The Truth About Christmas

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From the time you first found out there was no Santa Claus, did you ever question other aspects of this incredible holiday called Christmas? Did you ever wonder where it came from and if it is actually found in the Bible?

Where do we get all the unusual symbols surrounding the celebration? Why is an evergreen tree erected in people's homes and ornately decorated? Why do people exchange gifts? Where did the character of Santa Claus come from, and why does he wear a furry read suit while descending through a chimney? Why the traditional use of holly and mistletoe? Why is this holiday celebrated on December 25th? What is the true inspiration behind the supposed Christmas spirit?

More importantly, what is God's perspective of these symbols and festivities? If you were surprised when you first discovered that there was no Santa Claus, you will be even more surprised to hear the rest of the story.

Christmas Is Not Christian

As shocking as it might sound, there is nothing Christian about Christmas. It was men who created the word "Christmas" from the phrase "Mass of Christ." In this way, Christ's name came to be associated with an ancient holiday that is far from holy. Millions believe it is a Christian observance. The truth is that the Christmas holiday, with the same symbols and ceremonies, was celebrated centuries before the Messiah was born. In fact, it did not become a part of professing Christianity until hundreds of years after the Savior's crucifixion and ascension to heaven.

This is confirmed by the testimony of both religious and secular authorities. For example, the 1911 edition of the Catholic

Encyclopedia states that Christmas did not originate in Palestine but rather in Egypt:

> Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church... the first evidence of the feast is from Egypt... Pagan customs centering around the January calends gravitated to Christmas (https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm, retr. 7/29/2011).

Interestingly, the religious organization that seems to encourage the celebration of Christmas the most cannot ignore the fact that the holiday's customs and observance did not come from Christianity, but rather from pagans. Even the esteemed *Encyclopedia Britannica* recognizes this fact. As they wrote:

> As late as 245 Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ "as if he were a king Pharaoh" (11th edition, vol. 6, p. 293).

The celebration of Christmas was not embraced during the days of the apostles or by the New Testament Church. Another respectable historian, Alfred Carl Hottes, wrote a book titled *1001 Christmas Facts and Fancies.* In this work, he also noted the origin of our modern Christmas celebration, writing:

> The roots of Christmas observance, however, go deeply into the folklore of the Druids, Scandinavians, Romans, and Egyptians... In Scandinavian countries great fires were kindled to defy the Frost King... The Druids observed this season in their great roofless temples... torches blazed and strange ceremonies took place dealing with the cutting of the cabalistic Mistletoe... Two holidays, the Brumalia and Juvenalia, of ancient Rome were merged to form one great celebration in honor of the Italian deity Saturnus... The Saturnalia was not a day but a season of celebration from December 17 to 24... The period was characterized by "processions, singing, lighting candles, adorning the house with laurel and green trees, giving presents: the men dressed as women or

> masqueraded in the hides of animals." Even the early Egyptians celebrated this Midwinter festival. They claimed that Horus, son if Isis, was born at the close of December... The followers of Mithras called this period the Feast of *sol invictus*, representing the time of victory of light over darkness. Mithras, as a divinity, was worshiped in the centuries immediately preceding and following Christianity so that the idea of Mithraism fitted nicely to the idea of Christ being the Sun or Light of the World and the religion and practices soon merged into the early Christian customs (pp. 10-15).

The Origin of Christmas

All reputable authorities and historians agree that the celebration of Christmas did not enter Christianity until hundreds of years after Christ's death and resurrection. And it was not until the fifth century that the religious organization that became known as the Roman Catholic Church ordered this day to be celebrated. Furthermore, the Catholic Church directed this celebration to take place on the same day as the pagan Saturnalia which was dedicated to worshiping a sun god known as Saturn.

The connection between Christmas and a variety of pagan practices is thoroughly documented. Not only the day, but its symbols are intimately connected to rites of the pagan world. Notice what an authority on Christmas wrote:

> The Christmas festival of today is a gradual evolution from times that long antedated the Christian period... It was over laid upon heathen festivals, and many of its observances are only adaptations of pagan to Christian ceremonies... It was on or about December 21st that the ancient Greeks celebrated what are known to us as the Bacchanalia or festivities in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine. In these festivities the people gave themselves up to songs, dances and other revels which frequently passed the limits of decency and order. In ancient Rome the Saturnalia, or festivals in honor of Saturn, the god of time, began on December 17th and continued for seven days. These also often ended in riot and disorder. Hence the words Bacchanalia and Saturnalia acquired an evil

> reputation in later times... We are most interested in the festivals of the ancient Teutonic [German] tribes because they are most closely linked with Christmas as we ourselves celebrate it. The pagan feast of the Twelve Nights was religiously kept by them from December 25th to January 6th, the latter day being known, as it is still known to their descendants, as Twelfth Night (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 58, 65-66).

The excesses and decadence practiced during these festivals were legendary. Regarding the Saturnalia, Gerard and Patricia Del Re documented that:

> At its most decadent and barbaric, Saturnalia may have been the excuse among Roman soldiers in the East for the human sacrifice of the king of the revels (*The Christmas Almanac*, p. 16).

Considering the history of the Saturnalia, you might find it difficult to believe that the Catholic fathers adopted this holiday. But this is no secret. Hundreds of historians have noted this fact. Consider the words of Sheryl Karas who wrote an extensive book on the history of *The Solstice Evergreen:*

> During its first 300 years, the Church in Rome maintained a staunch position against all pagan beliefs and practices; however, many new and potential converts were reluctant to give up their familiar celebrations. One of the most popular holidays in the Roman year was the Saturnalia. It was a week-long festival with torch-light processions, gift-giving and merry-making, culminating in a winter solstice feast on December 25, called *Natilis Solis Invictior* the Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun. The holiday honored the strength of the sun and the fertility it would soon bring to the earth. In 375 A.D. the Church announced that the birth date of Christ had been discovered to be December 25, and allowed some of the light-hearted customs of the older celebration, such as feasting, dancing and the exchange of gifts to be incorporated into the reverent observance of Christmas (p. 88).

Why December 25th?

Most of the world today celebrates Christmas on the 25th of December believing that this is the day Christ was born. But the actual date of Christ's birth cannot be determined. Nevertheless, tens of millions believe they are honoring God by celebrating His birthday in the midst of winter. However, does this truly honor God? Researchers for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* state:

> The early Christian community distinguished between the identification of the date of Jesus' birth and the liturgical celebration of that event... In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus (https://www.britannica.com/EB checked/topic/115686/Christmas, retr. 7/29/2011).

There is not a single Scripture in the entire Bible advocating the celebration of the Messiah's birthday. In fact, there is nothing indicating that God's people celebrated any holiday during the winter. Instead, December 25th traces its roots directly to the pagan world. Werner Keller wrote in *The Bible as History*:

> December 25 is referred to in documents as Christmas day in A.D. 324 for the first time. Under the Roman emperor Justinian it was recognized as an official holiday. An old Roman festival played a major part in the choice of this particular day. December 25 in ancient Rome was the 'Dies Natali Invictus, the birthday of the unconquered,' the day of the winter solstice and at the same time, in Rome, the last day of the Saturnalia, which had long since degenerated into a week of unbridled carnival (p. 331).

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds some interesting insights with respect to the December 25th celebration of Christmas. Not only did the day coincide with the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, but other pagan deities are directly connected to December 25th:

> In the Roman world, the Saturnalia was a time of merrymaking and exchanging of gifts. December 25th

> was also regarded as the birth date of the Iranian Mystery god, Mithra, the Sun of Righteousness. On the Roman New Year houses were decorated with greenery and lights and gifts were given to children. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites... Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir tree, gifts and greetings all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life have always been associated with the winter festival (15th ed. Vol. II, p. 903).

