I kid you not! You likely are picturing in your head a jolly old elf dressed in Nordic gear arriving with reindeer. But that's how we picture him today. Indigenous Germans have an 8-legged horse ride by the

god Odin, who has a long white beard, lives in the North, is cloaked, and brings gifts during his wild ride. He was translated into Father Christmas when Christians arrived. Father Christmas was combined with Saint Nicholas. In Dutch, Saint Nicholas is Sinter Klaas. And although Sinterklaas and Father Christmas aren't combined in the Netherlands, they were combined in English speaking North America. So. Saint Nicholas, ol' Saint Nick, was known for giving gifts to the poor, in particular to impoverished girls for their doweries. Saint Nicholas was there at that council I spoke about. He was the bishop of Myra. As he listened to Arius speak, legend goes, he got so enraged he got up and slapped Arius.



Meaning, yes, Santa Claus got violent over the letter 'i.'

How is any of this good news? Because to me, it shows that what looks like great differences among us may be translation issues. It may be cultural issues. If we are willing to wade through all the years of history, we may find we all have the same root origins. We all want the same things. We all want to be loved, and to love others.

We all want security. We want to feel safe.

The arguments over virgin or maid, Emmanuel or Immanuel, same essence or similar essence, Jesus or Isa, Saint Nick or Father Christmas all are charged, emotional, because they touch the roots of our being.

We feel threatened when someone attacks one of our core beliefs that protect our own essences, our own security, our own loved ones. I would say we "over react," except I do the same and all people do the same. So this isn't over reaction. It is human nature.

We protect what, and who, we love.

These stories are a reminder to me to pause this Christmas. I will hear relatives saying things that make me want to cross the table and repeat Saint Nick's sin. I will hear loved ones saying things that cut to the root of who I am. I will be in a different reality than others.

My human nature says to fight with all I've got.

But I am given another spirit, too. God's spirit. A spirit of love. A spirit that pauses and hears in my relatives' words their fear their root identities are being attacked. Their concern the world they love is under attack. Their fierce love that makes them take up their boxing gloves and go on the attack.

I won't agree with them. Saint Nick never agreed with Arius. But he did repent of the violence. And I can take a moment to reflect on how history rhymes with itself and breathe. I am not the first family where emotions run high. I won't be the last. I'm not the first generation to feel like the opposition is from another planet. I won't be the last. Behind it all, behind the rhetoric and the phrases, behind the translations and misunderstandings, behind the anger and fear is... love.

Love threatened. Love wanted. Love given. Love desired.

And pausing, I may be able to respond to that deep root we share. That deep need to be loved and to love.

Not to win the Christmas Table Debate of 2025 - but to say, "I disagree with you, but I still love you. You disagree with me, I hope you still love me."

I pray God loans me some of the love God has shown to us in Jesus. Empowers me through the Holy Spirit. Answers my Christmas wish - and grants me the power to rise to the moment.

I pray the same for you. Each encounter you have, may you be the non-anxious presence in the room. Each conflict you have, may you be the one who is deescalating. Each misunderstanding that you encounter, may God be granting you the insight to turn your disharmony into a rhyme.

Amen.



Scripture Readings – Dec. 21, 2025 - LCUCPC

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Isaiah Gives Ahaz the Sign of Immanuel

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1: 18 - 25

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

May God's spirit shape

our understanding of these words.

And may they awaken in our hearts

