Origins of Christmas

Summary

Where did December 25th actually come from? This article traces the date and the customs back through history — and makes a scriptural case for a very different time of year.

- The New Catholic Encyclopedia, Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough, and other reference works tracing Christmas to Roman Saturnalia and Mithraic sun-worship festivals.
- Two scriptural arguments against a December birth: shepherds in the fields, a winter census.
- A case for an early-fall birth, based on the priestly courses tied to John the Baptist's conception.
- Deuteronomy 12:30-32 and Matthew 15:8-9 invoked against incorporating pagan customs into worship, regardless of stated intent.

The full article begins on the next page.

Origins of Christmas

What do evergreen trees, reindeer, mistletoe and yule logs have to do with the birth of Yah'shua the Messiah? And was He really born on Dec. 25? Discover the real history of Christmas!

Every year around the middle of November, the decorations are going up, the parties are being planned, the presents are being bought. People around the world will again be celebrating what they perceive to be “Christmas”. More than any other religious holiday, Christmas is associated with the name of the Messiah. The word *Christmas* is short for "the Christ's mass," instituted by the Catholic Church and continued by many Protestant churches.

Yet, curiously, the Bible records nothing about the apostles or early Congregation observing Christmas. History shows that it wasn't celebrated until hundreds of years after Yah'shua the Messiah lived on earth, and long after the apostles had passed from the scene.

Even more curious are the surprising circumstances under which Christmas came to be observed, and the many aspects of today's Christmas celebrations-including the date, Dec. 25-that have nothing to do with Yah'shua's birth, but *do* have a lot to do with ancient pre-Christian religions. What does history show us about the origins of the world's most popular holiday? It's quite an eye-opening story!

New Catholic Encyclopedia on

Christmas:

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* in discussing the unlikelihood of a Dec. 25 date for Yah'shua the Messiah's birth and how that particular date was chosen, gives some insight into the holiday's origins:

"Why, then, were December 25 and January 6 chosen for the celebration of the Messiah's birth? Several theories are offered in explanation. Some actually believed December 25 was the birthday of the Messiah and tried to prove it by arguing from the conception of St. John the Baptist. Assuming, gratuitously, that Zachary was high priest and that the Day of Atonement fell on September 24, John would have been born on June 24 and the Messiah 6 months later, on December 25. *This theory is now considered completely untenable."*

Continuing in the same source: "L. Duchesne” suggested that the date of Christmas was determined from March 25, the traditional date of the Crucifixion. If He died on March 25, He must also have been conceived on this date and thus have been born 9 months later on December 25. More recently H. Engberding has tried, unsuccessfully, to defend a comparable position.

"According to the hypothesis suggested by H. Usener, developed by B. Botte, and accepted by most scholars today, the birth of the Messiah *was assigned the date of the winter solstice,* because *on this day,* as the sun began its return to the northern skies, *the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun.*

"Christmas originated at a time when the cult of the sun was particularly strong at Rome. This theory finds support in some of the Church Fathers' contrasting the birth of the Messiah and the winter solstice. Though the substitution of Christmas for the pagan festival cannot be proved with certainty, *it remains the most plausible explanation for the dating of Christmas" (1967, Vol. 3, p. 656, emphasis added throughout).*

This encyclopedia admits that arguments for a Dec. 25 birth of Yah'shua the Messiah simply aren't credible (see "Biblical Evidence Shows Yah'shua the Messiah Wasn't Born on Dec. 25 - below). It acknowledges that this date was chosen because of popular existing festivities honouring the ancient sun god Mithra and celebrating the winter solstice.

Ancient origins of Christmas:

Man, Myth & Magic is an illustrated encyclopedia of mythology and religion. In its article on Christmas, we uncover a treasure trove of research material on this holiday's origins and history.

