

BIBLICAL LITERACY

Christmas History

As we approach December 25, 2010, much of the Christian world is preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, you can scour the New Testament from Matthew chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 22, and you will find no indication whatsoever of the date that Jesus was born. While there are two accounts of the birth of Jesus (Matthew & Luke), neither of those accounts give any indication that the birth occurred on December 25th.¹ Similarly, the New Testament gives no indication that the early church celebrated the birth of Christ on any special day.² In fact, Paul makes no reference in all of his writings to the birth of Christ, nor do other New Testament writers beyond Matthew and Luke. In Luke's history of the church (the book of Acts), he also does not make any reference to the church celebrating Christ's birth.

So, when did the church begin celebrating the birth of Christ? When did the church decide December 25th was an appropriate day for the celebration? Both of these are good questions that are fairly asked, especially in an Advent season. In the process of answering these questions, we will also bring our Christmas history up to date with a few more questions: Was there a real Saint Nick? What about Santa Claus? Why do we exchange presents? Who thought of chopping down a tree and sticking it in a house with a bunch of light bulbs on it? Last, but not least, was there really a reindeer named Rudolph with a red nose?

Our discussion will focus first on the gospel accounts of the birth of Christ. We will then consider the historical development of the Christmas holiday. Finally, we will look at the origination of many modern American Christmas traditions.

¹ In fact, Luke notes "there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" when an angel said to them, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Lk 2:8,11). They were in the fields with their flocks at the time that Jesus was born. Scholars seem fairly certain that during the era when Christ was born, shepherds kept their flocks in the fields from the months of March through November. (Kelly, Joseph, *The Origins of Christmas*, (Liturgical Press 2004) at 57). This seasonal indication implies that December 25th would not be the proper date for the actual birth of Christ.

² In fact, some dispute whether the New Testament church celebrated any day as more special than another. There are indications that the Lord's Day (Sunday) was marked as special (1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10). Beyond that, Paul writes in Romans that, "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike." Which days were considered "more sacred than another," however, Paul does not say. Some scholars would consider this to include days like celebrating Christ's birth. Other scholars consider the honoring of certain Jewish holy days more likely.

NEW TESTAMENT ACCOUNTS OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

The birth of Jesus is told in two separate places in the New Testament. In Matthew chapter one, after 14 verses of genealogy, Matthew explains that Mary was pregnant with Jesus by the Holy Spirit. At that point, Mary and Joseph had not yet finalized and consummated their marriage. Joseph was planning on sending Mary away quietly when an angel appeared and explained the baby was conceived of the Holy Spirit. The angel also told Joseph to name the baby Jesus (Hebrew “Joshua” meaning “God [Yahweh] is salvation”) “for He will save His people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21). Matthew shows this to be fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that “a virgin will be with a child and bear a son and she will call His name Immanuel” (Isa. 7:14). Joseph followed the instructions of the angel and Jesus was born “in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king” (Mt. 2:1).

Matthew then records the visit of the Magi,³ noting first their encounter with Herod and the wise men of Jerusalem. The wise men explained the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (quoting Mic. 5:2). The Magi followed the star into Bethlehem where they visited the baby Jesus bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Joseph then followed additional angelic instructions and fled with Mary and Jesus into Egypt before Herod’s sword killed male children under the age of two in Bethlehem.

