

# Christmas In Flatland

Steve Sorensen © 2004  
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## By the way...

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Perhaps the first science fiction book ever written was "Flatland" by Edwin Abbott. Without knowing any more than the title, we of the Allegheny Mountains might think it's about our neighboring state to the west. But no, it's not about Ohio. Its subtitle is "A Romance of Many Dimensions," and so it is about many things, among them social satire still pertinent today. But believe it or not, it's as much a theology book as it is science fiction or satire. To be more exact, it offers insights into the theological doctrine of Christmas, also known as the Incarnation. I've read a few things on that subject and, for people who understand best through analogy, this might be the most convincing.

Now, I may have already confused everyone, but please be patient and I'll explain.

Edwin Abbott was an English schoolmaster with mathematical and theological leanings, and he wrote Flatland in 1883. Like "The Wizard of Oz," Flatland is an allegory, a story with at least two meanings. It describes a hypothetical two-dimensional world having, as you would guess, length and breadth, but no height. In geometric terms, Flatland is (what else?) a simple plane.

Naturally, Flatland is inhabited by beings that have no more than two dimensions. In the culture of Flatland, the simpler a citizen's shape, the lower its class. Therefore, points and line are at the bottom, followed by triangles, squares, pentagons and . . . you get the picture.

Flatlanders all have occupations based on their shapes. For example, points and lines hold positions of servitude. Triangles make up the laboring

came to dwell in Flatland. This perfect three-dimensional being is a sphere, and when it intersected with Flatland's reality it had the appearance of a perfect circle. Indeed, it was a perfect circle, but it was also much, much more than Flatlanders could see.

Flatlanders saw the sphere as one of their kind – a perfect two-dimensional being. That's all their eyes had the ability to see. That's all their minds had the capacity to understand.

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The Gospel According to St. John used sparing but profound words to convey the Christmas story. John called the infinite God "The Word," and said he "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." The transcendent intersected our world and became imminent, and that's what Christians celebrate at Christmas.

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classes and the military and, for obvious reasons, the more acute the triangle the better its utility as a soldier. The more sides a shape has, the further it is removed from the proletarian classes. The more nearly a Flatlander approaches circular, the more nearly perfect it is.

Of course, no one is perfect, even in Flatland, until a perfect shape from the three-dimensional world (a world Flatlanders could not imagine)

Geometrically speaking, we humans have an advantage over the citizens of Flatland. We stand in a third dimension, a dimension where we can imagine a sphere intersecting a plane and becoming a circle.

All of this is background. I said Flatland was a theology book and, outside of Christian theology, no one is perfect in our three-dimensional world either. Christians believe that someone has intersected our



world, someone perfect and beyond our ability to understand. God becoming a man – yet in some humanly inaccessible dimension much more than a man – in Jesus is analogous to the sphere becoming Flatland's perfect circle.

For Christians, the holiday season cannot be blended into a confusing hybrid some are calling HanuRamaKwanzMas. Christians believe it's in Jesus that we understand God. The Gospel According to St. John used sparing but profound words to convey the Christmas story. John called the infinite God "The Word," and said he "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." The transcendent intersected our world and became imminent, and that's what Christians celebrate at Christmas.

*Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created. You can contact Greta or her master at Greta52@verizon.net.*