"Christmas has its origin in *two ancient pagan festivals,* the great *Yule-feast of the Norsemen* and *the Roman Saturnalia.* Extending from Advent, which begins on 30 November or the Sunday nearest to it, to Candlemas Day on 2 February, it was close enough to the winter solstice to acquire many of the associations of the Norse ceremony: the Yule-log, the evergreen decorations in houses and churches, even the Christmas feast itself. *These elements were combined with the Saturnalia of the Romans to provide the basis for the early Christian festival.*

"During the Saturnalia, gifts were made by the wealthy to the poor in honour of the golden age of liberty when Saturn ruled the known world, and slaves were allowed to change places and clothing with their masters. They even elected their own mock king who, for the period of the festival, ruled as a despot. The Saturnalia involved the wildest debauchery, and was a festival worthy of Pan himself.

"Naturally it came under heavy censure from the early Congregation and despite the fact that Yah'shua the Messiah and the saints gradually replaced the pagan deities *it was long considered completely out of character with the Christian ideal.* However, *the festival was far too strongly entrenched in popular favour to be abolished,* and the *[Catholic]* Church finally granted the necessary recognition, believing that *if Christmas could not be suppressed it should be preserved in honour of the Christian God" (1995, Vol. 3, p. 418).*

Do you grasp what this is telling us? We saw earlier that the Dec. 25 date for Christmas came from ancient pre-Christian festivals. Here we see that the same ancient pagan celebrations honouring other gods were continued, with the Catholic Church simply relabeling the festivities and customs as Christian!

Christmas banned for its paganism:

The *Man, Myth & Magic* encyclopedia reveals more of the strange story of Christmas as it continued after the ancient celebrations were adopted by the Catholic Church:

"Once given a Christian basis the festival became fully established in Europe *with many of its pagan elements undisturbed.* It was only in the 4th century that 25 December was officially decreed to be the birthday of the Messiah, and it was another 500 years before the term Midwinter Feast was abandoned in favour of the word Christmas.

"Even then on the Continent the festival continued to show many features inherited from the Saturnalia. In particular, the Feast of Fools was a wild debauch reminiscent of the pagan past. The Normans when they invaded England in 1066, introduced a Master of Ceremonies into the English Christmas. Known as the Lord of Misrule, his counterpart in Scotland was called the Abbot of Unreason.

". . . The *undisguised pagan element in Christmas* had often provoked criticism from extreme Protestants but the festival was not really affected by their beliefs until the Puritans came to power in the 17th century. Christmas was attacked as 'the old heathens' feasting day to Saturn their god' and carols were forbidden. Finally, 25 December was proclaimed a fast day in 1644. The new rule was enforced by the army, which spent much of its time pulling down the greenery that festive 'pagans' had attached to their doors.

"In Scotland the prohibition was enforced with great rigor. This anti-Christmas attitude spread to Puritan territories in America. The Church established special services for Christmas in Boston during the 1690s, but many civil authorities strongly opposed this move. And it was not until some 150 years later that Christmas first became a legal holiday in the United States, in Alabama in 1836" *(pp. 418-419).*

Of course, Christmas has long been accepted throughout much of the world. Now it's so popular-not to mention commercially important-that it's almost inconceivable to realize that at one time it was outlawed for its pagan associations and practices!

An ancient nativity celebration

reborn:

The noted British anthropologist and scholar Sir James Frazer wrote a classic work on ancient myths and religious practices titled *The Golden Bough.* His findings on the ancient origins of our Christmas practices and customs are revealing:

". . . There can be no doubt that the Mithraic religion *[the worship of Mithra, the Persian sun god, popular in the Roman Empire]* proved a formidable rival to Christianity, combining as it did a solemn ritual with aspirations after moral purity and a hope of immortality. Indeed the issue of the conflict between the two faiths appears for a time to have hung in the balance. An instructive relic of the long struggle *is preserved in*

our festival of Christmas, which the [Catholic] Church seems to have borrowed directly from its heathen rival.

"In the Julian calendar the twenty-fifth of December was reckoned the winter solstice, and it was regarded as the Nativity of the Sun, because the day begins to lengthen and the power of the sun to increase from that turning-point of the year. The ritual of the nativity, as it appears to have been celebrated in Syria and Egypt, was remarkable. The celebrants retired into certain inner shrines, from which at midnight they issued with a loud cry, 'The Virgin has brought forth! The light is waxing!'

