



MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS & SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT



THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

By Albert James Dager

There is little question that the day many Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus is not, in fact His birthday. Nobody knows the actual date of His birth, but most likely it was during the warmer season, as evidenced by the Scriptures which tell us that shepherds were tending their flocks in the fields at the time (Luke 2:8).

Adding to the probability that the Lord's birth did not take place during the winter is the fact that Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to comply with Caesar Augustus' census decree. This was a distance of some seventy miles as the crow flies—no small distance in those days.

Historians are uncertain of the date of the census mentioned in Luke 2:1-2, but it is improbable that Caesar Augustus would call for a census of his entire empire during the winter. Long-distance travel would be impossible in many areas including in Israel. Traveling on foot and upon beasts of burden during the winter would have been impossible in most areas of the Roman Empire at that time. Even armies could not march to war, let alone the average citizen take to the highways.

Yet the fact remains that December 25th has traditionally been set aside for the commemoration of Christ's birth. This is due to Roman Catholic tradition which was retained by most Protestant churches.

The Christmas season is actually comprised of a series of festivals that are sacred to Roman Catholicism: All Saint's Day (November 2), St. Martin's Day (No-

vember 11), St. Nicholas's Day (December 6), Christmas Day (December 25), St. Stephen's Day (December 26), New Year's Day (January 1), and Epiphany—commemorating the arrival of the Magi—also known as Old Christmas Day (January 6).

It is for good reason that the Lord chose not to reveal the date of His birth in Scripture. Man's religious spirit tends to place more importance upon certain days and dates than on others. In so doing men believe they are pleasing God when, in fact, they are pandering to their own ideas of what constitutes righteousness. This is why Paul was distressed with the Galatians' observance of special days:

But now, after you have known God, why do you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, with which you again desire to be in bondage?

You observe days, and months, and times, and years.

I am afraid for you, lest I have bestowed labor upon you in vain. Galatians 4:9-11

Yet it was not the observance of the days that Paul was concerned about but the legalism attached to those observances. This is clear in his epistle to the Romans where he sanctioned the individual conscience to esteem one day above another:

One man esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

He that regards the day, regards it unto the Lord; and he that does not regard the day, to the Lord he does not

regard it. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks, and he that eats not, to the Lord he eats not, and gives God thanks.

For none of us lives to himself, and no man dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14:5-8)

So it is not the observance of days in itself that is ungodly, but the requirement of those observances as a religious duty. And with the possible exception of the Easter season, no observance has carried with it more legalistic requirements than that of the Christmas season. This is true not only among Roman Catholics, but among Eastern Orthodox and even some Protestants and other Christians.

However, the question remains whether or not it is proper to celebrate the Lord's birth at all, and, if so, how the day or season should be commemorated. We should begin by recognizing that the particular day chosen for observance is not as important as our heart's attitude. As Christians we should keep every day holy unto the Lord. And that spirit of love and goodwill which is supposed to accompany the season of Christmas should prevail in our hearts at all times.

Nor should we allow ourselves to dwell on Jesus' infancy beyond the wonder of God's grace that would allow His Word to become vulnerable to the dangers of a sinful world. No doubt many prefer to think of Jesus as a harmless babe rather than the King who will one day return to the earth to judge righteously and to rule with a rod of iron. It seems irreverent to dwell upon His helplessness while in a manger and at the mercy of a world that hates Him.

The atmosphere of the world during the Christmas season is evidence of its incompatibility with Christ. The media are filled with advertising and programming that turn Christmas into a hedonistic celebration. Booze, babes and blasphemy saturate the air waves and make a mockery of the very sanctity that Jesus instills in those who love Him. Jesus is so rarely mentioned that it's obvious He has little to do with the day anyhow. And why December 25th was chosen as the date to celebrate His birth is especially significant in view of the debauched revelry and drunkenness that accompanies it.