Christmas historians Earl and Alice Count further documented the link between Christmas and the Saturnalia:

> The Romans believed in the ancient god of seed-time, Saturn, who had ruled their country ages before their own day... Whenever Romans thought that one of their gods resembled a Greek god, they concluded that the two were the same; then they took over the forms of worship that the Greeks already had observed... The first day of the Saturnalia shifted during the lifetime of Rome; at all events, it began around the middle of December, with the cry, *Io Saturnalia!*—Ho Saturnalia!—and continued until January first. In its midst was December twenty-fifth, the day, as the Romans calculated, when the sun was at its lowest ebb, read to increase again and impart its strength to the growing things of the earth... To the pagans, the Saturnalia were fun. To the Christians, the Saturnalia were an abomination in homage to a disreputable god who had no existence anyway. The Christians, moreover, were dedicated to the slow, uphill task of converting these roistering pagan Romans. There were many immigrants into the ranks of the Christians by this time, but the [Catholic] Church Fathers discovered to their alarm that they were also facing an invasion of pagan customs. The habit of the Saturnalia was too strong to be left behind. At first the Church forbade it, but in vain. When a river meets a boulder that will not be moved, the river flows around it. If the Saturnalia would not be forbidden, let it be tamed. The Church

> Fathers now sought to point the festival toward the Christian Sun of Righteousness... The Church finally succeeded in taking the merriment, the greenery, the lights, and the gifts from Saturn and giving them to the Babe of Bethlehem (*4000 Years of Christmas*, pp. 32-33, 36-37).

It is clear from the record of history that Christmas originated during pre-Christian times and was celebrated by the pagan world for centuries both before and after the death of Christ. This day was later embraced by the church in the fifth century. However, an important question remains. Where did the pagans get their ideas regarding such a celebration?

The Tower of Babel

Virtually all pagan practices had their beginnings in the city of Babylon during the time of Nimrod. Nimrod was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah. He was the founder of Babylon (Gen. 10:6-10).

Nimrod formed cities instead of going out and replenishing the earth as God had commanded Noah to do. One of Nimrod's accomplishments was building the tower of Babel. Some believe he did this to protect people from the potential threat of another flood from God.

The Scriptures reveal that Nimrod was, "a mighty hunter before the LORD" (Gen. 10:9). The word "before" is better translated "against" and this godless man became the first post-flood godless dictator. Ancient traditions regarding this apostate leader show that he rebelled against the Eternal. In so doing, Nimrod created a worldwide apostasy.

According to tradition, Nimrod married his own mother, Semiramis. Then, upon his death, Semiramis began to teach that her son had been reincarnated in the form of a full-grown evergreen tree which supposedly sprang up from a dead tree stump. On each anniversary of Nimrod's birthday, December 25th, Semiramis would visit this evergreen tree, claiming that Nimrod would leave gifts for her there.

Through her politics and the use of her son's name, Semiramis became the queen of Babylon which is the home of the

Chaldea Mysteries. She was also regarded as the "queen of Heaven" and "the mother of the divine son." After generations of these idolatrous practices and traditions, Nimrod came to be considered the son of Baal, the sun god. He and his mother became the chief entities of worship as a Madonna and child.

This belief and practice spread to Egypt, where the names of the gods became Isis and Horus. Horus was said also said to have been born on December 25th. In Asia it was Cybele and Deonius. In Rome they were called Fortuna and Jupiter. Throughout the world we still find the remnants of mother and child worship to this day. It is no surprise that this same system still exists at the end of the age. It is called "Mystery Babylon" (Rev. 17:5). Shockingly, it is disguised as Christianity and is still practiced in the celebration of Christmas.

From Paganism to Christianity

Historian Will Durant described how pagan traditions were adopted by ingenuine Christian leaders who changed the meaning of symbols and rites to fit their purposes:

> Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it... the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass. Other pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist result. From Egypt came the idea of a divine trinity... the adoration of the Mother and Child and the theosophy that made Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and obscured Christian creed... From Phrygia came the worship of the Great Mother... The Mithraic ritual so closely resembled the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass that Christian fathers charged the Devil with inventing these similarities to mislead frail minds. [Modern] Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world (*The Story of Civilization*, Vol. III, Caesar and Christ, p. 595).

A wide range of pagan practices were assimilated into the religious organization that became known as the Roman Catholic Church. It began with embracing the birthday of the sun god and establishing the date of this celebration as December 25th.

The practice of sun worship began in early Egypt. There the priests would make a round wafer to represent the sun. The celebrants would eat the wafer symbolizing the sun god's life and the nourishment of man's soul.

The Roman church was embracing paganism in an attempt to increase its numbers and draw in a non-believing world. In reality, it was the church that was being absorbed by beliefs totally contrary to true Christianity. In his book *The Two Babylons* Alexander Hislop characterized it this way:

> Long before the fourth century, and long before the Christian era itself, a festival was celebrated among the heathen at that precise time of the year, in honor of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven; ... in order to conciliate the heathen, and to swell the number of the nominal adherents of Christianity, the same festival was adopted by the Roman Church, giving it only the name of Christ. This tendency on the part of Christians to meet paganism half-way was very early developed (p. 93).

The church eventually adopted and merged several different pagan ceremonies to eventually end up with the modern-day practice of Christmas and the New Year celebrations we witness today.

More Christmas History

Deus Sol Invictus became the official deity of the Roman Empire during the latter part of the third century. At that time, a great temple was built in honor of the sun and the sun's birthday was set as December 25th. This date was chosen because it was the accepted date of the winter solstice.

Emperor Constantine came to power in Rome less than 100 years later. At the beginning of his rule, it was a violation of Roman law to practice Christianity. Christians were hated by the state and were subjected to great persecution which included torture and burning at the stake.

However, Constantine saw something in Christianity he believed could be very valuable in holding the empire together.

Despite great persecution, Christians remained dedicated to their faith. This commitment so impressed Constantine that he issued "The Edict of Toleration" in 313 A.D. and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. As a result, state persecution of Christians stopped. However, the news was not all good. Because Christianity became the state religion, the church became very political and the doctrines embraced by the church were watered down and seriously compromised. Jesse Hurlbut described this period in *The Story of the Christian Church*.

> The establishment of Christianity as the state religion became a curse... Everybody sought membership in the church, and nearly everybody was received. Both good and bad, sincere seekers after God and hypocritical seekers after gain, rushed into the communion. Ambitious, worldly, unscrupulous men sought office in the church for social and political influence... The services of worship increased in splendor, but were less spiritual and hearty than those of former times. The forms and ceremonies of paganism gradually crept into the worship. Some of the old heathen feasts became church festivals with change of name and of worship (p. 79).

The emergence of pagan practices in the church is well chronicled in history. Historian John Romer characterized this subtle incursion this way:

> Subtly, so subtly that the bishops themselves had not seen them, the old gods had entered their churches like the air of the Mediterranean. And they live still in Christian ritual, in the iconography and the festivals of Christianity. When Julian arrived in Antioch in 362... the great Christian city was in mourning, bewailing in the Levantine manner the annual death of Adonis, Venus's beautiful lover. At Ephesus, though the sanctuary of Diana, goddess of the city, was taken down... her statues were carefully buried in dry sand. And when the Third Council of the church assembly at Ephesus solemnly voted that henceforth the Virgin Mary should be honoured with the title of *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, Ephesus, itself for centuries the city of the

> virgin hunter Diana, became the city of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. In Egypt, too, the ancient sign of life, the *ankh*, which the gods had carried in their sculptures for thousands of years, was easily transformed into the Christian cross; the figure of Isis nursing her child Horus, Isis Lactans, became the figure of the Virgin with Jesus at her breast. At Rome, Romulus and Remus were swapped for the biblical saints Peter and Paul. And still in the fifth century, the Pope had to stop the early morning congregation of St. Peter's from walking up the church steps backwards so as not to offend Sol, the rising sun god. Similarly, 25 December, now Christ's birthday, was also the day of Sol Invictus' festival and Constantine's birthday. This festival was celebrated by cutting green branches and hanging little lights on them, and presents were given out in the god's name. Sol's weekly festival Sol-day – Sunday – became the Christian Sabbath. Just as Apollo of Delphi had made a beautiful transformation to become the Roman Sol Invictus, so later he became a Christ of the sun. All three of them are sometimes pictured in their fiery chariots... with... radiant haloes *(Testament: The Bible and History*, pp. 230-231).

