

Christmas Celebration - Is It Pagan?

Introduction

Is it wrong to celebrate this date, or indeed any other date? Some make a big thing of the fact that the Bible does not tell us to celebrate this day, but nowhere in Scripture are we told NOT to celebrate it and thus at the very least it becomes a matter of conscience.

Scriptures give clear instructions that we are not to condemn each other over days that we keep.

Colossians 2:16 - days are not the key factor

Colossians 2:18 - careful what you worship

Colossians 2:19 - and who you worship with

Colossians 2:20 - don't submit (only place word is used *dogmatidzo* from root dogma) to the world and its ways

Romans 14:5 - matter of your own conscience - be fully convinced and so not swayed by others and know what you do and why you do it.

Date of Jesus Birth

Can never be *absolutely* sure exactly when Jesus is born but a number of interesting clues. There are reasons why it could not be December 25th; not time to travel for census and shepherds not in fields etc. But there are also some positive Biblical clues.

Luke 1:5-8 - John Baptist was conceived immediately after the 'course of Abijah' was completed in the Temple and Zacharius went home.

1 Chronicles 24:7-19 mentions 24 courses of priests who served in the Temple and Abijah was eighth (verse 10).

If course 1 began at the beginning of the 'religious year' Nisan then Zacharius would have finished his course during the second week of Sivan which corresponds to May/June in our calendar. (See <http://biblelight.net/sukkoth.htm> for more detailed information that you can check out)

Jesus would therefore have been conceived 6 months later around December time or in Jewish month of Kislev and born in September/October or Jewish month of Tishri. We will see the significance of this later.

Roots of Christmas Pagan or Jewish?

From the Negative Perspective

People will say that Christmas is pagan; need to first make sure they know what they are saying and second what the historical facts are. Are they saying:

We should not celebrate the birth of Christ? Or,

We should not celebrate on this day? Or,

If they are saying this then the Scriptures above show these points are not a valid argument. However are they saying:

The traditions and ceremony is pagan? Or,

That Christmas is based on an occultic festival.

We will look historically at how Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25th and decide if it is pagan and/or occultic.

Many articles have been written and they don't all agree. We therefore need to check out the facts, as best we can, and make some clear decisions.

In summary, the following appear to be true facts:

People had celebrated a mid-winter festival for hundreds of years before Christ came to this earth.

The Roman festival of Saturnalia lasted for several days.

The date of December 25th appears to have been chosen, for the celebration of the birth of Christ, by Pope Julius I, in the 4th century (336 and 350 are both quoted with authority), in order to include a Christian element in the long-established mid-winter festivals.

In more detail:

The midwinter festival of Saturnalia started on December 17 but was it specifically celebrated on December 25? Some pagan sources claim that it finished on December 23; others say it extended for a week from the 17th, "Despite Augustus' efforts to reduce it to three days, and Caligula's, to five." If this is true then December 25 has no association with Saturnalia.

We should also note that the "12 Days of Christmas" is not associated with Saturnalia but rather the days after Christmas and before Epiphany when in the ecclesiastical calendar the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem is celebrated. There are some that say that the song was written as an 'underground' Christmas song in the Dark Ages but there is no proof for this whatsoever and it just appears to be a children's rhyme.

The Festival *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (the birth of the unconquered sun) was probably first celebrated in Rome by order of the Emperor Aurelian (270-5), an ardent worshipper of the Syrian sun-god Baal. The earliest reference to the festival is from 354 in the Philocalian calendar. All this is later than the first time 25th put forward. This was in 221 AD and based on the chronological calculations of a converted pagan Julius Africanus. He dated the conception of Jesus around March 20th, which gave December 25th for Jesus' birth. Although I would not agree with this date, which was widely accepted by the mid 4th Century, it is clear that it is not based on pagan celebrations.

But even if the Church did choose this day to celebrate the rising of the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings, there is still **no direct evidence** of a deliberate substitution.