SATURNALIA

December 25th was the date of the Roman Saturnalia, a celebration to honor the Roman god, Saturn. The date generally coincides with the winter solstice, when the days begin to lengthen and nature seems to come to life. To ancient pagan civilizations this was the birthday of the gods, giving hope to mankind for the life that the earth would produce during the spring and summer months.

On the old Roman calendar December 25th was indicated as Dies Natalis Invicti Solis—the Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun. When the Roman Church began to exercise religious authority with the backing of Rome's military might, its tactic to persuade pagan Romans into adopting its brand of Christianity was to convert the pagan festivals into "Christian" festivals. The church applied festivals in honor of pagan gods to the only true God and His Christ, Jesus. In time, many pagan gods were renamed as departed saints, or supposed saints, and the pagan festivals became "holy days" to be observed in their honor.

Celebrations in honor of the sun were especially sacred, not only to the Romans, but to cultures that preceded them. The ancient Chaldeans and Egyptians observed festivals and laws that commemorated the birth of the sun.

Nearly 1,400 years before Jesus' birth, a pharaoh-mystic named Akenaten made a symbol of the sun with each of its rays ending in a human hand. He called it the Aton—the light of the world. Akenaten declared that Aton gave its light to all nations, to all races, and to creatures of every kind. Aton did not judge or condemn, but simply gave light and life. Today's religious humanists present a similar picture of a non-judgmental God.

The ancient pagans equated nature with God, and worshiped the creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25). This, too, is the sin of today's religious philosophers who equate man with God or believe that God is in everyone.

Because much of God's truth was known to man from the beginning, there are some similarities between pagan teachings and those of Christianity. But the Scriptures which define true faith in God are God's truth; all other religious philosophies—even those that go by the name of "Christian"—are perversions of God's truth.

CHRIST'S MASS

The name "Christmas" is a contraction of "Christ's Mass," a special Roman Catholic mass performed in celebration of Christ's birth. Christmas is a holy day of obligation to Roman Catholics and must be attended under penalty of what is known as "mortal sin"—a sin so grievous it condemns the offender to hell should he die without confessing his sin to a priest, or at least intending to do so.

In the Catholic mass Jesus is considered both the priest and the victim. As priest He is represented by the Catholic priest who offers Him as a sacrifice at every mass. The Catholic Church teaches that the priest is empowered by God to change the bread and wine into Jesus' literal flesh and blood, and that they are to be worshipped in the same manner God is worshipped:

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that all the faithful ought to show to this most holy sacrament [the communion wafer] the worship which is due to the true God, as has always been the custom of the Catholic Church. Nor is it to be adored any the less because it was instituted by Christ to be eaten. (Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents [Northport, NY: Costello Printing Co., 1975], EM ef, reaffirming the Council of Trent, Session 13: Decree on the Eucharist, ch 5; Denz. 878, 1648.)

Many Roman Catholics in the United States and other "Protestant" countries do not think of the Eucharist in these terms; nor do they necessarily believe everything the Roman Catholic Church insists is essential for right standing in that body. It is primarily in countries where Roman Catholicism dominates that such idolatry is consciously adhered to.

Over the centuries, and because of Protestant rejection of the sacrifice of the mass, the name Christmas has taken on an entirely different connotation for most of the world. It is no longer associated with the Roman Catholic mass except by Catholics, but is specifically the day when most who call themselves Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Unlike Easter, which is specifically named for Ishtar (or Astarte, or any number of names for the pagan "Queen of Heaven"), Christmas is named for Christ. Even so, its origins are rooted in the apostasy of the Roman Church, which apostasy is still with us today.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The evergreens, because of their ability to remain verdant throughout the winter, have long symbolized immortality and fertility. The Egyptians believed that the fir tree sprang from the grave of their god Osiris who, after being murdered, was resurrected through the tree.

The custom of bringing the tree indoors and decorating it has been attributed to Martin Luther. He allegedly desired to duplicate the beauty of stars shining through the evergreens of his native forest in Germany by bringing a fir tree into his home and decorating it with candles representative of the twinkling stars.