Legalizing Christianity solved one problem for the church, but it caused another. Millions of pagans were suddenly made "Christians" literally overnight. These pagans had no desire to give up their pagan practices, however. Try as it would, the church could not prevail on the people to give up the paganism that they embraced. The church's answer was to finally "Christianize" numerous pagan practices. Charles Guignebert gave the following explanation in 1927:

> Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the church in numbers… The clergy had believed it necessary to hasten the conversion of the masses of people whom the imperial government delivered over to their propaganda and, sacrificing quality to quantity, that had joyfully inscribed, as convers to the faith, the names of men who knew little of it save some few formulas. Then could not

understand these at all well and, in making their acquaintance, that had forgotten none of their pagan customs. It would have needed much time and work to turn these neophytes into real Christians, and to shelter the doctrine, as well as the ethics, of the Christianity set up in the first three centuries from their unintentional raids. But at that time the Roman world was breaking up; everywhere premonitory signs of an approaching cataclysm were apparent and the Church herself was seriously disturbed by heretics and partisans. Accordingly it did not seem to be a favorable hour for undertaking such a long drawn out work, and the bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking malformations of the Christian faith which they perceived around them. Very soon the invasions of the barbaric hordes will render their efforts futile. Had the choice been offered the Church of leaving the invaders to their paganism or trying to win them for Christ, her duty and her material interests alike would have dictated her decision, and would have inclined her to be content with a conversion which she could not hope would be very profound. She was not even free however to decide the matter for herself. To begin with, a good many of the barbarians were already nominal Christians when they entered the Empire. Of such were the Goths, converted in the fourth century by Wulfila, although indeed to Arianism. Most of the others, in their ardent desire to be the equals of the Roman, accepted the faith of the Emperor without delay. I should say that they believed they accepted it, for what could the clergy do with such a number in such a short time? Instruct them? It was out of the question; they had to be content with teaching them no more than the symbol of baptism and then baptizing them en masse, postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact. To tell the truth, this ‘‘later date’’ never arrived, and the Church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, they were content to dress their paganism in a Christian cloak (*The Early History of Christianity,* pp. 208-210).

The adoption of pagan festivals was not without opposition. While many welcomed the liberty to celebrate these pagan practices, others objected. Some understood that such practices should never have been brought into the church, but the corrupt Romanization of the clergy made resistance futile. The *Chambers Encyclopedia* states the following.

> The winter solstice was regarded as the birthday of the sun and at Rome a pagan festival of Sol invictus was introduced by the emperor Aurelian on 25th December 274. The Church unable to stamp out this popular festival, spiritualized it as the feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness (vol. 3, p. 528).

Despite opposition by Christians committed to pursuing the teachings in Scripture, pagan influence simply overwhelmed the church transforming it into something far different from that raised up by Christ through the apostles. This fact is confirmed by the *World Book Encyclopedia* which states:

> In A.D. 354 Bishop Liberins of Rome ordered the people to celebrate it on December 25th. He probably chose the date because the people of Rome already observed it as the Feast of Saturn, celebrating the birthday of the sun (vol. 3, p. 416).

As you can see, ancient rites practiced by the pagan world were eventually grafted into Christianity. Rome had been pagan centuries before the birth of Christianity and it simply was not going to abandon its false religion. When Emperor Constantine ordered Christianity placed on equal footing with paganism, people preferred their old ways. They enjoyed those things they had always known, and simply adapted the old to appear to conform to the new. They changed from worshiping the "sun" to worshiping the "Son" and this was done retaining all their old practices.

Most people today know little or nothing of the pagan origin of Christmas. They are unaware that faithful Christians opposed these heretical practices. Additionally, most Christians today don't understand that believers dedicated to keeping the truth of God were

forced to go underground, some suffering martyrdom rather than allowing themselves to participate in such things.

Christmas Symbols and Customs

The symbols and customs of Christmas convey powerful images of this holiday. Consider the Christmas tree, mistletoe, the holly wreath, and Santa Claus, just to name a few. These symbols stand as a constant reminder of the season of which they are so much a part. Religions have used symbols and traditions as a means by which to perpetuate their beliefs. Symbols are designed to add meaning to seasons and events.

The symbols of Christmas have great appeal to this holiday's celebrants. However, after careful examination of these symbols and traditions, a much darker picture emerges. The truth is that Christianity has embraced as holy that which has its roots in religions totally contrary to the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the apostles. Consider the following symbols and beliefs.

The Christmas Tree

The decorated evergreen is likely the most prominent symbol of Christmas. Millions of people bring a tree into their homes and adorn it with ornaments, tinsel, and lights. They bow before the motionless object and place gifts below its branches, and yet these same millions would never consider the Christmas tree to be the type of idol that God abhors.

But that is exactly what Christmas trees are. They are symbolic of the ancient worship of false gods. Consider the words of Sheryl Ann Karas who has done extensive research into this subject. In her book about the history, folklore, and origins of the Christmas tree, she wrote:

> The evergreen played an influential role in the spiritual life of early societies throughout the world. Archaeological and anthropological evidence indicates that veneration of the tree dates from at least 4000 years before Christ... These pagan beliefs survive to this day embedded in religious rituals and myths as well as in secular customs, legends, and fairy tales.

> Many people like to de-emphasize our pagan heritage. We have been taught to associate paganism with violent practices and, therefore, find it threatening to see pagan aspects in our modern "civilized" religions... In the case of the Christmas Tree, this knowledge can enrich the celebration of the ritual... (*The Solstice Evergreen*, p. 4).

Sadly, this liberal view of pagan practices is not unusual today. Many believers knowingly observe rituals that were handed down from heathen without a second thought. They feel that these practices were "confiscated for Christ" and that God is tolerant of such behavior.

It is important to understand that such practices are abhorrent to God. The tenth chapter of the book of Jeremiah illustrates this point. Here, God commands his people to "learn not the way of the heathen." He then describes a tradition in which the heathen cut a tree out of the forest and decorate it as a form of worship. Notice that God goes on to characterize this tree as a graven image:

> For the customs of the peoples *are* futile; for *one* cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple. They *are* upright, like a palm tree, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot go *by themselves* (Jeremiah 10:3-5).