Luke adds additional detail to the story. He tells us that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem pursuant to a decree of Caesar Augustus for a census. Unfortunately, historical records of that census do not exist, so they are of no help in dating the time of Jesus’ birth. It is Luke who adds the information about the angel appearing to the shepherds in their fields with “good news of great joy which will

³ Are you familiar with the Christmas song, “We Three Kings of Orient Are?” It comes from this passage. Yet, Matthew does not tell us the Magi were kings, nor does Matthew tell us that there were “three.” Those are later church decisions! Matthew merely reports that the Magi came from the East and brought Christ gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. However, the church saw this Matthew passage indicating a fulfillment of Isaiah 60, which promised, “A multitude of camels will cover you...They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord” (Is. 60:6). Earlier in the chapter, Isaiah noted that, “Nations will come to your light, and the kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa. 60:3). From this passage, the church decided the gift giving Magi must have been the kings Isaiah prophesied. This was already well in circulation by 200 when the North African theologian Tertullian (see Lesson 16) wrote that the Eastern Church regarded the Magi as kings. So, why does the song (and Christmas tradition) say there were three? Some believe that the three gifts indicated three men, but history shows us more! Origen, the great early church father who allegorized the Old Testament, believed that Isaac, Abraham’s son, was a prototype of Jesus. From that, Origen went to Genesis 26:26-31 where King Abimelech and two others came to Isaac and acknowledged him as blessed of the Lord. Origen said that these three were the prototypes in the Old Testament of the Magi.

be for all the people” (Lk 2:10). This news, of course, is the birth of the Christ child.

The shepherds then hear many angels singing glory to God and peace on earth. The shepherds head straight to Bethlehem to see the miracle. They found Jesus with Mary and Joseph lying in a manger.

We can readily see in these gospel accounts the source of many of our treasured Christmas carols. Those carols, however, come much later in history. We turn now outside the New Testament to find the remaining roots of the celebration we have today.

EARLY CHURCH CELEBRATION

As we have seen, we have no evidence of the New Testament church celebrating the birth of Jesus. This is not totally surprising, in the sense that the New Testament church anticipated the return of Jesus most any day. Faced with the imminent return, the church never seemed to focus on annual celebrations. We do not even have an indication of the New Testament church celebrating Easter in the sense that we observe it today.

By the 2nd Century, however, there were branches of Christianity that were focusing on when Jesus was born. Many scholars believe some of this focus arose because of the Gnostic movement within Christianity (See Church History Lessons 8 and 9 on Gnosticism⁴). Because the Gnostics never saw the death of Christ as anything redemptive, they had a tendency to focus on other events within the life of Christ as the basis for their doctrine and teaching. For some, it seems the incarnation was an event worth celebrating, or at least recognizing. Therefore, some Gnostics tried to make a determination on which date Jesus was born. Clement of Alexandria (he lived from the mid 100’s to c.215) wrote that the Gnostics, or at least one group of Gnostics, dated the birth of Christ to be May 20, 3 BC.⁵ This was one of a number of different dates bantered about as the possible

⁴ Our Church History lessons are available at the class Internet site, www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁵ All of these dates that we use during this time period are reinterpreted into our calendar. Clement of Alexandria writes with the Egyptian calendar (“they say it took place in the 28th year of Augustus [3 BC] and in the 25th day of the month Pachon” [May 20th that year] See Origen, *The Stromata*, Chapter 21), which obviously was very different than our own. Similarly, the “B.C.” connotation was not devised until about 525 by a Catholic Monk named Dionysius Exiguus (Latin for “Dennis the Short”). As a practical matter, Dionysius made a mistake in computing the calendar. He dated Christ’s birth too late. Christ was born while Herod Antipas was on the throne. Herod died in 4 BC. Most scholars today recognize Christ was born somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C.

date of Christ's birth. During this same time period, Origen (c.185-254) (see Church History Lessons 10 and 11) wrote against the concept of celebrating Christ's birth at all. Origen's review of scripture indicated to him that only evil people celebrated birthdays (namely Pharaoh and Herod).

Scholars are uncertain when exactly December 25th became the date to celebrate the birth of Christ. Clearly by 336, December 25th was in place for at least the Roman church. In an almanac called "The Chronograph of 354," which is actually dated for 336, December 25th is listed as the celebratory feast day for the birth of Christ (Actually, the Chronograph date is the "eighth of Kalends of January," but translated into our calendar that is December 25th!) This is our earliest written reference to the 25th being the official celebration date. We also know that St. Ambrose (See Church History Lesson 23), who died in 397, wrote a number of nativity hymns for singing during the Christmas season around December 25th. Pope Siricius (who died in 399) wrote the Bishop of Spain in 384 referencing the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25th.