The true origin of decorating trees has been lost in antiquity. But almost every culture, at least among Christianized nations, has some such tradition. For ages sprigs of evergreen were brought into homes during the winter for good luck and hope for a fruitful new year.

Some Christians cite Jeremiah 10:2-4 as a description of the origin of the Christmas tree. But it is generally accepted among biblical scholars that what was referred to was an Asherah pole, erected in honor of the Canaanite goddess Ashera, (AKA, Ashtoreth, Astarte and Anath). Some commentaries imply that the practice originated with the Chaldeans who carved the trees into astrological shapes. The Scriptures say nothing about the tree other than that it was cut out of the forest and decorated with silver and gold.

The immediate predecessor to today's Christmas tree was the paradise tree. In the medieval Roman Catholic Church December 24th was celebrated as Adam and Eve Day, during which plays reenacted the fall of our first parents. The purpose was to demonstrate that Jesus, as the "second Adam," came to redeem what was lost by the first Adam. The paradise tree was a fir hung with apples to represent the forbidden fruit. If the legend of Martin Luther's candle-lit tree is true, it's possible that he merely added a twist to the paradise tree.

It is believed by some who hold to the belief that the Christmas tree was a Chaldean invention, that the star which tops many of today's Christmas trees did not originate as a representation of the star that the wise men followed, but rather as a representation of the stars to which the ancient Chaldeans looked for guidance.

SANTA CLAUS

The name Santa Claus is believed to be a corruption of the Dutch "Sant Nikolaas" (Sant-Ni-Klaus). St. Nicholas (as he was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church) was made bishop of Myra because of his reputed piety. Legend says he gave aid to the poor, providing his gifts anonymously. In memory of his generosity mothers would hide gifts and tell their children the gifts were left by St Nicholas.

Because of the legends attributing to him miracles which centered on children and the bestowing of fertility upon childless couples, St. Nicholas is revered by the Roman Catholic Church as the patron saint of children.

The legends of St. Nicholas bear many similarities to those of the ancient Egyptian god Bes, a rotund, gnome-like person who was the patron of little children. Bes was said to live at the North Pole, working year-round to produce toys for children who had been good. Santa Claus and the traditions that surround him are an outgrowth of this ancient pagan belief.

Bes had his counterpart in the Roman god Saturn, the old man who lived at the North Pole and brought to children a sprig of evergreen and the gift of a new year.

Today children look to Bes or Saturn under the name of Santa Claus for good things at Christmas time. In the minds of many, Santa Claus takes precedence over Jesus. If one were to ask several children at random who the most important person at Christmas time is, with few exceptions the answer will be "Santa Claus."

Even the name "Christ Child" has been given to this pagan deity under the name "Kris Kringle" (a corruption of the German "Christ Kindl"). This is one of the most subtle of Satan's blasphemies.

Arguments often heard in favor of promoting Santa Claus are that "it's only make believe," and "children relate to him." Yet if a child can comprehend Santa Claus he can certainly comprehend Jesus.

As children grow older and learn that Santa was only "make believe," will they not be inclined to think that Jesus, too, is only "make believe"? This is the greatest danger in teaching children to believe in fairy tales and fables which are, in reality, cultural superstitions. Without the living faith necessary to keep a child close to God through Jesus, he is prone to equate faith in God with faith in Santa Claus. As he grows older he may well reject both.

MISTLETOE

The custom of kissing under the mistletoe can be traced to the ancient Druids. A sacred plant and a symbol of fertility, mistletoe was believed to contain certain magical powers.

Why kissing is associated with mistletoe is somewhat obscure. But because of mistletoe's role as a fertility symbol, it stands to reason that the kissing associated with it carries sexual rather than merely platonic implications. The practice is believed to have originated with orgiastic celebrations in connection with the Celtic Midsummer Eve ceremony when the mistletoe was gathered. During that festival the men would kiss each other as a display of their homosexuality. The custom was later broadened to include both men and women.