Although many argue that these words are not specifically referring to modern Christmas trees, that argument entirely misses the point. What God revealed through Jeremiah is that His people are to avoid practices that resemble those embraced by pagans. He did not say that it was appropriate to modify their practices and call them Christian. The Christmas tree is clearly a symbol of a faith to millions and it is in opposition to the kind of worshipful service advocated by the Scriptures. Tree worship is forbidden, and it is woven throughout the history of ungodly people. Karas continued:

> The most common deities found in mythologies worldwide were the Sun God, the Earth Mother and the Sky Spirit. These great spirits were considered so powerful that no temple was large enough or holy enough to contain them... Accordingly, goddesses and gods were usually worshipped outdoors in naturally protected spots such as under the trees. Woods found or planted on hills and mountaintops were considered especially suitable places for holy observances. These sacred groves were the forbidden "high places" mentioned in the Old Testament... Ceremonies honoring the tree involved sacrifices and holy offerings which were placed on the ground beneath it or in its branches... Greek and Roman goddesses and gods each had their special trees which were draped in cloth or garlands of flowers... The connection between the Christmas Tree and the sacred tree is quite clear; however, if the tree were merely a representation of a powerful spirit, the early Christian church would probably have been successful in eliminating its celebration when the converts accepted the idea that the one god was supreme and the ancient gods were devils. The persistence of the tree makes it apparent that its symbolism was more important than the form of its worship (*The Solstice Evergreen*, pp. 19-20, 23-24).



The Christmas tree's origin in paganism is thoroughly supported by the testimony of history. Consider the words of Alexander Hislop:

> The Christmas tree, now so common among us, was equally common in Pagan Rome and Pagan Egypt. In Egypt that tree was the palm tree; in Rome it was the fir;

> the palm tree denoting the Pagan Messiah, as Baal-Tamar, the fir referring to him as Baal-Berith. The mother of Adonis, the Sun-God and great mediatorial divinity, was mystically said to have been changed into a tree, the son must have been recognized as the 'Man the Branch' (*The Two Babylons*, p. 97).

Other credible works on the tradition of Christmas dramatically declare that the Christmas tree is intimately connected to faiths practiced by heathen. A book *Christmas Folklore* reveals the following:

> Most people have heard that the Christmas tree originates in the tannenbaum and is some sort of vestige of Teutonic vegetation worship. This is partially true. However, the custom of using pine and other evergreens ceremonially was well established at the Roman Saturnalia, even earlier in Egypt (p. 209).

The book *Festivals, Holy Days, and Saints Days* confirms that the origin of the Christmas tree can be traced to people who did not esteem Christ and the God of the Bible.

> It [the Christmas tree] recapitulates the idea of tree-worship, and the universe-three—lights, flowers, and gilded nuts and balls symbolizing the sun... The Christmas tree is peculiar to Northern Europe, and many other customs which we keep in connexion [sic] with the birthday of our Lord properly belong to the pre-Christian festivals (pp. 234-235).

The Christmas tree is a powerful symbol and conjures many images concerning the celebrations it represents. However, there is one thing the Christmas tree is NOT—it is not Christian in the truest sense. Everything about it can be traced to beliefs that are strongly condemned in Scripture.

Another respected source dating this idolatry to ancient pagan times is found in the pages of *Encyclopedia Americana*:

> The idea of using evergreens at Christmas also came to England from pre-Christian northern European beliefs.

> Celtic and Teutonic tribes honored these plants at their winter solstice festivals as symbolic of eternal life, and the Druids ascribed magical properties to the mistletoe in particular (International Edition, 1991, p. 666).

The Christmas tree that we see today with its ornaments, tinsel, and colored lights has changed very little from the time it was first used in pagan rituals. Given the thoroughly documented history of this idol, anyone can recognize that there is no true connection between the Christmas tree and the birth of Christ. It is a pagan symbol that God condemns!

Today, millions of homes around the world are adorned with evergreen trees every year. Tragically, people fail to realize what these trees picture because they simply don't want to be bothered with temperance. Ancient Israel was once indicted for engaging in practices that included the veneration of trees:

> Also the children of Israel secretly did against the LORD their God things that *were* not right, and they built for themselves high places in all their cities, from watchtower to fortified city. They set up for themselves *sacred* pillars and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree. There they burned incense on all the high places, like the nations whom the LORD had carried away before them; and they did wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger, for they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, "You shall not do this thing" (2Kings 17:9-12).

The evidence condemning this practice of venerating an evergreen tree is undeniable. Still, people continue to honor Saturn and the winter solstice while thinking they are honoring Christ. This is simply not the case and is a clear breach of the first and second commandments (Exo. 20:2-5). Despite divine instruction, countless numbers adoringly bow before decorated trees every year to place gifts below its branches. With this picture in mind, consider the following words of God.

> Thus says the LORD: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles [heathen]; do not be dismayed at the signs of

heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples *are* futile; for *one* cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple. They *are* upright, like a palm tree, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot go *by themselves.* Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor can they do any good… But they are altogether dull-hearted and foolish; A wooden idol *is* a worthless doctrine… But the LORD *is* the true God; He *is* the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth will tremble, And the nations will not be able to endure His indignation… He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, And has stretched out the heavens at His discretion. When He utters His voice, *there is* a multitude of waters in the heavens: And He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth. He makes lightning for the rain, He brings the wind out of His treasuries. Everyone is dull-hearted, without knowledge; every metalsmith is put to shame by an image; for his molded image *is* falsehood, and *there is* no breath in them. They *are* futile, a work of errors; in the time of their punishment, they shall perish… For the shepherds have become dull-hearted, and have not sought the LORD; therefore, they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered (Jeremiah 10:2-21).

The Origins of Santa Claus

One of the most popular images associated with Christmas is Santa Claus. Every year, children around the world long for his arrival; for they believe that this mythical figure is a giver of gifts. He is depicted as a jolly man who loves children and a judge between good and evil. So popular is Santa Claus that adults tell fanciful tales of his adventures. These stories are conveyed with such conviction that young children are quick to believe them. But where did the lore of Santa Claus begin?

Many have said that Santa Claus was once a bishop by the name of Nicholas who lived in Asia Minor during the fourth century. Even though a bishop by that name did exist, much of

what is attributed to him is legend and myth. Tony van Renterghem extensively researched this legendary saint and wrote:

> The Catholic Saint Nicholas also had a confusing past. He was a compilation of two separate saints, both of whom were—as the church nowadays admits—nothing more than Christianized water deities. This now apocryphal Saint Nicholas was venerated, not only as the patron of children, but also of sailors, merchants, thieves, and prostitutes. He was supposed to have performed charitable deeds and miracles... (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 70, 96).

Further research shows that the origin of Santa Claus goes back much further than the Catholic Church.

> We have already said that St. Nicholas is the patron of children in general. As the "Santa Klaus" of Holland, Germany, and Russia, he personifies the Christmas spirit. His world-wide identification with "Father Christmas" seems to have originated with the conversion of the Teutons to Christianity. The Scandinavian God Woden or Odin was believed to bestow special gifts at Yuletide to those who honoured him by approaching his sacred fir tree. He was assisted in his benevolent distributions by the Goddess Bertha and attendant sprites. Converts to Christianity could not easily resign this pleasant idea; and in their new faith it was natural to associate it with the name of a saint who had the reputation of generosity. The secretive manner of Santa Klaus in bestowing his gifts—thrusting them unseen into stockings or shoes, and coming unseen down the chimney—is, of course, in allusion to the secret dower to the nobleman's daughters of Patara (*Festivals, Holy Days, and Saints' Days*, pp. 221-222).

> The early Germans considered the Norse Hertha, or Bertha, the goddess of domesticity and the home. During the Winter solstice houses were decked with fir and evergreens to welcome her coming. When the family and the serfs gathered to dine, a great altar of flat stones was erected and here a fire of fir boughs was laid. Hertha was

said to descend through the smoke to guide those who were wise in Saga lore to foretell the fortunes of those persons at the feast. Hertha's altar stones became the hearthstones of the home. We learn from this story of Hertha the reason why Santa Claus comes down the chimney instead of in at the door. It is a survival of the coming of Hertha in pre-Christian days (*1001 Christmas Facts and Fancies*, p. 59).