Yes, there were pagan festivals around this time, but it is very difficult to make a case for the fact that the celebration of the birth of Christ has been grafted on to pagan or occultic roots. The fact that it is celebrated on a particular day that others might worship the sun god (by the way we worship on SUNDAY and the Sabbath is SATURNDAY) would not make it in itself a pagan festival. The content *not* the day makes it pagan or occultic.

Others will talk about this being the first day we can measure light overcoming darkness; and still others that it could well have been the time of the conception of Jesus. But whatever is said, there is no direct historical evidence of the celebration of the birth of Jesus being a pagan festival.

The day had always been there, people had lived their lives quite happily on that day. Those, where there was no 'pagan festival', treated it like any other day and it was no more 'evil' than any other day. The day and the date are neither good nor evil. If someone decided to celebrate a pagan festival on that day, the day was not made occult but the hours in the day were used in such a fashion. There may be a witch's coven meeting on the Sabbath, does that either make the coven Christian or the local church gathering evil? Of course not! If I go shopping on that day, would all the goods I buy be tainted by evil? Of course not! It is not what others have done, or are doing with that day, it is what I am doing – and if I am truly worshipping Christ then it is not evil in any way.

The evidence does not show that they were trying to 'Christianise a pagan festival'; nor were they taking customs and pretending they were Christian. It was using a day, that was already there, but seeking to make the Lord Jesus the centre of attention; that He was the One who was to be the "sun rising" - Malachi 4:2.

From the Positive Perspective

The festival celebrated in John 10:22, called the Feast of Dedication, was undoubtedly Hanukkah. This is an 8-day festival annual Jewish festival beginning on Kislev 25, the third month of the Jewish calendar, corresponding, approximately, to December. Also known as the Festival of Lights and Feast of the Maccabees, because it commemorates the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem by Judas Maccabee in 165 BC after the Temple had been profaned by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

As we said earlier Jesus would have been conceived around this time in (Kislev) December and would have been born in Tishri (September/October). If this is the case not only could the "Light of the World" been conceived at the Festival of Lights but He could have been born at the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. This too would have great prophetic significance:

Isaiah 7:14 - Immanuel - "God with us" - tabernacling with us. John 1:14 - "dwelt among us". Hebrew for dwelt is, *succah* and the Feast of Tabernacles is, *sukkot*. His first coming when God broke into human history and dwelt with us; but the Feast of Tabernacles also looks forward to His Second Coming when in completion, He will be with His people. Such an event should be celebrated at some point in the year and we should meditate on the reality of what has happened and is yet to happen.

Why Bethlehem?

Bethlehem has tremendous prophetic significance which can be very encouraging as we look at it.

House of Bread

First mention Genesis 35:19 - Rachel buried. (See Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:17)

Bethlehem originally was called Ephrath - 'fruitfulness'

Rachel was the mother of Joseph and he is a clear type of Christ bringing redemption to His people. This indeed is the first picture of Bethlehem we have - the birth place of the Redeemer.

Same picture in Ruth, where Naomi could have gleaned in the very fields of the shepherds. But more than that we have the Kinsman Redeemer introduced.

See Ruth 3:13 the *goel*. The word signifies a near kinsman - one who by the Mosaic Law had a right to redeem an inheritance. The office of the next akin was threefold:

1. To buy back the **forfeited inheritance**, or the liberty of him who had been obliged to sell himself for a servant.
2. To **avenge** the blood of any of the family who had been killed, by killing the murderer.
3. To **take the widow** of a deceased brother or relative, if he died childless.

4:1-4 - Redeem the Israelite

4:5 - Redeem the Gentile

See Matthew 1:5 Rahab and Ruth

City of David

David born there - 1 Samuel 17:12 anointed as King - 1 Samuel 16:13 now we not only have the Redeemer but the King! The first and second coming of Christ.

The Eternal One

Micah 5:2 - given by one outside of time who could fulfil it!

