



"Some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe them."
—George Orwell

27-Dec-13

Dating Christ's Birth

Despite the continuing secularization of our society, people remain fascinated and curious about the historical basis for the life of [Jesus Christ](#). This curiosity becomes apparent especially around the traditional holidays of [Christmas](#) and [Easter](#), when Jesus is supposed to be "the reason for the season." The Internet provides a wide-open window into the things people are thinking about, and questions about Jesus' birth and death are frequently asked on search engines and answers are posted on social media sites. For instance, a quick inquiry on Google or Bing about the date of Jesus' birth returns literally millions of pages of material.

The vast majority of mainstream Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25 or January 6 (Eastern Orthodox), depending on their denominational allegiance. While a minority of these Christians insist that December 25 is the correct date of the Nativity, most people realize that proof for this early winter date is quite scanty, which we will see presently. Even so, very few of them think that the date is significant as long as one is celebrating the advent of the Son of [God](#) into [the world](#) for the salvation of mankind—and one experiences good cheer with family and friends and receives the expected number of presents under the tree. I know, my cynicism is showing.

In the run-up to Christmas, it is not uncommon for newspapers, magazines, and online news sites to publish articles revealing the errors and inconsistencies in the supposedly Christian holiday. A person would be ignorant indeed if he did not know that erecting Christmas trees, burning yule logs, hanging mistletoe, and putting up twinkling house lights have no biblical foundation, and in fact, hail from paganism. Santa Claus blends the fourth-century Saint Nicolas with old Germanic and Scandinavian traditions that probably have their roots in Odin worship, and his eight reindeer likely derive from Odin's eight-footed horse, Sleipnir. (Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, the ninth reindeer, was added in 1939, thanks to the poem of that name by Robert L. May written for the Montgomery Ward department store chain.) Santa's modern look comes courtesy of a Coca-Cola advertising campaign in the 1930s.

The more serious-minded publications, however, tend to focus on the date, the place, and the biblical and historical sources of Jesus' birth. In 2012, "Bible History Daily," an online publication of the Biblical Archaeology Society, published "[How December 25 Became Christmas](#)," written by Andrew McGowan, Warden and President of [Trinity](#) College at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Writing for the general public, McGowan collates the findings of numerous scholars who have looked into the issue, concluding that, frankly, no one can really be sure how Christmas came to fall on December 25.

In typical scholarly fashion, McGowan brushes over the biblical information, mentioning only the detail of the shepherds being out with their flocks at night ([Luke 2:8](#)). He snootily dismisses it, writing, "Yet most scholars would urge caution about extracting such a precise but incidental detail from a narrative whose focus is theological rather than calendrical." He quickly hurries on to extra-biblical findings, clearly believing them to be more credible.

In spite of his less-than-comforting dismissal of what the Bible says on the subject, McGowan rounds up the historical facts with rigor. He shows that Christian leaders well into the late-third century did not celebrate Christ's birth, citing the well-known "Early Church Father," Origen: "Origen of Alexandria (c. 165-264) goes so far as to mock Roman celebrations of birth

anniversaries, dismissing them as 'pagan' practices—a strong indication that Jesus' birth was not marked with similar festivities at that place and time." Note that Origen lived into the latter half of the third century.

Earlier, around the year 200, Clement of Alexandria had written that Christian teachers had proposed various dates for the Nativity, but December 25 was not among them. In fact, most of them fall in the spring. But by the fourth century, December 25 in the Roman West and January 6 in Egypt and the East had become widely recognized as competing dates for that unique day in Bethlehem. How had the people of that time come to decide on these dates?

McGowan posits two theories—and that is all they are. The first is the one most members of God's church are familiar with: that December 25 is borrowed from Roman paganism, particularly the Saturnalia festival kept in late December. As the author notes in support of the idea, "To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25."

While collecting the facts assiduously, he stumbles in interpreting them. Finding no historical proof that the Roman church in the late-third or early-fourth century *intentionally* syncretized the pagan holiday into Christianity, McGowan fails to see any plausibility in this theory. However, he later contradicts himself: "From the mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan festivals." For this, he blames Constantine, who "converted" in AD 312. We can only conclude that he is being either naïve or purposely disingenuous about the Roman church's penchant to ignore God's Word in its quest for converts.

The second theory makes a great to-do about the date of [Passover](#) (Nisan 14) when Christ died, which at the time was believed to have occurred on March 25, exactly nine months prior to December 25. The ancients apparently considered such symmetry to be divinely ordained. "Thus," McGowan writes:

Jesus was believed to have been conceived and crucified on the same day of the year. Exactly nine months later, Jesus was born, on December 25. . . . Connecting Jesus' conception and death in this way will certainly seem odd to modern readers, but it reflects

ancient and medieval understandings of the whole of salvation
being bound up together.

Despite this theory being based on supposition and "divine symmetry," McGowan considers it more likely than deliberate syncretism—before the mid-fourth century, of course.

Belief in the general historicity of God's Word would solve his dilemma, but trusting the Bible is rare among critical scholars these days. Our article, "[When Was Jesus Born?](#)" uses the biblical details to narrow the possible dates to a two-week period in the early autumn, aligning well with the fall [holy days](#), particularly the [Feast of Trumpets](#). It is far more likely that the divine symmetry would align Christ's birth with God's feasts than with the short days of early winter.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[What's Wrong With Christmas?](#)

by Martin G. Collins

A certain commentator admits the pagan origins of Christmas and its contribution to religious confusion, and yet wants to salvage the holiday anyway, even though it totally scuttles the truth. Human nature would rather indulge in pagan lies and idolatry, taking pleasure in unrighteousness, rather than be corrected or guided by truth. Christmas thrives in this syncretistic culture, having adopted the Roman Brumalia-Saturnalia festival, celebrating the birth of the invincible sun. The Roman Catholic Church carefully blended a little truth with a lot of falsehood in order to have the birthday of the Son of God coincide with the birth of the invincible sun. This shameless syncretism does not have God's endorsement. God does not approve of false ministers who try to appropriate God's words to promote their selfish ends, turning peoples' hearts away from Him. Pagan customs cannot be assimilated into the truth, as our forebears learned that worshipping a golden calf does not coincide with worshipping God. Christians need to extricate themselves

from the worshipping of Satan. Regarding our beliefs, we must always start with God, not man, and that we regard the Bible, not human reason as our ultimate authority. Christmas seems to thrive on covetousness and the way of get, while God's holy days encourage the way of give.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Birth of Jesus Christ \(Part Two\): Nativity](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

When the Son of God was born into the world, one of the greatest events of all history occurred. Richard Ritenbaugh describes the birth of Jesus and the angel's announcement to the 'shepherds abiding in the fields,' perhaps the first preaching of the gospel to mankind.

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