It is noteworthy that prior to this time in the Eastern Church, January 6th was celebrated as the feast day for the birth of Christ. By the late 300's, however, the Eastern Church was also celebrating December 25th as the birth of Christ. The Cappadocian Fathers we studied in Church History Lesson 22 preached Christmas sermons on December 25th (we have sermons of Basil as well as Gregory of Nazianzen). We also have sermons of St. John Chrysostom that date from 386 and assert that December 25th is the proper date to celebrate the birth of Christ.

The Jerusalem church celebrated January 6th for the feast of Christ's birth until the mid-600's. At that point, the church began celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25, and shifted the January 6 celebration as the day of the Magi's visit. January 6 then becomes the last (or 12th!) day of Christmas, the day of celebrating the Magi.

Why was December 25th picked as the day to celebrate? Especially, in light of the fact that there is no biblical basis for that view? Scholars differ on their answers to these questions. Two hypotheses are currently in vogue among scholars. The first is called "The History of Religions Hypothesis," and the second is called "The Calculation Hypothesis."

The History of Religions Hypothesis argues that Christians seized December 25th as a celebration day for the birth of Christ because of a Roman festival celebrated at much the same time. The Romans celebrated the Sun God in a feast of "Saturnalia." This was a 7-day feast that occurred from December 17th through December 23rd. It was a pagan festival that had a lot of lewd behavior as well as gift giving and other traditions and festivities. Some believe that Christmas was a

“Christianizing” of this pagan festival. The idea is that while Rome was in the after-math (and hangover) of celebrating their Sun God, there were enough distractions that Christians could “get away” with a celebration of the birth of Christ. Supporters of this theory are quick to point out the many parallels between the pagan Sun Feast and Christmas. For example, December 25th is the actual winter solstice in the Roman calendar. By that, we mean it was the Roman calendar day when the sun began to “reassert itself” and days started lengthening. There is no question that Rome was fond of sun worship by the time that Christmas began finding its celebration in the church. Sun worship itself reached an apex in 274 when the Emperor Aurelian declared that the Sun God would be the preeminent of all Gods to be worshipped.

The History of Religions Hypothesis then asserts that while the worship of the Sun God was so popular during this December time period, the church was emphasizing that Jesus was in fact the real “sun” to be worshipped. Now, Latin and Greek did not make the pun off the words “sun” and “son” that English makes. The church taught Jesus as the Sun using both analogy and scripture.⁶ Scholars say we find here the basis for Christianity morphing a pagan festival into what we now consider to be Christmas. The History of Religions Hypothesis is first noted in the margin of Dionysius Bar-Salibi’s 1100’s manuscript. But, it really found its modern punch from writers in the last 120 years. Noteworthy are works by H. Usener in 1889 and B. Botte in 1932. This History of Religions Hypothesis is still the predominant hypothesis in Europe.⁷

A second, more recent hypothesis is called “The Calculation Hypothesis.” This hypothesis says that the church opted for December 25th birthday for Jesus by making calculations from other dates believed true by the church at the time. At the time the church decided on December 25th as the birth of Christ, the church believed the crucifixion of Christ occurred on March the 25th. How the church came to March 25th is not fully known. March 25th was the Spring Equinox, and was considered the anniversary of creation. Writers like Hippolytus (c. 170-235) and Tertullian (c. 161-220) (See Church History Lesson 16) believed that creation itself started on the day of the Spring Equinox. These writers and others then viewed the new creation following the crucifixion of Jesus as also occurring on the same day.⁸

⁶ These sermons frequently pointed out that the sun rises in much the same way that Jesus had a resurrection. These sermons would also point to Malachi 3:20 where the sun of justice arises in a way that is prophetic about Jesus.