In the newly-Christianized areas where the pagan Celtic and Germanic cults remained strong, legends of the god Wodan were blended with those of various Christian saints; Saint Nicholas was one of these. There were Christian areas where Saint Nicholas ruled alone; in other locations, he was assisted by the pagan Dark Helper (the slave inherited from the Germanic god Wodan). In other remote areas, where the Church held little power, ancient pockets of the Olde Religion controlled traditions. Here the dark helper ruled alone, sometimes in a most confusing manner, using the cover name of Saint Nicholas or "Klaus," without in any way changing his threatening, Herne/Pan, fur-clad appearance. (This was the figure later used by the artist Nast as the model for the early American Santa Claus)… By absorbing such pagan feasts and traditions, the Christian Church could subtly bring in its own theology: in this case, establishing the good Saint Nicholas, bringer of love and gifts, while grudgingly allowing the presence of the Olde Religions Herne/Pan, but only as a slave to Saint Nicholas. Thus, in parts of Europe, the Church turned Herne into Saint Nicholas' captive, chained Dark Helper; none other than Satan, the Dark One, symbolic of all evil. His



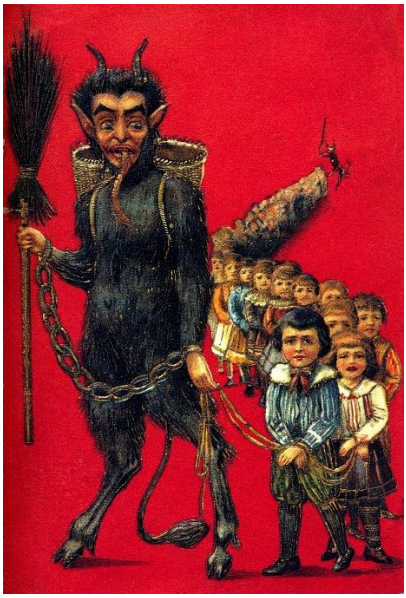
> only remaining tasks now were to carry the bag, scare maidens and children into devout behavior, and drag sinners and pagans off to the Christian hell… In Holland and several other European countries, the Saint Nicholas figure is still highly esteemed. He appears as a tall, dignified, bearded, white-haired old man, dressed as a Catholic bishop, complete with cloak, mytre, and pastoral staff, a seemingly genuine Catholic saint, but with a bizarre, quite unsaintly habit of riding through the skies on a white horse, followed by his Dark Helper. It seems that our Catholic saint inherited some of these customs from the pagan Germanic god Wodan, who has also been a bearded, white-haired old man, also dressed in a hat and cloak, carried a staff (or spear), rode a holy white horse, and dragged along the same dark slave/helper on a chain (*When Santa Was a Shaman,* pp. 96-97).

Renterghem continued to explain that this character, also known in some areas as "Sinterklaas," the name by which we get Santa Claus, would reward good children with gifts while the dark helper, known also as Krampus, carried a bundle of birch rods used to punish bad children. The tale also speaks of Krampus taking bad children away for slave labor. Notice a few images from the last century portraying the wicked behavior of Santa's Dark Helper.









In Germany and a few other areas of northern Europe, the dark helper was portrayed as a old, crotchety, horned man brandishing a punishing broom who was named Belsnickel.



Within the last the last century, a tamer version of the Nicholas' dark helper was introduced called Black Pete. Black Pete is as a friendly comic relief rather than a threatening demon. However, he retains the perception of being a threat to bad children during the winter celebration.



Such folklore and imagery continue to be a celebrated part of Christmas in that part of the world.



In America, these customs evolved into a jolly, fat, bearded, old man in a furry red suit. However, the inspiration for this character did not come from the God of light in whom is no darkness (1Jn. 1:5). Instead, the depictions deriving from Thomas Nast in 1863 came from fanciful tales inspired by the adversary. It is also interesting to note that by rearranging the letters in the name "Santa," the name becomes "Satan." In light of the history of this character and his demonic helper, it is hard to imagine that the author of this character figure we call Santa Claus could be anyone other than the devil.

Winter Gifts

Most people believe the tradition of giving Christmas presents comes from the Bible's account of wise men bringing gifts to the newborn Child and His parents. Therefore, it is assumed appropriate for us to give gifts to each other on December 25th in honor of Jesus. A careful examination of this tradition reveals that gift giving on the holiday Saturnalia has nothing to do with the gifts presented to Christ. Religious and secular history shows a connection between giving gifts during the Christmas season and pagan practices of ancient Rome. Consider the following insights concerning this practice.

> The Roman Saturnalia and the holidays that followed were boisterous indeed. Judging by what the Christians thought of them, they were often much worse than that... Whatever behavior of some Romans, others were simply merry, they masqueraded through the streets, at big dinners, visited their friends, wished them good luck at this time of tender fortune, and gave each other good-luck gifts called *Strenae*. Originally, these were just luck fruits... Later on, the lucky fruits gave way to lucky cakes and other tokens of well-wishing (*4000 Years of Christmas*, pp. 33-34).

> The interchange of presents between friends is a like characteristic of Christmas and the Saturnalia, and must have been adopted by Christians from the Pagans, as the admonition of Tertullian plainly shows (*The Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 12, p. 153).

Tertullian wrote in his work titled *On Idolatry* that the pagan feast of the Saturnalia celebrated in December was a time when gifts were "carried to and fro." According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, exchanging gifts at this time of the year may have been influenced by customs practiced by the pagans on January 1st.

> Gifts are exchanged by the French on January 1, by the Spanish and Italians on January 6, and by other nationalities on December 25. In most parts of Europe it was the Christ Child who brought the gifts. After the Reformation, the day itself was personified, and the

> figure of Father Christmas was later combined with St. Nicholas, [later known as] Santa Claus (p. 659).

William Walsh provides additional insights into the tradition of exchanging presents.

> Christmas gifts themselves remind us of the presents that were exchanged in Rome during the Saturnalia. In Rome, it might be added, the presents usually took the form of wax tapers and dolls—the latter being in their turn a survival of the human sacrifices once offered to Saturn. It is a queer thought that in our Christmas presents we are preserving under another form one of the most savage customs of our barbarian ancestors (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p. 67).

Gifts to a King

It is important to understand that the wise men did not give gifts to each other. Additionally, the gifts they brought to Christ were not birthday presents. His family did not receive toys from these visitors, but rather unusual offerings that many believe carry great significance.

It has been suggested that gold was a gift given to a king, frankincense a gift given to a priest, and myrrh was a spice used in preparing a body for burial. This last item would be a gift given to a condemned man. It is clear that the wise men presented gifts to Christ because they understood Him to be a great King. The protocol at that time was to never approach the presence of kings or dignitaries without bearing a gift. Adam Clarke's commentary of the Bible expresses it this way:

> The people of the east never approach the presence of kings and great personages without a present in their hands (Vol. 5, p. 46).

Gift giving at this time of year is not scriptural and has no basis in the story of the wise men. The giving of gifts at this time of year came from the practice of the ancient Saturnalia. Today this worship of Saturn has merged with the worship of Mammon, the god of money.

Over the centuries the practice of giving gifts at this time of year has amplified to become big business! Hallmark, one of the nation's top three wrapping paper manufacturers, announced that during one Christmas season, it will produce over 24,000 miles of wrapping paper and Americans will spend over seven billion dollars on children's toys during the Christmas season.

Collectively, agencies and photo studios suit up and ship out as many as 20,000 Santa Clauses to malls, parades, and parties every year. It has been estimated that retail stores can generate a significant amount of additional income simply by hiring a photographer and a man in a rented Santa Claus suit during this season. It is also estimated that mall traffic increases by 15% when a Santa Claus is centrally placed.