Some historians believe that kissing under mistletoe is reminiscent of the temple prostitution and sexual license that proliferated during the Roman Saturnalia.

Today mistletoe provides an excuse for people to express their attraction toward someone. Without it they might not have the courage to express those feelings for fear of rejection. If the feelings are mutual, they will readily know it.

THE YULE LOG

The term "Yule" has nothing to do with Christ, but is a Celtic religious festival associated with the winter solstice. As Christianity spread to northern Europe, a festival of the Celtic and Germanic people, Julmond, was melded into the Christmas celebration. It is believed that the word Jul related to the Germanic word lul or Giul, meaning "a turning wheel" which represented the turning of the sun. Another theory is that Jul derives from Geola, which means "a feast," and sometimes refers to the month of December.

During the Yule festival, evergreens were used for decorations since they symbolized the life that would return in the spring.

Fire was sacred to every ancient culture and was an essential element during the Yule festivities, being necessary to dispel the prevailing darkness of winter. The Yule log was a sacred log whose fire provided promises of good luck and long life. A remnant of the log was kept to relight the next year's Yule log. Each year the log had to be selected by the family using it, and could not be bought, or the superstitions associated with it would not apply.

WREATHS

Wreaths have from the earliest of times been associated with pagan superstitions. They were worn during initiation into the mystery religions of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Evergreen wreaths, especially, were associated with the Dionysian mysteries as fertility symbols, and signified the perpetuity of existence—the cycles of life and regeneration. This is why, to this day, wreaths are a popular form for arranging funeral flowers.

Some Christians say that the wreath represents the crown of thorns placed upon our Lord's head at His Crucifixion. But it is more likely that the crown He wore was really a cap which covered His entire crown, not a circle that merely encased the brow and temples.

THE GIVING OF GIFTS

It has been generally assumed that the tradition of exchanging gifts during Christmas is a reenactment of the Magi giving gifts to Jesus. But the custom has other origins.

Among the Romans it was customary to exchange food, trinkets, candles, or statues of their gods during the mid-winter Kalends (the first day of the month in the ancient Roman calendar). This custom was transferred to December 25th by the Roman Catholic Church in keeping with the Saturnalian festival.

In old England there was a custom known as "letting in Christmas." This superstition focused on the first person to enter a house on Christmas Day. No one would leave the house that morning until the "lucky bird" (the first person entering) was let in. He would enter through the front door and proceed through the house, leaving at the rear. Along the way he was given gifts to insure his bestowal of good luck on the household. To have a dark-haired man "let in Christmas" was believed to bring good luck. Red-haired persons were shunned as purveyors of evil. For a woman to "let in Christmas" was believed to bring very bad luck.

There is certainly nothing wrong with giving gifts to family and friends out of love and genuine appreciation for what they have meant throughout the year. Like all things material, those gifts are neither good nor evil. But it would be better if they were given spontaneously rather than under pressure to meet the social requirements of a pagan holiday.

HOW DO WE RESPOND?

It would take volumes to detail all the origins (mostly pagan) of Christmas traditions and customs. The few mentioned here are meant to provide Christians with knowledge that will enable them to make intelligent, informed decisions relative to their walk with Christ. It is hoped that they will avoid those customs that are not compatible with the Faith.

The Lord does not look favorably upon His children engaging in the same practices as the heathen, holding to idols and the unclean things associated with them (2 Kings 17:7-15). This is not to say that it is sin commemorate the birth of Jesus. As Paul said, let each man be persuaded in his own mind whether to esteem one day above another. However, if the Body of Christ receives any blessing from celebrating the birth of our Lord it would be better to separate ourselves from the pagan trappings associated with holidays such as Christmas.

