

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

70 Do Christmas and New Years Have Pagan Origins?

Scripture: Hebrews 9:23-28; 10:1-6

The question before us is akin to saying that if Christmas and New Years do have pagan origins, Christians ought to have second thoughts about celebrating them. The fact is that there have been certain Christian groups, both in the past and in the present, who strongly refuse any participation whatsoever in Christmas and New Year celebrations of any kind. On the other hand, pious believers for centuries have felt that there is a great deal to be gained through a balanced and wholesome application of the true meaning of what Christmas is intended to celebrate. I suppose that every Christian will have to decide for himself what is the mind of the Lord in the matter, but it should be an informed decision. The purpose of our study this morning is to review some of the facts concerning the history of Christmas and New Years as well as to be mindful of certain implications which the Bible contains.

I. THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEARS:

Sooner or later we are all going to meet someone who will be quick to remind us that the celebration of Christmas on December 25 is but a Christianized form of an old pagan festival known as Brumalia. This particular festival was held on December 25, immediately following the festival of Saturn known as Saturnalia. The dates of the Saturnalia were December 17-24. This was a Roman celebration in honor of the field god Saturnus. The purpose was to celebrate the shortest day of the year, when the sun now began to inch its way back to Spring only to bring new life to all of nature. Some people believe that this event has given birth to the celebration of Christmas by Christian people.

Early in Third Century there lived a Greek Bishop by the name of Hippolytus, he eventually was martyred for his faith. He seems to have been the first authority to set December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. The Schaff-Herzog **Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge** says about this man, "How much the calculation of Hippolytus had to do with the fixing of December 25th, and how much the date of the festival (Christmas) depended upon the pagan Brumalia (December 25), following the Saturnalia (Dec.17-24)....cannot be accurately determined."

This celebration of Christ's nativity was introduced as a special feast in Rome about the middle of the fourth century. It quickly spread through the Roman Empire and by the fifth century was already established in Gaul and Spain. From the Church in Gaul came the first news that a definite period had been prescribed for preparation and the name "Advent" was given to this preparatory period. In Rome the celebration of Advent originated considerably later, sometime during the sixth century. Here then, we have a little back ground material which helps us to understand why people refer to "the pagan origins of Christmas."

As far as New Years is concerned we know that the ancient Egyptians began their year on September 21, the date of the autumn equinox. This is one of the two times a year when the sun crosses the equator and the days and nights are of equal length. The Greeks began their year on June 21, the date of the summer solstice. This occurs twice a year when the sun's distance on the ecliptic is greatest from the celestial equator, this happens about June 22 and December 22. The custom of observing New Years among the Romans originated in 747 B. C. when they presented to Taitius, king of the Sabine's, branches from trees consecrated to Strenia, goddess of strength. Gifts were also given called "stranae," Under the Caesars, these gifts often became a matter of personal profit to the emperor. Claudius, aware of the burden upon the people, issued a decree limiting such giving. New Years was observed in professing Christendom as a Festival of Circumcision marking the ceremony which took place in Jesus' life eight days after He was born. The Feast of Circumcision has been celebrated in the Roman Church since 487 and in the Anglican Church since 1549.

II. THE DATE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH:

Although December 25 is observed around the world as the anniversary of Christ's birth, the exact date is not known. We have an instance out of antiquity when the Bishop of Rome received a letter from the Bishop of Jerusalem asking him to consult the archives in the Imperial City to determine the exact date. The bishop of Rome made an investigation and replied that the date was December 25. Egyptian scholars have set the date as May. 20, while others have felt it was April 19 or 20. In fact, there is not a month which has not been suggested at one time or other by various Scholars.

There was a Greek bishop who became a martyr by the name of Hippolytus. He lived in the Third Century and he seems to have been the first authority to fix December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. Having already mentioned him, let me

go on to say that the omission of the actual date in the Gospel narrative seems reasonable when you realize that God or the Holy Spirit's emphasis was upon the person of the day and not the day itself. We can well imagine that the four men who wrote the biography of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) probably knew the day Jesus was born. They were concerned with other details of His birth. I think we can see in this strange omission a warning against the tendency people would have to celebrate a day rather than the Christ Himself.

Several suggestions, however, can be made for reasoning that Jesus did not come forth from Mary's womb on December 25th. The three outstanding reasons for suggesting an alternate date are **(1)** The words of Luke 2:8 tell us that *"There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night."* The problem is that this was an unlikely time of the year for shepherds to be in the fields at all. The nights were much too cold for them to abide in the field. Furthermore, at that time the provender, or dry food upon which the flock fed, would have been in scarce supply in the fields. **(2)** Luke 2:5 tells us that Mary was great with child. Which route Mary and Joseph chose for the trip south from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not definite. It was a distance of 90 miles in a chill time of the year if the December date is held to. Mary is going to suffer many discomforts. The central route via the valleys winding through the hills of Samaria would have been the shortest. If the pious Joseph wanted to stay clear of the Samaritans, He would have had to go across the plain of Esdraelon, down the Jordan River valley as far as Jericho, up to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem. Whichever course he took, it was unseasonal for a woman in Mary's condition.

The unwelcome prospects of Mary enduring the rigors of such a trip on the back of a jogging donkey when she was about to go into labor surely would be increased if the weather had been a factor. This question has given rise to much speculation. Sixteenth century woodcuts show Mary and Joseph all bundled up pressing forward in the face of a heavy European snow storm. Palestine lies between the 31 degree and 33 degree north latitude line, which places it in the same parallel as Georgia and Arizona. However, for various reasons, local climates in the land of Palestine range from sub-arctic to torrid. There is the possibility of snow, in 1950 twenty inches fell in the Jerusalem area. **(3)** The third reason for the unlikelihood of a December 25th birth is that of the tax levied by Augustus Caesar. This man had decreed an enrollment or census of his empire at the time of Jesus birth. All subjects were to return for registration to their ancestral home. Mary and Joseph were distant descendants of King David

and thus were required to return to the place of David's birth. (Luke 2:3) The point here is that this was the worst possible time of the year for people to be journeying to their ancestral homes.