In the city of Los Angeles alone the number of Christmas trees sold tops 1.1 million. This county will also consume over ten million kilowatt hours of electricity to support Christmas lights. This is the average monthly usage for many third world countries and this is just one city of thousands across the U.S.

The average American family will receive 26 cards while 650 million Christmas packages will be sent to friends and loved ones through the mail during this season. The city of Beverly Hills will spend over one million dollars on their holiday decorations while See's Candy will sell over 12 million pounds of candy.

Retailers have glamorized Christmas as no other holiday. They lavishly decorate their stores, pipe in special music and hire men in Santa Claus suits, all for one purpose: to lure shoppers into a spirit of consuming.

So important is Christmas to the economy that the absence of this holiday could devastate the economy of the United States of America. It has been suggested that nearly half of annual profits are generated by Christmas-related sales, and yet all of this vast spending does not really make people happy.

During this time of the year 35% to 40% of Americans will become so depressed they will use alcohol or drugs to simply cope with the emptiness they feel at this professed "joyous" time. Reacting to this gross commercialism of Christmas, numerous religious leaders have been heard to exclaim, "We ought to put

Christ back in Christmas." But the truth is, Christ was NEVER in Christmas and He never will be!

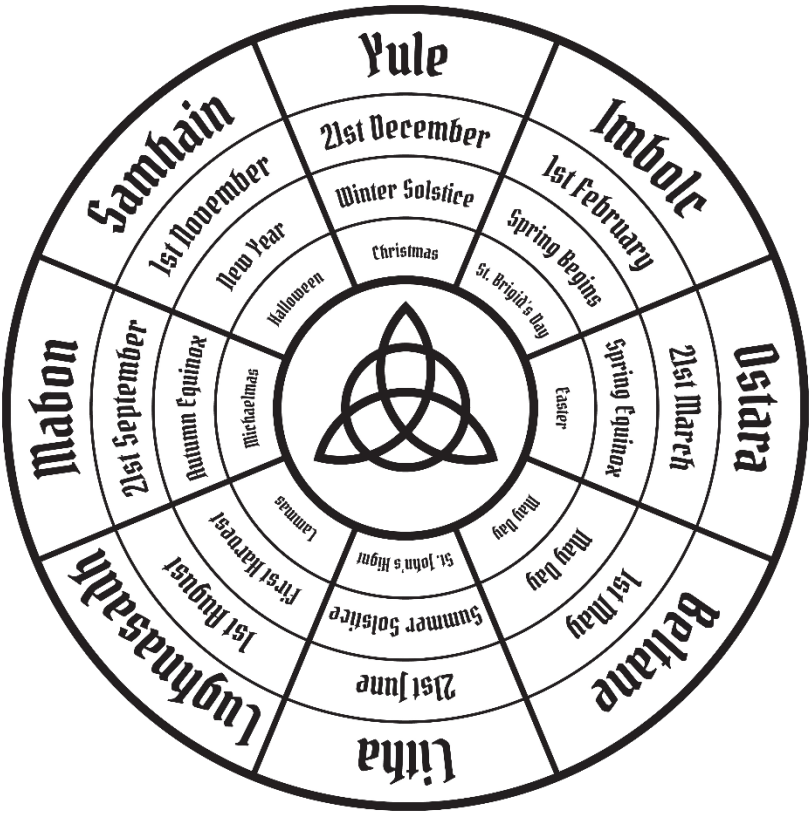
Regardless of how Christmas has been packaged, it is a holiday that was rooted in the worship of false gods and is now dedicated to materialism. It is sin adorned with tinsel and lights, dressed in a red suit, and wrapped up in colorful paper. People may tell themselves that they are worshiping Christ when they celebrate Christmas, but the truth be known that Christmas has nothing to do with legitimate Christianity, and the Messiah will never have anything to do Christmas!

The Yule Log, Holly, and Mistletoe

Today, most people think the word "Yule" refers to the season of Christmas. However, this word is actually a derivative of the Nordic word *geol*. The Nordic people pronounced their *g* with the English *y* sound.

The word *geol* has a few meanings. It can mean "noise and revelry" or it can mean "wheel," symbolizing a continuous revolution of the months and holidays of each year. The expression "Yule tide" defines a period of one month before and one month after the winter solstice. Neopagans continue to use this wheel marking their celebrations. It is from this wheel that we have formed traditional Christmas wreaths.

> During the period of the year when the sun returns to the heavens after it's a long winter rest and the shortest days have passed, the ancient Teutonic Celtic races held a festival celebrating the true meaning of the wheel of time, which was called the *Houl* or the *Hioul*. Some believe that the sun stood still for twelve days at this period of the year. Because this Yule period comes at the same time as Christmas the word is used in most northern countries for the Christmas season. The Druid priests at this period chose the Yule Log which they blessed with much ceremony and proclaimed that it should be kept ever burning. Each year a brand was saved to kindle a new fire... The old books surround the Yule Log with much mystery and superstition (*1001 Christmas Facts and Fancies*, p. 60).



Leonard Cowie also explained the assimilation of the Yule log and as mistletoe into the Christmas tradition.

> As Christianity spread to northern Europe, it met with the observance of another pagan festival held in December in honor of the sun. This time it was the Yule-feast of the Norsemen, which lasted for twelve days. During this time log-fires were burnt to assist the revival of the sun. Shrines and other sacred places were decorated with such greenery as holly, ivy, and bay, and it was an occasion for feasting and drinking. Equally old was the practice of the Druids, the cast of priests among the Celts of ancient France, Britain and Ireland to decorate their temples with mistletoe, the fruit of the oak-tree which they considered sacred. Among the German tribes the oak-tree was sacred to Odin, their god of war (*The Christian Calendar*, p. 22).

In the pagan world, fertility played a major part in worship. Winter vegetation was used to reflect this belief. This is noted by Del Re in *The Christmas Almanac*:

> In midwinter, the idea of rebirth and fertility was tremendously important. In the snows of winter, the evergreen was a symbol of the life that would return... Evergreens were used for decoration... Light was important in dispelling the growing darkness of the solstice, so a Yule log was lighted with the remains of the previous year's log (p. 18).

A book about *Western Scottish Folklore & Superstitions* explains that the symbol of holly was adopted from pagan Romans who used it during the Saturnalia:

> *Holly*. This name is probably a corruption of the word holy, as this plant has been used from time immemorial as a protection against evil influence... Its common use at Christmas is apparently the survival of an ancient Roman custom, occurring during the festival to Saturn, to which god the holly was dedicated. While the Romans were holding this feast, which occurred about the time of the winter solstice, they decked the outsides of their houses with holly... (p. 133).

It should come of no surprise that the custom of kissing under the mistletoe was also adopted from pagans. The oldest of heathen tales relates a story of pagan gods who gave honor to the plant. Alfred Hottes wrote:

> Balder (the Scandinavian counterpart for Apollo) received a charm from his mother Frigga... Loke, an evil spirit, having enmity against Balder, formed an arrow from Mistletoe... The Mistletoe dart struck Balder to the ground. The tears of Frigga became the white berries of the Mistletoe. Through concerted efforts of the gods, Balder was restored to life and Frigga decreed that the plant must never again serve as an instrument of mischief. Frigga, being the goddess of love and beauty, grateful for the return of her son, is said to bestow a kiss

> upon anyone who shall pass under the Mistletoe. From this old tale we derive our custom of kissing under the Mistletoe (*1001 Christmas Facts and Fancies*, p. 150).