Many would protest at the thought of not having a Santa Claus or other pagan symbols of the holiday. And in some cases they may think it better to remain in ignorance so they would not have to face the decisions that knowledge brings. But God insists that we seek knowledge of spiritual matters. How can we grow spiritually without it? His words in Hosea 4:6 echo through the corridors of time as we survey the ruin of His people again and again: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6).

Yet in spite of the ungodly revelry that is associated with such holidays, they can provide excellent opportunities to witness for Christ, not just by words but by our actions and the love we extend to others.

Some protest that to use Christmas or Easter as opportunities to witness is a compromise in itself. But why should we be intimidated by these events? Should we go on strike during these holidays and refuse to witness because of the opportunities they provide?

We can take our lesson from the apostle Paul who addressed the Greek philosophers on Mars' hill, proclaiming to them that the "unknown god" to whom they had erected an altar, was none other than "the God that made the world and all things therein." Certainly he was not intimidated by his surroundings, nor did he walk away indignant that he was surrounded by pagan religious symbolism.

He didn't berate the Greeks for their error, but showed them the truth in love.

We should also remember that Daniel was made head over all the sorcerers in Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. Yet he did not refuse their association; nor did he even forbid them to practice their demonic arts. Rather he allowed his witness to the true God to come forth at every opportunity even if it meant death. And God honored him in spite of the position he held. In truth, God placed him in that position for His own purposes.

Let's be sensitive to the opportunities others present for us to minister the Gospel, whether during the Christmas season or at any other time. For our Christian brethren who are ignorant of things they might be doing to displease God, our approach should be no less meek and humble in helping them grow in truth.

A Real Conundrum

Today, believers in Jesus who desire to separate themselves from the pagan elements of Christmas, and even separate Christ from Christmas because of so much ungodliness associated with the holiday, are finding themselves in an emotional conundrum. This is due to the increasing demand by an anti-Christ world to obliterate any association or reference to Christ in society. On one hand we see the ungodliness foisted upon the celebration of Christ's birth; on the other hand we see the hatred of Christ demonstrated by those who see even Christmas as an affront to their humanist sensibilities. They insist that "Merry Christmas" be banned in favor of "Happy Holidays." They insist that even the Christmas tree be banned in all public displays because of its alleged Christian connotation.

How we respond is a matter of personal conscience. We must all answer to our Lord for our actions. If some are confident before Him to maintain His influence in the season, let no one else judge them. If others see agreement with the secularists, but for other reasons out of a good conscience, and wish to totally divorce themselves from the season, let no one judge them either.

In all things let us have an attitude of humility and love toward others.

The media may blare out its tinsel and liquored-up version of Christmas, and our associations in the world may not recognize the incongruity of it all. But we need not be intimidated into silence

because we fear we may defile ourselves. Christ's Body is capable of surviving in the midst of the evils that sorely vex us. 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 is an excellent guide for us in any situation where our faith is confronted by the evils of the world, and where we may be in danger of compromising our testimony. In those verses Paul is saying that sharing a meal even offered to idols is not a sin because the food of itself is neither good nor evil. But he also cautions us not to do so in the presence of a brother in Christ who would be tempted by our actions to compromise his conscience. The sin would not be in the eating, but in the lack of love and concern for the brother.

CONCLUSION

The problem with many of today's traditions is that the true origins are lost to antiquity and much of what is believed is based on reasonable speculation and on what is known about ancient cultures.

In this world we are surrounded by evil. Yet evil cannot touch us if we are led by God's Spirit. This doesn't mean we are free to tempt God and to engage in what we know or even think to be sin. Nor should we try to persuade others to do so.

As we grow in God's grace and recognize that we have authority over everything that touches our lives, provided our authority is submitted to the Father's will, we will live circumspectly in the world. We will recognize that, as Paul so aptly put it, all things are lawful, but not all things are expedient (1 Corinthians 10:23). And in the midst of the evils that surround us we not only may, but we must, show the world the true meaning of Christ's birth, not only during Christmas, but all year long. ❖

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