⁷ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (2d Edition) Vol. 3, p. 552.

⁸ Kelly at 61.

What does the date of crucifixion have to do with the date of Christ' birth? During this early church time period, the church commonly believed that patriarchs and others in the Bible lived for exact year periods. In other words, when the Old Testament says that Moses was 120 when he died, many early church writers believed that 120 years were exactly 120 years ("Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died" Dt. 34:7.) So, they reasoned, Moses must have died on the anniversary of his birth. Otherwise, scripture would have said Moses lived 119 years and 364 days, or whatever it would have been. In similar fashion, these writers believed that Jesus started his ministry when he was 30, not 29 and 11 months and 4 days, but 30. Evidently, these writers did not notice that Luke dates Jesus as being "about" 30 (Lk 3:23).

The Calculation Hypothesis concludes that March 25th would have been the date of the crucifixion and Jesus would have been crucified on an anniversary of his birth date. However, in the case of Jesus, you should not look to March 25th as a birth date, but rather an "incarnation" date. In other words, March 25th was believed to be the day that Jesus was conceived. If you then add 9 months for the time that Jesus would have spent in Mary's womb, presto! December 25th is the birth date of Christ! This theory also explains why the Eastern Church celebrated Christmas January 6th. In the east, they believed that Jesus was incarnated April 6th, not March 25th. Then, 9 months runs to January 6th. This theory has found a great deal of support after a publication by Thomas Talley, entitled *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, (Collegeville, Minn. 1991).

If we have that much trouble deciding on a date for the Savior's birth, how do we know what time during the day or night Jesus was born? Well, we do not! Luke 2:9 tells us that the angels came to the shepherds keeping watch "at night," but told them that "today" a Savior was born.

So, where do we get the lyric, "It came upon a *midnight* clear, that glorious song of old"? A Jewish book, The Wisdom of Solomon, has several verses that some early Christians applied to Jesus' birth:

For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your [God's] all-powerful word leapt from heaven."

These early Christians thought that the "word" was Jesus (based on John1). They also believed that "the night half gone" meant that the time was midnight. This midnight belief some scholars believe gave rise to the midnight mass of the Middle Ages.⁹

⁹ Kelly at 73.

MODERN CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

By the mid-400s, the church at Rome began having a mass for the birth of Christ at midnight. This midnight mass soon spread to other locales, and by the 11th Century, the mass in England was referred to as “Christ’s Mass.” Obviously, it was just a matter of time before the label for this midnight mass, “Christ’s Mass,” became a designation for the entire celebratory day, which is now pronounced “Christmas.”

As we noted in Church History Lesson 42, St. Francis of Assisi started the Christmas tradition of the manger scene. It was 1223 in the town of Greccio where St. Francis for the first time decided that a nativity scene would be a wonderful teaching tool for the birth of Christ. Interestingly, the Franciscans are also credited with being one of the principle sources of spreading Christmas Carols. Evidently, they were fond of singing, and took those carols as part of their celebration with nativity scenes throughout Europe.¹⁰

In the Middle Ages, Christmas was a civil holiday and the start of the church calendar. It was marked in various ways by celebrations. We have records of Christmas plays being performed in 11th Century France. The celebrations eventually took on an almost un-Christian atmosphere of partying and revelry. In reaction, the reformation movement sought to seriously downplay, if not outright remove, Christmas celebrations. The reformers believed that if God had intended the church to celebrate Christmas, he would have given an indication of its true date.