The Druids believed that only good could pass by the parasitic plant. They considered mistletoe to be a sacred plant and believed it had miraculous properties which could cure illnesses, serve as an antidote against poisons, ensure fertility and protect against the ill effects of witchcraft. Whenever enemies met under the mistletoe in the forest, they had to lay down their arms and observe a truce until the next day. *Christmas Folklore* also explains that holly and mistletoe were borrowed from Romans who used them to depict reproduction:

> Many of the plants used at Christmas are symbols of fertility. Certainly any evergreen with its ability to return verdure [green vegetation] in the barren months is appropriate, but by far the most interesting are the holly, the ivy, and the mistletoe. Holly, with its pricking leaves, white flowers, and red berries symbolizes the male reproductive urge... holly is the male and the ivy is the female. This use of the plants was... borrowed by the Christians along with other customs of the Roman Saturnalia (pp. 22-23).

As benign as these symbols may appear to many, make no mistake about it; they are deeply rooted in practices God condemns throughout the Scriptures. God does not need or want the Yule log, holly, mistletoe, or any other form of vegetation used in the worship of Him. The Bible tells us that God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). The belief that these symbols can be legitimately connected to Christ's birth is totally false. They are pagan to the core and should be forsaken.

The Birth of the Messiah

The belief that Christ was born on or near December 25th is unfounded. In fact, this date has a very sullied past. Virtually all credible records indicate that we do not know the exact date of Christ's birth. The Catholic Church admits that:

> Inexplicable though it seems, the date of Christ's birth is not known. The gospels indicate neither the day, the month, nor the year (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, v. 3, p. 656, 1967).

According to all of recorded history, it is impossible to identify the exact date of Christ's birth. Despite this, Catholic church fathers set that date as December 25th. This date is actually connected with many vile practices. It was the celebrated birthday of the pagan sun god Mithra. This was the conclusion of Charles Guignebert and Leighton Pullan who intensively studied the early history of Christianity:

> Clearly Mithra is a solar deity, and his birth occurs upon the twenty-fight of December, i.e., the winter solstice (*The Early History Christianity Covering the Period from 300 B.C. to the Origin of the Papacy*, p. 68).

> In the 4th century the great festival of Mithra, 25th of December, was adopted by Christians as a fitting day for the celebration of the birth of the "Sun of righteousness." As a matter of fact, the festival of the Oriental cults were so closely connected with the changes of nature, that they had the effect of restoring to Roman holidays an important element of their primitive character as festivals of nature, and thereby prepared for a transition towards the observance of Christian festivals. By the 4th century, festivals connected with the family, or with the seasons, were the most popular. The personality of the god grew dim, the festival became neutral, and the Church gained compromise (*The History of Early Christianity*, pp. 19-20, 1907).

Christ Was Not Born In Winter

The Scriptures reveal that, at the time of Christ's birth, "there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). It must be understood that shepherds would not have been in the fields during the month of December. Two-thirds of the annual rainfall in Judea occur between the months of December through February.

Therefore, the common practice was to corral animals before that time. Adam Clarke wrote in his commentary that shepherds would take their flock into the mountains and fields during the spring, and bring them back home at the beginning of the first rains (Vol. 5, p. 370). Swiss historian Werner Keller wrote:

> At Christmas time Bethlehem is in the grip of frost, and in the Promised Land no cattle would have been in the fields in that temperature. This fact is borne out by a remark in the Talmud to the effect that in that neighborhood the flocks were put out to grass in March and brought in again at the beginning of November. They remained out in the open for almost eight months (*The Bible as History*, p. 367, 1981).

The Season of Christ's Birth

The Scriptures provide benchmarks that assist in determining when the Savior was conceived as well as the general time of His birth. The gospel of Luke records an event in which the angel Gabriel visited a priest named Zacharias and informed him that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son. This son would be known as John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-17).

Gabriel made this announcement while Zacharias was serving in the temple. Luke indicates that Zacharias performed his service during the division of Abijah. According to First Chronicles, Abijah served during the eighth segment (1Chr. 24:10). The historian Josephus wrote that each division was eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath, with priests rotating so that each would serve twice during the year (*Antiquities of the Jews*, ch. 7 14:7). In this case, Zacharias would have served from Iyar 27 through Sivan 5. This period coincides with late May or early June.

Luke's record also indicates that Zacharias returned home after his days of service were complete (Luke 1:23). Shortly after his return, his wife conceived. This would mean Elizabeth's conception would have occurred in June or perhaps July at the latest. This means that the birth of John the Baptist would have taken place in the spring. When the Angel Gabriel spoke to Mary informing her that she would give birth to the Messiah, Mary asked "How can this be?"

> And the angel answered and said to her, "*the* Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren" (Luke 1:35-36).

Mary left her home to seek Elizabeth. When she arrived, Elizabeth confirmed that Christ had already been conceived (Luke 1:39-42). The time of that visit was during the winter; probably December or January. This being the case, Christ would have been born nine months later—in the fall. Although the Bible does not identify the exact date of Christ's birth it is clear that He was not born anywhere near December 25th.

The Wise Men

One of the most popular scenes depicted during the Christmas season is three wise men offering gifts to Mary and her son in a manger. Defining the term translated as "wise men" in the Bible provides insight as to who these men were. It is *magos* and neither Greek nor Hebrew. It is a Babylonian term origin referring to a knowledgeable dignitary that probably came from that region (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, G3097, H7248).

It has also been suggested that the *magi* were astrologers—which is a possibility. However, knowing that several tribes of Israel were taken as captives to Babylon centuries prior, it is possible that these men were aware of prophecies of the Messiah's birth found in the Bible. In fact, they may have been related to one of the tribes and became men of prominence in that region. Dr. Henry H. Halley provided a credible explanation regarding the identity of these visitors.

> These wise men came from Babylon, or the country beyond the land where the human race had its origin, the land of Abraham, land of the Jewish Captivity, where many Jews still lived. They belonged to the learned class, advisers of kings. Perhaps they were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, and knew of the expectation of a coming Messianic King. It was the land of Daniel, and

> no doubt they knew of Daniel's 70 weeks' prophecy; and also Balaam's prophecy about "A Star out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). They were men of high standing, for they had access to Herod. They are commonly spoken of as the "three Wise-men." But, the Scripture does not say how many (*Halley's Bible Handbook,* pp. 418-419).

The traditional view is that there were three wise men. That perspective is largely due to the three categories of gifts that these men brought—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. However, another reason for the adoption of this number might be related to the three gods worshipped by pagans during their yuletide activities. As noted in a study of origins and survivals of church ceremonies:

> The Christian Festival of this day superseded one of the greatest of Pagan ones. Yuletide was sacred to Odin, or Wuotan; he, with Thor and Zio, the Storm-Gods, whom at this time it was necessary to propitiate, afterwards became identified with the Magi, or the Three Kings of the East (*Festivals, Holy Days, and Saints' Days*, p. 9)

The Bible does not mention the number of wise men. According to Dr. Halley, there may have been an even larger number accompanying the dignitaries from the east:

> There were probably more, or at least they were with an entourage of scores or hundreds, for it would not be safe for a small group to travel a thousand miles over desert wastes that were infested with bandits. Their arrival in Jerusalem was of sufficient show of importance to stir the whole city (*Halley's Bible Handbook*, p. 419).

The common nativity scenes which show the wise men visiting Christ in a manger is not accurate. Luke wrote that Mary and Jesus were in a manger shortly after birth, but Matthew's gospel states the wise men visited sometime later when the family was in a house:

> And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him (Matthew 2:11).

The word translated as manger is *phatne* while the word translated as house is *oikia*. These are different terms defining different structures. Therefore, while most believe that the wise men paid their respects shortly after Christ was born, the visit must have occurred sometime later.