Picture of our Christian Life

Place of New Life - bread and water (2 Samuel 23:13-17)

Place of Joy - angels' song of Joy and Triumph

Place of Conflict - Matthew 2:16-18

Place of Eternal Life

Modern Celebrations

Celebrating, in spirit and truth, the Saviour's entry into this world cannot be occultic, worldly or wrong. Without His birth there would be no death; a miraculous birth that deserves celebrating; celebrating Christmas, so marked by the prophets of old is doing justice to the event heralded throughout the Old Testament. If we are worshipping the Lord, the day is not the issue; it is the style and content of worship. However, there are some pitfalls and we do need to be aware of them and make up our own minds before the Lord. This is way that Paul dealt with idol issues in his day, see 1 Corinthians 8: 4-13.

Paul had no problem eating meat sacrificed to idols because they were of man's making and the God he served was greater than all that. However, he would refrain if doing such things would stumble any weaker Christians around. If Paul would actually eat meat that had been used in a pagan ceremony there is obviously no problem in worshipping the Lord on a day that at one time may have been used for pagan rites. However, notice that Paul would be aware that some things we do on this day might stumble others.

In 1 Corinthians 10:23-26 Paul explains that all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable or will build up; therefore Paul will not just do something because he is free to do it but will make sure

that it is first profitable and then for edification. In this light we will look at a number of issues, some more important than others, that maybe are a hindrance to true worship.

There would be those who would not necessarily agree with the conclusions we have made in these paragraphs and for those who want to follow up on this I would suggest that you take a look at the following website - http://www.logosresourcepages.org/Holidays/christmas_.htm.

Normal Christmas Story

First error is the crib scene - not Biblical because the magi were not there that first night. They went to Jerusalem and Herod's scribes looked in Scriptures; even the idea of a star pointing from heaven is not recorded in God's Word.

The ancient Magi were a hereditary priesthood of the Medes (known today as the Kurds) credited with profound and extraordinary religious knowledge. After some Magi, who had been attached to the Median court, proved to be expert in the interpretation of dreams, Darius the Great established them over the state religion of Persia. Contrary to popular belief and statement in the book, the Magi were not originally followers of Zoroaster; nowhere is Zoroaster Spitama, the founder of Zoroastrianism, ever described as a magi - that all came much later. It is not Zoroastrian but is recorded in Biblical history:

Jeremiah 39:3 - "And all the princes of the king of Babylon came in and sat in the middle gate... Rab-Mag..." Rab-Mag actually refers to chief Magi, with the word Mag meaning priest in the old Persian language.

By the time of Jesus, there were many kinds of Magi, including pagan priests, physicians, learned men, and sorcerers. But there were obviously some God-fearing Magi as well. Daniel 2:48 - "Then the king made Daniel a great man... and made him... chief of the governors over all the wise men [Magi] of Babylon."

Probably the caravan – would have made quite a stir – came from Parthia; the Parthian empire, which was second only to Rome in power and ruled parts of Persia and Babylon.

The stable is also not mentioned in Scripture and even the crib may be a wrong concept. The Greek word, *kataluma* translated, 'inn' is used one other time (see Luke 22:11 and Mark 14:14), it was the place where Jesus observed the Last Supper which according to Luke (22:12) was a furnished large upper storey room within a private Jerusalem house. Could the *kataluma* of Jesus' first night be a similar room in Bethlehem? Joseph's ancestral home full of other family members, Joseph and Mary stayed downstairs in the domestic stable, still within the ancestral home. The Biblical account only mentions a manger (Luke 2:16), an animal feeding trough and there is archaeological evidence that such mangers were found within the house where animals were regularly kept at night.

Christmas Tree

The history of the Christmas tree is like the history of the day. Pagans, as far back as the Babylonians, used trees, but is there a direct link? Also did the Christmas Tree start life as the Paradise Tree as indicated in the book?

It was during the 11th century that the scenes called 'mysteries', including one about Paradise, were very popular. A tree decorated with red apples symbolized the tree of Paradise. During the 15th century, the faithful began to put up trees in their own houses on December 24, the feast day of Adam and Eve.

However, the story starts much earlier, 722 to be exact in Germany with Boniface. It is said he encountered some pagans who were about to sacrifice a child at the base of a huge oak tree. He cut down the tree to prevent the sacrifice and a Fir tree grew up at the base of the oak. He used the triangular shape of the Fir Tree to describe the Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the Fir tree was recognised as God's Tree. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

The first Christmas tree as we know it, but without lights still, appeared in Alsace in 1521. You can take your pick for the oldest record decorated tree; some say it was in Riga in Latvia, in 1510 others Bremen in 1570 where it was put up for the for the benefit of the guild members' children.