"The Egyptians even represented the new-born sun by the image of an infant which on his birthday, the winter solstice, they brought forth and exhibited to his worshippers. No doubt the Virgin who thus conceived and bore a son on the twenty-fifth of December was the great Oriental [i.e., Middle Eastern] goddess whom the Semites called the Heavenly Virgin or simply the Heavenly Goddess; in Semitic lands she was a form of Astarte *[also known as Easter].*

"Now Mithra was regularly identified by his worshippers with the Sun, the Unconquered Sun, as they called him; hence his nativity also fell on the twenty-fifth of December. *The Gospels say nothing as to the day of the Messiah's birth, and accordingly the early Congregation did not celebrate it.*

"In time, however, the Christians of Egypt came to regard the sixth of January as the date of the Nativity, and the custom of commemorating the birth of the Saviour on that day gradually spread until by the fourth century it was universally established in the East.

"But at the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century the Western [Catholic] Church, which had never recognized the sixth of January as the day of the Nativity, adopted the twenty-fifth of December as the true date, and in time its decision was accepted also by the Eastern Church. At Antioch the change was not introduced till about the year 375 A.D." *(1993, p. 358).*

Sir James Frazer studied the thread of Christmas customs and practices through ancient times and reached an inescapable conclusion: Christmas is but a relic of the worship of the pagan god known by the Persians and Romans as Mithra or Mithras, relabelled with a Christian name.

A pagan festival relabeled:

Why did the early Catholic Church adopt and relabelled this ancient pagan celebration? Frazer explains:

"What considerations led the ecclesiastical authorities to institute the festival of Christmas? The motives for the innovation are stated with great frankness by a Syrian writer, himself a Christian. 'The reason,' he tells us, 'why the fathers transferred the celebration of the sixth of January to the twenty-fifth of December was this. *It was a custom of the heathen to celebrate on the same twenty-fifth of December the birthday of the Sun,* at which they kindled lights in token of festivity.

"In these solemnities and festivities the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the [Catholic] Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnized on that day and the festival of the Epiphany on the sixth of January. Accordingly, along with this custom, the practice has prevailed of kindling fires till the sixth.'

"The heathen origin of Christmas is plainly hinted at, if not tacitly admitted, by Augustine when he exhorts his Christian brethren not to celebrate that solemn day like the heathen on account of the sun, but on account of him who made the sun. In like manner *[Pope]* Leo the Great rebuked the pestilent belief that Christmas was solemnized because of the birth of the new sun, as it was called, and not because of the nativity of the Messiah.

"Thus it appears that the Christian *[Catholic]* Church *chose* to celebrate the birthday of its Founder on the twenty-fifth of December *in order to transfer the devotion of the heathen from the Sun to him who was called the Sun of Righteousness" (1993, pp. 358-359).*

The truth about Christmas's origins is simple: One of the ancient world's most popular celebrations-a festival that originated in sun worship and honouring pagan gods-was renamed and reborn as traditional Christianity's most popular celebration.

What would Yah'shua say?

Today, would Yah'shua the Messiah recognize the religion that professes to follow Him? Think about it: If you lived in the Holy Land in the time of Yah'shua and you observed Christmas, *you would be alone,* for no true Israelite ever kept Christmas during Yah'shua's life on earth. Further, if you saw Yah'shua or the apostles walking through the narrow passageways of Old Jerusalem or the dusty roads of Judea and you invited them to join in your Christmas celebration, what would they say?

Since Yah'shua the Messiah is the same yesterday, today and forever *(Hebrews 13:8),* and all Scripture is inspired by Yahweh *(2 Timothy 3:16)*, they might remind you of what Yahweh's Word says about incorporating pagan customs into your worship:

". . . Do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' *You shall not worship Yahweh your God in that way;* for every abomination to Yahweh which He hates they have done to their gods . . . Whatever I command you, *be careful to observe it;* you shall not *add to it* nor *take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:30-32).*

Yah'shua Himself might repeat to you what He said to the Pharisees, who considered their traditions and customs more important than obeying Yahweh's Word: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And *in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9).* Christmas, mentioned nowhere in the Bible, is a "commandment" of men.

