

The History of Christmas: Its Biblical Roots

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Because of the pagan roots of holidays at the end of December, many Christians believe we should avoid Christmas altogether. Yet, does the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ itself have anything to do with pagans? Or is it truly a Christian holiday that is simply celebrated at the wrong time of year?

THE HEBREW ROOTS

Jesus' birth was foretold centuries prior in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the fullness of time, God sent His Son to redeem mankind. He sent Jesus as a little baby to become God With Us.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Watch! The virgin is conceiving a child, and will give birth to a son, and his name will be called Immanuel. — Isaiah 7:14 ISV

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name is called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the growth of his government and peace there will be no end. — Isaiah 9:6–7 ISV

THE CHRISTIAN ROOTS

“Then the angel told her, “Stop being afraid, Mary, because you have found favour with God. Listen! You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...” — Luke 1:30–32 ISV

About 1,950 years ago, the well-educated physician Luke wrote to Theophilus, detailing the life of Jesus Christ. Luke explained he had done research on the subject so that Theophilus could know with certainty the things he had been told about Jesus were true (Luke 1:4).

Luke must have spoken with Mary herself, for he describes things only she would know. He tells of the birth of Jesus; how he was born in Bethlehem during a time when the entire Roman world was being taxed. Shepherds out in the field were surprised by a host of angels singing, ‘Glory to God in the highest!’ and found the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Those shepherds then told everybody they could find about the incredible things they had seen (Luke 2:8–18).

The child grew up and went on to have a short, three-year ministry that ended in His death on a Roman Cross. Yet, the man born in Bethlehem rose again from the dead, as witnessed by over 500 men (1 Corinthians 15:6). And He is still changing the hearts and lives of people living today.

CHURCH HISTORY

The early Christians are not known to have celebrated Christ's birth, and the actual date of His nativity has been lost to history. The first recorded mention of the December 25 date is in the Calendar of Philocalus (AD 354), which assumed Jesus' birth date to be Friday 25 December in AD 1. Pope Julius I officially proclaimed December 25 to be the anniversary of

Christ's birth in AD 440. Giving 25 December Christian significance has been understood to have been an effort to help the pagan world embrace Christianity and trade in their worship of pagan gods for the One True God. Originally called the Feast of the Nativity, the custom spread to Egypt by AD 432 and to England by the end of the 6th century. The celebration of Christmas had spread all the way to the Scandinavian countries before the year 800.

Christ's birth is honoured on January 6 in the Orthodox Church, on Epiphany or Three Kings Day, the day that celebrates the arrival of the wise men who gave the Christ child their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Christmas did largely win out over the pagan holidays, but was still celebrated with rowdy festivities and practical jokes. Puritans in England outlawed Christmas for years, and the holiday was not popular in early America. In fact, Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday in the United States until 26 June 1870.

TODAY

The holiday then underwent a conversion. Christmas was 'reinvented' into the more moderate holiday we know today. Washington Irving and Charles Dickens both wrote tales that presented Christmas as a holiday of caring for the poor and bringing families together. As the angels sang above the shepherds that first night, Christmas was about 'peace on earth, good will toward men'.

The Season is still a mixture of traditions pulled from a multitude of sources. While many of them have little to do with Jesus, most are morally neutral activities. However, even while Santa Claus Ho-Ho-Hos down Main St. on a fire truck, the reality of Christ's birth does break through. Nativity scenes bring to mind the great gift of God—the King of kings lying in a manger, attended by shepherds. Christmas carols that cry 'The Lord is come' and 'Come let us adore Him' remind us all of what God has done.

It is a time of year when people can speak more freely of Jesus the Saviour—when even the faithless are willing to attend a Christmas Eve service. It is truly a precious slot of time God has given us during which to spread the Good News of His Son. Glory to God in the highest!