The wise men followed a "star in the east" and came to Jerusalem asking "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews." When Herod heard of this, many were troubled and he inquired of priests and scribes about a prophecy. Herod was told that a king was prophesied to be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Herod advised the wise men to go to Bethlehem, find the child, and return to inform him where this newborn king could be found. However, as the wise men departed, the star appeared again and it led the wise men to a house where Jesus and His mother were staying (Mat. 2:2-11).

Something else to recognize is that Mary and Joseph were adherents to all the laws recorded in the Torah. Those laws require mother's to be purified after 40 days when they give birth to a male child. A specific offering is required to be made at the temple after those days are over. If the mother is not able to offer a lamb, she may bring two turtledoves and two pigeons (Lev. 12). The allowance for a substitute is a provision made for those who did not own a sheep, or could not afford to purchase one. This detail is of great interest when consider the time of the wise men's visit.

If the *magi* would have visited Mary before the 40 days of purification were over, giving the family gold, frankincense, and myrrh, Joseph and Mary would have had more than enough money to purchase a lamb to offer on behalf of their newborn son. However, it appears that they found it necessary to offer two birds indicating that they did not yet have the funds necessary to purchase a lamb when her days of purification were completed (Luke 2:22-24).

Finally, the wise men departed and disregarded Herod's request to know of Jesus' location. Herod was enraged and ordered soldiers to kill all male children two years and younger in Bethlehem and surrounding areas (Mat. 2:16). Herod's determination of age was based upon his meeting with the *magi*. This means that the wise men must have arrived in Jerusalem

sometime after Jesus was born, and several months had passed since they had met with Herod leading him to believe that the child could be no older than two years of age.

The First Noel

One of the most popular Christmas carols is the song *The First Noel*. This song begins with the words, "The first noel the angels did say..." Many assume that *noel* refers to Christmas. This is not true. The word *noel* is of Celtic origin and comes from *novo* and *hel*. The word simply means "new sun." This is related to the sun worship of pagan due to their recognition of the winter solstice. Again, something that appears beautiful on the outside has its roots in religious practices that are contrary to the faith of the saints.

Peace on Earth and Good Will Toward Men

Millions of Christians around the world believe that Christ came to bring peace on earth and good will toward men. This belief is based on words found in Luke 2:14 where an angel informs shepherds that the Messiah was born. The shepherds also heard an angelic chorus praising God with the words:

> Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! (Luke 2:14).

These words appear to be conveying that the birth of Christ was bringing peace to the world. However, this is not true. His own words contradict the idea that Christ's intent was to bring peace to mankind at that time. The Savior clearly stated that His life produced conflict. His message of obedience to God's law compelled people to take sides.

> Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter in law against her mother in law and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me (Matthew 10:34-37).

King Herod committed one of the most violent and bloody acts recorded in Scripture as a result of Jesus' birth. He conspired and carried out a plan to murder numerous children (Mat. 2:16).

With this understanding, how should Luke 2:14 be translated? When this verse is carefully examined, we see that the angels' anthem was two-fold. First, it exalted God who reigns over everything. Second, the angels speak of peace, but a peace that comes only to men who seek God and on whom His favor rests. Christ spoke of this peace just hours before His death. On the eve of His crucifixion, Christ said:

> Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

With these words, Christ was stating that there would be a special peace to those who followed Him. That peace is the peace of mind that comes from knowing God is actively involved in the lives of His children and that He will never forsake them. With this understanding, Luke 2:14 is better rendered "Peace on earth to men of good will." This is similar to the Knox Translation of the Bible which states, "peace on earth to men that are God's friends."

However, there are those who do not love God or His way. To those there can be no true peace, but only conflict. The Messiah's birth brought with it the potential for great peace as well as great war. It is interesting that when Christ returns to this earth to set up His millennial Kingdom, the world will be engaged in a great war. However, once the earth is conquered by the Messiah, there will be great world peace.

Should Christians Celebrate Christmas?

It is undeniable that Christmas is the most anticipated time of the year for millions of professing Christians. It is a time of beautiful music, delicious food, bright colors, and family reunions. However, there is one thing Christmas is not; it is not now, nor has it ever been, Christian. The Puritans understood this. William Prynne wrote the following about Christmas in the 17th century:

> Our Christmas lords of Misrule... were derived from the Roman Saturnalia and Bacchanalian festivals; which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them (*Book of Christian Folklore*, p. 8).

As innocent and appealing as Christmas may be, it did not come from a desire to obey the mandates of God. It did not come from wanting to honor Jesus Christ. The motivation came from those who wanted to meet pagans halfway. It's traditions, like Santa's dark helper, have a godless origin.

God hates a lie no matter what form it takes. Satan himself was characterized as the father of lies and deceiver of the whole world (John 8:44, Rev. 12:9). The Scriptures also reveal that Satan appears as an angel of light (2Cor. 11:14). It should be no surprise that festivals honoring him would possess great beauty and appeal.

Some might argue that, although Christmas may have been pagan at one time, it is now confiscated for Christ. They feel justified that their church has put a stamp of approval on Christmas and they think that they are honoring God. But let's consider what God said about adopting the traditions of unbelievers and using them to worship Him: In the book of Deuteronomy, the Eternal spoke and it was written:

> Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:30-32).

God tells us that we cannot create our own way to worship Him. We cannot adopt the practice of unbelievers and use their methods to try and honor the true God. We cannot add or take away from that which He has commanded. If we claim to follow Christ, if we desire to do what He deems as acceptable, we must be honest and ask if God would recognize the traditions of heathen as a

proper way to honor Christ? Would God give a stamp of approval to using pagan traditions to worship Him? The answer should be clear without a need to guess. God spells it out for us.

> Thus saith the LORD, learn not the way of the heathen (KJV, Jeremiah 10:2).

When we come to understand the truth behind the Christmas holiday, and we compare it to the written Word of God, we see that God hates festivities that claim to celebrate in honor of Him. Christmas is one of these apostate celebrations. It does not carry the mark of Christ in its symbols and traditions. Instead, it is filled with traditions of ancient pagans.

A Lesson from Israel's History

The descendants of Israel were led out of Egypt with a high hand 1500 years before the birth of Christ. Shortly after they were freed, they wanted to return to the pagan practices they had left. While Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, many appealed to Aaron to fashion a golden calf like the idols of Egypt. Aaron consented and instructed the people to gather gold jewelry so that an idol could be made and declared:

> This *is* your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt! So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD" (Exodus 32:4-5).

Such an act of defiance seems unimaginable in light of the great miracles Israel witnessed. God was so angry that He suggested that the children of Israel be wiped out, and He would instead make a great nation from the posterity of Moses (Exo. 32:10). However, the people did not see it as blatant idolatry. They claimed that it was a celebration in honor of God.

This illustrates a foundational principal to those who claim to worship Christ. We cannot decide for ourselves how we are going to honor God. As Jesus pointed out to those who think that we can worship Him in any way that we choose. As Jesus echoed:

> "In vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7).

The simple truth is that Christmas is not Christian. Its images and symbols were adopted from pagan practices. It should be abandoned by all genuine Christians. The Scriptures repeatedly demonstrate that God despises the perverse religions created by godless people.

Christ is going to return and establish God's Kingdom on the earth. When He comes, will He find that people have returned to the idolatry of Egypt? Will you accept the teachings of a world that embraces pagan practices and dresses them up as Christianity, or will you worship God in spirit and in truth?

The Eternal Church of God offers a variety of books, booklets, articles, audio, and video to help people better understand the Bible. Some of the printed material available includes:

The Truth about New Year's Day

The Day of Christ's Resurrection

The Truth about Easter

The Shocking Truth about Valentine's Day

The Trinity – Fact or Fiction

The Truth about Mardi Gras and related holidays

The Truth about Tithing

This is Not the Only Time of Salvation

The Truth about Halloween

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