

SHOULD WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

I. When was Jesus born?

- A. Popular myth puts his birth on December 25th in the year 1 C.E.
- B. The New Testament gives no date or year for Jesus' birth. The earliest gospel – St. Mark's, written about 65 CE – begins with the baptism of an adult Jesus. This suggests that the earliest Christians lacked interest in or knowledge of Jesus' birth date.
- C. The year of Jesus birth was determined by Dionysius Exiguus, a Scythian monk, "abbot of a Roman monastery. His calculation went as follows:
 - a. In the Roman, pre-Christian era, years were counted from ab urbe condita ("the founding of the City" [Rome]). Thus 1 AUC signifies the year Rome was founded, 5 AUC signifies the 5th year of Rome's reign, etc.
 - b. Dionysius received a tradition that the Roman emperor Augustus reigned 43 years, and was followed by the emperor Tiberius.
 - c. Luke 3:1,23 indicates that when Jesus turned 30 years old, it was the 15th year of Tiberius reign.
 - d. If Jesus was 30 years old in Tiberius' reign, then he lived 15 years under Augustus (placing Jesus birth in Augustus' 28th year of reign).
 - e. Augustus took power in 727 AUC. Therefore, Dionysius put Jesus birth in 754 AUC.
 - f. However, Luke 1:5 places Jesus' birth in the days of Herod, and Herod died in 750 AUC – four years before the year in which Dionysius places Jesus birth.
- D. Joseph A. Fitzmyer – Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at the Catholic University of America, member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and former president of the Catholic Biblical Association – writing in the Catholic Church's official commentary on the New Testament[1], writes about the date of Jesus' birth, "Though the year [of Jesus birth is not reckoned with certainty, the birth did not occur in AD 1. The Christian era, supposed to have its starting point in the year of Jesus birth, is based on a miscalculation introduced ca. 533 by Dionysius Exiguus."
- E. The DePascha Computus, an anonymous document believed to have been written in North Africa around 243 CE, placed Jesus birth on March 28. Clement, a bishop of Alexandria (d. ca. 215 CE), thought Jesus was born on November 18. Based on historical records, Fitzmyer guesses that Jesus birth occurred on September 11, 3 BCE.

II. How Did Christmas Come to Be Celebrated on December 25?

- A. Roman pagans first introduced the holiday of Saturnalia, a week long period of lawlessness celebrated between December 17-25. During this period, Roman courts were closed, and Roman law dictated that no one could be punished for damaging property or injuring people during the weeklong celebration. The festival began when Roman authorities chose "an enemy of the Roman people" to represent the "Lord of Misrule." Each Roman community selected a victim whom they forced to indulge in food and other physical pleasures throughout the week. At the festival's conclusion, December 25th, Roman authorities believed they were destroying the forces of darkness by brutally murdering this innocent man or woman.
- B. The ancient Greek writer poet and historian Lucian (in his dialogue entitled Saturnalia) describes the festival's observance in his time. In addition to human sacrifice, he mentions these customs: widespread intoxication; going from house to house while singing naked; rape and other sexual license; and consuming human-shaped biscuits (still produced in some English and most German bakeries during the Christmas season).
- C. In the 4th century CE, Christianity imported the Saturnalia festival hoping to take the pagan masses in with it. Christian leaders

succeeded in converting to Christianity large numbers of pagans by promising them that they could continue to celebrate the Saturnalia as Christians.[2]

D. The problem was that there was nothing intrinsically Christian about Saturnalia. To remedy this, these Christian leaders named Saturnalia's concluding day, December 25th, to be Jesus' birthday.

E. Christians had little success, however, refining the practices of Saturnalia. As Stephen Nissenbaum, professor history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, writes, "In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior's birth by assigning it to this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been." The earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, sexual indulgence, singing naked in the streets (a precursor of modern caroling), etc.

F. The Reverend Increase Mather of Boston observed in 1687 that "the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens' Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into Christian ones." [3] Because of its known pagan origin, Christmas was banned by the Puritans and its observance was illegal in Massachusetts between 1659 and 1681.[4] However, Christmas was and still is celebrated by most Christians.

G. Some of the most depraved customs of the Saturnalia carnival were intentionally revived by the Catholic Church in 1466 when Pope Paul II, for the amusement of his Roman citizens, forced Jews to race naked through the streets of the city. An eyewitness account reports, "Before they were to run, the Jews were richly fed, so as to make the race more difficult for them and at the same time more amusing for spectators. They ran... amid Rome's taunting shrieks and peals of laughter, while the Holy Father stood upon a richly ornamented balcony and laughed heartily." [5]

H. As part of the Saturnalia carnival throughout the 18th and 19th centuries CE, rabbis of the ghetto in Rome were forced to wear clownish outfits and march through the city streets to the jeers of the crowd, pelted by a variety of missiles. When the Jewish community of Rome sent a petition in 1836 to Pope Gregory XVI begging him to stop the annual Saturnalia abuse of the Jewish community, he responded, "It is not opportune to make any innovation." [6] On December 25, 1881, Christian leaders whipped the Polish masses into Antisemitic frenzies that led to riots across the country. In Warsaw 12 Jews were brutally murdered, huge numbers maimed, and many Jewish women were raped. Two million rubles worth of property was destroyed.

III. The Origins of Christmas Customs

A. The Origin of Christmas Tree

Just as early Christians recruited Roman pagans by associating Christmas with the Saturnalia, so too worshippers of the Asheira cult and its offshoots were recruited by the Church sanctioning "Christmas Trees". [7] Pagans had long worshipped trees in the forest, or brought them into their homes and decorated them, and this observance was adopted and painted with a Christian veneer by the Church.