The apostle Paul might remind you of the words he wrote to Congregation members in Corinth, a city steeped in pagan religious practices: ". . . What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has the Messiah with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?

"And what agreement has the temple of Yahweh with idols? For you are the temple of the living God . . . Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says Yahweh. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.' . . . Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of Yahweh" *(2 Corinthians 6:14-17;7:1).*

Does it really matter?

Sadly, for the bulk of modern Christianity these scriptures-which help define what true New Covenant Israelite faith is and is not-mean very little. Most of the 2.5 billion professing Christians on earth today observe Christmas and other extra biblical holidays without ever giving them a second thought.

Most will never take the time to look into their beliefs to learn their true origins, though information such as that found in this article can be found in virtually any modern library or on the Internet. Though the basic facts about the origins of Christmas are spelled out in almost any reputable encyclopedia, most people will not look long and hard at their traditions and customs to see if they square with the Bible.

It's especially ironic to see the articles that appear in many newspapers each year -often written by well-intentioned but misguided clergymen-who recite the pagan origins of Christmas and its trappings but conclude that it doesn't matter because it's now celebrated for a good cause. We have to wonder how they can reconcile that view with the clear scriptures quoted above.

What about your beliefs? Yah'shua the Messiah says that those who worship Yahweh "must worship [Him] in spirit and truth" *(John 4:24).* Are your beliefs and worship firmly grounded in biblical truth, or in ancient fables?

Biblical Evidence Shows Yah'shua

the Messiah Wasn't Born on Dec. 25:

History convincingly shows that Dec. 25 was popularized as the date for Christmas, not because the Messiah was born on that day but because it was already popular in pagan religious celebrations as the birthday of the sun.

But is it possible that Dec. 25 could be the day of the Messiah's birth?

"Lacking any scriptural pointers to Yah'shua's birthday, early Christian teachers suggested dates all over the calendar. Clement. . . picked November 18. Hippolytus . . . figured the Messiah must have been born on a Wednesday . . . An anonymous document*[,]* believed to have been written in North Africa around A.D.

243, placed Yah'shua's birth on March 28" *(Jeffery Sheler, U.S. News & World Report, "In Search of Christmas," Dec. 23, 1996, p. 58).*

A careful analysis of Scripture, however, clearly indicates that Dec. 25 is an unlikely date for the Messiah's birth. Here are two primary reasons: First, we know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at the time of Yah'shua's birth *(Luke 2:7-8)*. Shepherds were not in the fields during December. According to *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays,* Luke's account "suggests that Yah'shua may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" *(p. 309).*

Similarly, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* says this passage argues "against the birth *[of the Messiah]* occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted" shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.

Second, Yah'shua's parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census *(Luke 2:1-4)*. Such censuses were not taken in winter, when temperatures dropped below freezing and roads were in poor condition. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

Given the difficulties and the desire to bring pagans into Christianity, "the important fact then . . . to get clearly into your head is that the fixing of the date as December 25th was a compromise with paganism" *(William Walsh, The Story of Santa Klaus, 1970, p. 62)*.

If Yah'shua the Messiah wasn't born on Dec. 25, does the Bible indicate when He was born? The biblical accounts point to the fall of the year as the most likely time of Yah'shua's birth, based on the conception and birth of John the Baptist.

Since Elizabeth *(John's mother)* was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Yah'shua was conceived *(Luke 1:24-36)*, we can determine the approximate time of year Yah'shua was born if we know when John was born. John's father, Zacharias, was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple during the course of Abijah *(Luke 1:5)*.

Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 in that year *(The Companion Bible, 1974, Appendix 179, p. 200).*

It was during this time of temple service that Zacharias learned that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child *(Luke 1:8-13).* After he completed his service and traveled home, Elizabeth conceived *(verses 23-24).*

Assuming John's conception took place near the end of June, adding nine months brings us to the end of March as the most likely time for John's birth. Adding another six months *(the difference in ages between John and Yah'shua)* brings us to the end of September as the likely time of Yah'shua's birth.

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