Once again there is no evidence of direct pagan traditions. However, some Scriptures are taken by some to forbid the use of Christmas trees. Before reading it though please be aware that throughout Scripture trees are often used to refer to men and if the roots are in the Lord then there is good fruit and if in the world then bad fruit. Trees therefore are not automatically a bad thing in Scripture; the verses in Jeremiah 10:1-6 from the King James Version are regarding the heathen:

“Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel: Thus saith the LORD, learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good. Forasmuch as there is none like unto thee, O LORD; thou art great, and thy name is great in might.”

If somebody genuinely feels that the Lord speaks to them through these verses and tells them not to have a Christmas tree, that is between them and the Lord; however, taken in context and compared with Isaiah 40:19 and 44:9-10, it is clear that this is talking about making and worshipping an idol, not having a decorated tree in your house. The only similarities between this and a Christmas tree, seems to be that both are made of wood and both are decorated.

Once again we are back to the reason we do it. To make the house look nice – fine. To worship the tree as some sort of spiritual symbol should not be part of the Christian's Christmas celebrations.

Other Decorations

Other decorations such as the 'Yule Log' and 'Mistletoe' definitely do have pagan roots. Yule was the winter solstice celebration of the Germanic pagans and a special log was chosen on the eve of Yule, for the holiday fire. A small piece from last year's log was used to light the fire, which was a festive family event, to hurry the return of the sun. Charred pieces from the fire would be kept to protect the house through the coming year. Today, eating a chocolate covered sponge Yule log is not likely to lead you in to paganism but it is good to know the origin of words we use.

Whereas the roots of kissing under the mistletoe are not clear it does seem to be linked with the fertility aspects of mistletoe, and the Druids view that it brought peace.

Santa Claus

Fictional characters are not wrong and many children learn from their favourite characters, which is why parents want to expose their children to wholesome stories with good morals. One wonders however, what we teach our kids through the invention of Santa Claus.

First, ask for as many things as you want on the basis that you will receive all that you ask for. Not only does this often lead to disappointment but it can also produce an attitude of greed in the child's life and an expectation that whatever they ask for they get.

Second, we have a superhuman character that we can trust implicitly and that knows all about us, whether we have been good or bad. He will reward or punish us according to our actions.

Third, it doesn't matter how many lies we tell the children about him but we must not lie to him and of course the rest of the year we will be encouraging our children not to lie.

No wonder many children today grow up believing more in Santa Claus than in Jesus; in most homes I guess even at Christmas time there is more said about Santa than there is about the Saviour; but just look at the differences in character.

Jesus will listen carefully to all that we ask Him, but He will only give us what, He in His sovereign wisdom, knows what is best for us.

He is truly eternal not having superhuman powers on one night only; He knows all about us but still loves us just the same and will forgive our wrong doings as we ask Him to. He, of course, is the only One who can truly forgive them all.

We can trust Him fully because it is not that He just chooses always to tell the truth, but He is truth.

Over Indulgence

There is nothing wrong with being blessed with money and nothing wrong with enjoying good food; it is our attitude towards them that cause the problems. Scripture tells us that it is the love of money that is the root of evil (1 Timothy 6:10); it also tells us that we should do all things in moderation.

Enjoying a nice meal together and giving each other presents is neither pagan nor to be avoided but our attitude is important. We should not go into debt over buying presents or food and we should not give with either an attitude of wanting to receive back or that we are so good to be giving what we do.

These are all areas that can ruin the worship of the Christ and move Him away from the centre of Christmas.

Conclusions

I do not believe there is anything wrong or pagan about remembering the birth of our Saviour on 25 December but how we do this and what we do is very important.

As individuals and in fellowship with close family, will need to decide whether or not we should celebrate Christmas and what that will entail; but being clear as to why you believe it is wrong because you could be depriving the Lord of His true worship.