B. The Origin of Mistletoe

Norse mythology recounts how the god Balder was killed using a mistletoe arrow by his rival god Hoder while fighting for the female Nanna. Druid rituals use mistletoe to poison their human sacrificial victim. [8] The Christian custom of "kissing under the mistletoe" is a later synthesis of the sexual license of Saturnalia with the Druidic sacrificial cult. [9]

C. The Origin of Christmas Presents

In pre-Christian Rome, the emperors compelled their most despised citizens to bring offerings and gifts during the Saturnalia (in December) and Kalends (in January). Later, this ritual expanded to include gift-giving among the general populace. The Catholic Church gave this custom a Christian flavor by re-rooting it in the supposed gift-giving of Saint Nicholas (see below). [10]

D. The Origin of Santa Claus

a. Nicholas was born in Parara, Turkey in 270 CE and later became Bishop of Myra. He died in 345 CE on December 6th. He was only named a saint in the 19th century.

- b. Nicholas was among the most senior bishops who convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE and created the New Testament. The text they produced portrayed Jews as “the children of the devil”[11] who sentenced Jesus to death.
- c. In 1087, a group of sailors who idolized Nicholas moved his bones from Turkey to a sanctuary in Bari, Italy. There Nicholas supplanted a female boon-giving deity called The Grandmother, or Pasqua Epiphania, who used to fill the children's stockings with her gifts. The Grandmother was ousted from her shrine at Bari, which became the center of the Nicholas cult. Members of this group gave each other gifts during a pageant they conducted annually on the anniversary of Nicholas’ death, December 6.
- d. The Nicholas cult spread north until it was adopted by German and Celtic pagans. These groups worshipped a pantheon led by Woden –their chief god and the father of Thor, Balder, and Tiw. Woden had a long, white beard and rode a horse through the heavens one evening each Autumn. When Nicholas merged with Woden, he shed his Mediterranean appearance, grew a beard, mounted a flying horse, rescheduled his flight for December, and donned heavy winter clothing.
- e. In a bid for pagan adherents in Northern Europe, the Catholic Church adopted the Nicholas cult and taught that he did (and they should) distribute gifts on December 25th instead of December 6th.
- f. In 1809, the novelist Washington Irving (most famous his *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*) wrote a satire of Dutch culture entitled *Knickerbocker History*. The satire refers several times to the white bearded, flying-horse riding Saint Nicholas using his Dutch name, Santa Claus.
- g. Dr. Clement Moore, a professor at Union Seminary, read *Knickerbocker History*, and in 1822 he published a poem based on the character Santa Claus: “Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, in the hope that Saint Nicholas soon would be there...” Moore innovated by portraying a Santa with eight reindeer who descended through chimneys.
- h. The Bavarian illustrator Thomas Nast almost completed the modern picture of Santa Claus. From 1862 through 1886, based on Moore’s poem, Nast drew more than 2,200 cartoon images of Santa for *Harper’s Weekly*. Before Nast, Saint Nicholas had been pictured as everything from a stern looking bishop to a gnome-like figure in a frock. Nast also gave Santa a home at the North Pole, his workshop filled with elves, and his list of the good and bad children of the world. All Santa was missing was his red outfit.
- i. In 1931, the Coca Cola Corporation contracted the Swedish commercial artist Haddon Sundblom to create a coke-drinking Santa. Sundblom modeled his Santa on his friend Lou Prentice, chosen for his cheerful, chubby face. The corporation insisted that Santa’s fur-trimmed suit be bright, Coca Cola red. And Santa was born – a blend of Christian crusader, pagan god, and commercial idol.

IV. The Christmas Challenge

- Christmas has always been a holiday celebrated carelessly. For millennia, pagans, Christians, and even Jews have been swept away in the season’s festivities, and very few people ever pause to consider the celebration’s intrinsic meaning, history, or origins.
- Christmas celebrates the birth of the Christian god who came to rescue mankind from the “curse of the Torah.” It is a 24-hour declaration that Judaism is no longer valid.
- Christmas is a lie. There is no Christian church with a tradition that Jesus was really born on December 25th.
- December 25 is a day on which Jews have been shamed, tortured, and murdered.
- Many of the most popular Christmas customs – including Christmas trees, mistletoe, Christmas presents, and Santa Claus – are modern incarnations of the most depraved pagan rituals ever practiced on earth.

Many who are excitedly preparing for their Christmas celebrations would prefer not knowing about the holiday’s real significance. If they do know the history, they often object that their celebration has nothing to do with the holiday’s monstrous history and meaning. “We are just having fun.”

Imagine that between 1933-45, the Nazi regime celebrated Adolf Hitler’s birthday – April 20 – as a holiday. Imagine that they

named the day, "Hitlerday," and observed the day with feasting, drunkenness, gift-giving, and various pagan practices. Imagine that on that day, Jews were historically subject to perverse tortures and abuse, and that this continued for centuries.

Now, imagine that your great-great-great-grandchildren were about to celebrate Hitlerday. April 20th arrived. They had long forgotten about Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen. They had never heard of gas chambers or death marches. They had purchased champagne and caviar, and were about to begin the party, when someone reminded them of the day's real history and their ancestors' agony. Imagine that they initially objected, "We aren't celebrating the Holocaust; we're just having a little Hitlerday party." If you could travel forward in time and meet them; if you could say a few words to them, what would you advise them to do on Hitlerday?

On December 25, 1941, Julius Streicher, one of the most vicious of Hitler's assistants, celebrated Christmas by penning the following editorial in his rabidly Antisemitic newspaper, *Der Stuermer*:

If one really wants to put an end to the continued prospering of this curse from heaven that is the Jewish blood, there is only one way to do it: to eradicate this people, this Satan's son, root and branch.

It was an appropriate thought for the day. This Christmas, how will we celebrate?

AUTHOR: LAWRENCE KELEMEN