In England in 1647, Parliament passed a law forbidding the observance of Christmas. In Puritan-laden Massachusetts in 1659, it also became illegal to celebrate Christmas. This law lasted until 1681 when it was revoked. Still, Christmas was slow to recover in New England. It was not until New England experienced an influx of large numbers of Irish and German immigrants, that Christmas generated a great deal of celebrants. The basis for the puritanical ban

¹⁰ Christmas songs themselves are as ancient as the church’s celebrations of the birth of Christ. As already noted, St. Ambrose composed Christmas hymns. Another early hymnist was the Spanish lawyer, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (c. 348-405). He wrote a “Hymn for Christmas Day” which contained the following lyrics: “The Infant’s feeble cry proclaimed/ The springtime of the universe; the World reborn then cast aside/ The gloom of winter’s lethargy. At your Nativity, O Child/ All hard, unfeeling things were stirred; the unrelenting crags grew kind/ And clothed the flinty stones with grass. How holy, O eternal King,/ Is this your crib, revered by all in every age, and even by beasts/ Who hover near in silent awe?”

on Christmas was the recognition that the New Testament scriptures nowhere provide the basis for such a celebration.

Those parts of America settled by Spanish and French, however, had no such reticence of the holiday. In these parts of America, Christmas was celebrated with great fanfare and festivities. Still, as America went into the 1800's, Christmas was not considered a time of "family togetherness" nor were there Christmas trees, Christmas cards, or really much in the way of Christmas presents (and Santa was nowhere to be found in America at that time either!).

The holiday underwent significant changes in the 1800's. Washington Irving, John Pintard, and Clement Clarke Moore (all New Yorkers) brought into American culture the traditions that would soon permeate the whole country. The changes included an Americanization of Saint Nicolas, the patron saint of children.

Nicolas was a real man who had lived in the area of Turkey in the late 200's and early 300's. We actually have very little knowledge of him from his lifetime. We know he was the Bishop of Myra and that he died around 345-352. Beyond that, we have a number of legends that sprung up about him. The legends include his presence at the Council of Nicaea (see Church History Lesson 18) where he supposedly slapped the heretic Arius. Other legends include his care for others. One key legend said that Nicolas learned of a man with three daughters who had no dowry to give so that they could marry. The man was going to have to sell his daughters into slavery. Hearing of it, Nicolas took small bags of gold and tossed them into the man's window at night. The man caught Nicolas the third time, but Nicolas exacted a promise that the man would never identify Nicolas as the gift giver until after Nicolas's death (hence the explanation for the legend as opposed to a contemporaneous account).

Nicolas was also considered the patron saint of sailors. Through the centuries after his death, sailors throughout Europe invoked Nicolas as their protectors in their ships. By the Reformation, more churches were dedicated to Nicolas than any other personage of the church other than Mary and Jesus himself. The reformers sought to eliminate the veneration given to Nicolas, but a number of countries continued to honor him as a patron saint looking after children and sailors. In Holland, he was called "Sinter Claas" (from *Sinter* – "Saint" and *c'lass* – "Ni-colas"). Many scholars deduce that the Dutch brought this tradition and veneration to New Amsterdam (later renamed "New York"), but there is no documented evidence to that effect.

In 1809, things changed! Washington Irving wrote, *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York*. In it, Saint Nicholas plays a role in the work as the patron

saint of New York. The following year, John Pintard tried to help the civil unrest and vandalism in New York by holding a banquet in honor of Saint Nicolas. Pintard felt that resurrecting old customs where rich and poor celebrated together would help quell the unrest. Pintard had a poster prepared for his celebration (which he set for December 6, the feast day of Saint Nicolas) of “Sancte Claus”.

Eleven years later, in 1821, Irving wrote another book, the *History of New York* where he added more to the legend of Saint Nicolas. In this work, Irving wrote of Nicolas flying over trees in a wagon bringing gifts to children, with “smoke from his pipe spread like a cloud overhead.”

Just one year later, Clement Clarke Moore joined in adding to the Nicolas tradition writing the children’s poem, “Twas the night before Christmas.” Actually, he called it, “A Visit from St. Nicolas!” The poem was picked up by various media and within 20 years had spread throughout the country. Moore invented the eight reindeer and set the time for the visit: The night before Christmas. Behold, a new tradition was born.