So far as we know, the earliest allusion we have to Christians observing a December 25th date for Jesus' birth comes from the record of Clement of Alexandria early in the third Century, this was about the year 330 No official reason is handed down in ecclesiastical documents for this choice and we may wonder why such a date would have been chosen in the face of the obstacles already mentioned. Some have felt Dec. 25 was chosen because of official records of the Roman Census taken at the Savior's birth. John Chrysostom held to this position. He was mistaken for no one in Rome ever claimed that the records of Cyrinus were extant in the fourth century or that Jesus name was on them. Another reason suggested was of a symbolic nature. Malachi 4:2 calls the Messiah the "*Sun of Righteousness,*" and it was felt that his birth had to coincide with the beginning of a new solar cycle, which meant He had to be born at the time of the winter solstice.

There is another explanation and for many this seems the most likely. In the Roman Empire it was a custom to celebrate the birthdays of rulers and famous people. (Matthew 14:6) Sometimes the celebration did not coincide with the actual day of birth. The birthday of Plato was celebrated on the feast day of the God of Apollo. The Romans celebrated the feast of the sun god (Sol Invictus; The Unconquered Sun) on December 25. All through the empire this day was called the "Birthday of the Sun." It would seem only natural for Christians to celebrate the birthday of their ruler, and the one who is called the "*Light of the World.*"

One final explanation concerning December 25 has to do with another day which Christians celebrated and which was known as Michaelmas, that is, Michael-Sent. Michaelmas was celebrated on September 29th. Michael was the great archangel of God. Now, September 29th was the first day of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. It was at that time that thousands of pilgrims took their journey to Jerusalem and dwelt in small "tabernacles" or booths as they reflected upon the wilderness wanderings. The first day of this feast came on the 15th day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. On the Roman calendar it was September 29th. (Leviticus 23:34-35) This was a feast which must be kept. (Deuteronomy 16:16) This time of the year was ideal for the Roman census, being warm enough for travel. Shepherds would still have their flocks in the field, whereas these things would have been unlikely in the winter period. In

John 1:14 it is said that the Word dwelt (literally: tabernacled) among us. It certainly would have been a time to describe by the words, *“we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.”* Interestingly, if one counts back the exact number of days for human gestation (280 days), the period which lies between conception and birth, you arrive at December 25.

When we realize that the actual birth of Jesus was a normal birth, and that the miracle had to do with the conception, the Holy Spirit's placement of that *“holy thing,”* (Luke 1:35) it is easy to understand why early Christians celebrated on September 29th. It was more than a celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus came forth from the womb on that day, 280 days after having entered the womb on December 25th. You will also notice the interesting words of Isaiah 9:6, *“Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given...”* Why differentiate between the giving and the bearing of the Son? Could it not be that on December 25 the Son was “given?” Could it not be that on September 29th the child was born? On Michael-Mass Christ was born, on Christmas Christ was given. If we feel that this is a plausible explanation, it is very reasonable for Christians to celebrate a Christmas Day on December 25th, they are not celebrating Christ's birth, they are celebrating the incarnation at the time of conception. Of course, lest we become sidetracked, the date of Christ's birth is insignificant compared to the message surrounding that birth. We might suggest here that it is entirely appropriate to celebrate Christ's birth at the time of the winter solstice, when the nights are longest, for the appearing of Christ has changed the direction of man's trek into darkness, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (II Timothy 1:10)

III. THE CELEBRATION OF NEW YEARS:

I have already mentioned the Festival of Circumcision observed in both the Roman and Anglican Church. Just how this related to the turn of the year it is difficult to tell. We do know that our present calendar is four or five years off by reason of the fact that a monk-mathematician by the name of Dionysius Exiguus dated the Nativity 753 years after the founding of Rome. Yet, Herod died only 749 years after Rome was founded. The result was to give the correct date for the founding of Rome, but to throw the birth of Christ off about four or five years. It was his desire to reform the calendar in a way that it would pivot around Christ. Jesus may have been born around 5 or 6 B.C. according to our current calendar. Thus, He was about thirty years of age when He began His public

ministry in or about 28 A.D. We are not able to work back for the exact date of Jesus' birth. It is the undatable date.

We do not know how early Christians welcomed the New Year. We can look to the Old Testament and discern some interesting precedents. The civil year of the Jews began in the middle of September. The beginning of the year known as Rosh Hashanah, was characterized by the blowing of trumpets calling the people to holy assembly. This was a time of rejoicing and expectation. Immediately following there were ten days of repentance and confession, culminating in the solemn observance of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. People confessed their sins on this day which finally culminated with the symbolical goats. (Leviticus 16) After offering a bullock for his own sins, the high priest was directed to select two goats. One was to be slain at the mercy seat in the holy place in the tabernacle. This offering was accepted by God and was considered by Him an atonement. (Leviticus 17:11) The second goat was called a "scapegoat." It was sent away into the wilderness after the sins of the people were confessed over its head by the high priest. These two goats symbolized that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin (Hebrews 9:22) and that "sins and iniquities God would remember no more." (Hebrews 10:17-18) This solemn ritual was repeated each year. Doubtless, each new year, they made resolution to live more righteously as God would help them. It seems to me we have a precedent of some kind here as we step into a new year yet unspoiled. Of course, we are glad for the clear salvation we have in the person and work of Christ. Yet, I feel the timing of those feasts was significant in the lives of those ancient people, and of course, God is no less interested in confession and holy resolve now, than He was then.

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