This explains “Santa Claus,” but what about Kris Kringle and Father Christmas? These are two separate traditions that, for many, have merged into one. Kris Kringle is a modernization that originated in changes Luther brought with the Reformation. Luther sought to stop the practice of honoring and praying to saints. In an effort to give people a new and proper place for focus, he substituted the honoring of Saint Nicolas during the Christmas season with honoring the Christ Child. In Old German, “Christ Child” was “*Kris Kindl*.” It was just a matter of time before *Kris Kindl* became Kris Kringle in Anglican usage and merged into the Father Christmas figure.

“Father Christmas” was another similar effort to change things from honoring Catholic saints, although this was by Henry VIII. Father Christmas was in many ways an incarnation of the Saturn figure associated with the pagan celebration of Saturnalia still extant a bit from Roman times.¹¹

Christmas trees are of uncertain origin. We do have records of a Christmas play performed in 1605 in Strasbourg. In that play, there was a “Paradise Tree.” The Paradise Tree was hung with apples and was termed to be the tree of life. It was also seen as an appropriate celebration tree with Christmas, because in Christ, Christians have a return to paradise with God.

A particularly interesting legend about Christmas trees gives credit to Luther for them. Supposedly, Luther was walking home on a cold Christmas Eve. He saw

¹¹ Federer, William, *There Really is a Santa Claus*, (Amerisearch 2003) at 39.

the glistening starlight reflecting off the icy trees and was so moved by the beauty that he cut a tree, brought it into his home, and lit it with candles. The legend is nice, but there is no basis for this legend actually occurring, especially considering that Luther was one of the main reformers who actually fought against a common celebration of Christmas.

By the 1830's, Christmas trees became a common occurrence in Germany. Many scholars believe that German immigrants brought the tradition over to America around this time period. With due respect to the legend that George Washington attacked the Hessian (German) troops on Christmas Eve at Valley Forge while they gathered around a Christmas tree rather than guarding their position, there is no basis for the "Christmas Tree" part of that legend. The first written indication of Christmas trees in America is found in Matthew Zahm's diary entry on December 20, 1821. The tradition gradually grew throughout the country.

A number of different theories are advanced for why gifts are exchanged on Christmas day. There are secular opportunities for gift exchange that were found throughout Europe. The French traditionally exchanged gifts on January 1st. The Spanish and the Italians would exchange gifts on January 6th. Gift exchange would seem especially appropriate on Christmas day because it is recognized as a day where God gave the greatest gift possible to humanity, namely his son, Jesus.

There is much more; books could be written on this subject. In fact, books *have* been written on this subject! There are historical books, books that recount the history of Christmas hymns and Christmas traditions. Then, there are books that made Christmas traditions. Dickens's, *A Christmas Carol*, is among the most noteworthy. Then, there are others less noteworthy! For example, in 1939, Montgomery Ward employee Robert L. May wrote a booklet for customers called, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The book was a smash! May's brother-in-law then put the Rudolph character into a song which Gene Autry reluctantly recorded in 1949 (it became his biggest hit!)

Because this is simply a Sunday School class, we leave the rest to the writers and readers of books! But before we close, we consider our Points for Home!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “A *Savior* has been born! Glory to God in the highest!” (Lk 2:14).
2. He was given “the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21).
3. In the words of John Chrysostom’s Christmas sermon from over 1600 years ago, “Bethlehem this day resembles heaven. It hears from the stars the singing of angelic voices, and in the place of the sun it enfolds itself on every side with the Sun of Righteousness. And ask not how this can happen, for where God wills, the order of Nature yields. For he willed, he had the power, he descended, he redeemed; all things move in obedience to God. This day He Who Is, is born; and He Who Is becomes what he was not. For he was God and became man, yet not departing from the divinity that is his.”

MERRY CHRISTMAS!