

# The Surprising Origins Of The Christmas Holiday

---

Many people know the Bible doesn't tell Christ's followers to observe Christmas. So where did the holiday come from, and does the Bible condone it? Does it make any difference as long as it's intended to honor God and bring families together?

When asked about Santa Claus one man answered: *"I don't think you should tell kids that there is a Santa Claus," he said. "That's the first lie you tell your children." Instead, "Tell kids that Santa is a character that was made up to celebrate a holiday." Otherwise, "when kids get to be 5 . . . they realize their parents have been lying to them their whole life."*

The Arts & Entertainment cable television channel aired a program about Christmas titled Christmas Unwrapped: The History of Christmas. The promo for the program read:

*"People all over the world celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th. But why is the Savior's nativity marked by gift-giving, and was He really born on that day? And just from where did the Christmas tree come?"*

*"Take an enchanting journey through the history of the world's favorite holiday to learn the origins of some of the Western world's most enduring traditions. Trace the emergence of Christmas from pagan festivals like the Roman Saturnalia, which celebrated the winter solstice."*

Christians need to face an uncomfortable fact that Santa Claus is fictitious and that Christmas and its trappings evolve from pagan Roman festivals. But as we'll see, by no means are these the only sources of information about the background of Santa Claus and Christmas.

Is there more to these ancient traditions and practices than meets the eye? Does it make any difference whether we continue to participate in them? What does the Bible say about such practices?

## Celebration Of The Sun God

It may sound odd that any religious celebration with Christ's name attached to it could pre-date Christianity. Yet, the holiday we know as Christmas long predates Jesus Christ.

Elements of the celebration can be traced to ancient Egypt, Babylon and Rome. This fact doesn't cast aspersions on Jesus, but it does call into question the understanding and wisdom of those who, over the millennia, have insisted on perpetuating an ancient pagan festival that has spread through much of the world as Christmas. Members of the early Church would have been astonished to think that the customs and practices we associate with Christmas would be incorporated into a celebration of Christ's birth. Not until several centuries had passed would Christ's name be attached to this popular Roman holiday.

As Alexander Hislop explains in his book, **The Two Babylons**: *"It is admitted by the most learned and candid writers of all parties that the day of our Lord's birth cannot be determined, and that within the Christian Church no such festival as Christmas was ever heard of till the third century, and that not until the fourth century was far advanced did it gain much observance"* (1959, pp. 92-93).

As for how Dec. 25 became the date for Christmas day, virtually any book on the holi-

day's history will explain that this date was celebrated in the Roman Empire as the birthday of the sun god.

Explaining how Dec. 25 came to be selected as the supposed birthday of Jesus, the book **4000 Years of Christmas** says: “*For that day was sacred, not only to the pagan Romans but to a religion from Persia which, in those days, was one of Christianity's strongest rivals. This Persian religion was Mithraism, whose followers worshipped the sun, and celebrated its return to strength on that day*” (Earl and Alice Count, 1997, p. 37).

Not only was Dec. 25 honored as the birthday of the sun, but a festival had long been observed among pagan nations to celebrate the growing amount of daylight after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The precursor of Christmas was in fact an idolatrous midwinter festival characterized by excess and debauchery that predated Christianity by many centuries!

### **Pre-Christian Practices Incorporated**

This ancient festival went by different names in various cultures. In Rome it was called the Saturnalia, in honor of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture. The celebration was absorbed into the early Roman church and given the name of Christ (“Christ mass,” or Christmas) to conciliate new converts who didn't want to give it up and to swell the number of nominal adherents of Christianity.

The tendency on the part of third-century Catholic leadership was to meet paganism halfway — a practice made clear in a bitter lament by Tertullian, a Catholic theologian of that time. In 230 he wrote of the inconsistency of professing Christians. He contrasted their lax and political practices with the strict fidelity of the pagans to their own beliefs: “*By us who are strangers to Sabbaths, and new moons, and festivals, once acceptable to God [the biblical festivals spelled out in the Bible in **Leviticus 23**, which they no longer observed], the Saturnalia,*

*the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia, are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, new year's day presents are made with din, and sports and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to their religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians.*” (quoted by Hislop, p. 93, emphasis added throughout unless otherwise noted).

Failing to make much headway in converting the pagans, the religious leaders of the Roman church began compromising by dressing heathen customs in Christian-looking garb. But, rather than converting them to the church's beliefs, the church became largely converted to non-Christian customs in its own religious practices.

Although at first the early Catholic Church censured this celebration, “*the festival was far too strongly-entrenched in popular favor to be abolished, and the Church finally granted the necessary recognition, believing that if Christmas could not be suppressed, it should be preserved in honor of the Christian God. Once given a Christian basis the festival became fully-established in Europe, with many of its pagan elements undisturbed*” (**Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown**, Richard Cavendish, editor, 1983, Vol. 2, p. 480, “Christmas”).

### **Celebration Wins Out Over Scripture**

Some resisted such spiritually poisonous compromises. “*Upright men strove to stem the tide, but in spite of all their efforts, the apostasy went on, till the Church, with the exception of a small remnant, was submerged under Pagan superstition. That Christmas was originally a Pagan festival is beyond all doubt. The time of the year, and the ceremonies with which it is still celebrated, prove its origin*” (Hislop, p. 93).

The aforementioned Tertullian, for one, disassociated himself from the Roman church in an attempt to draw closer to the teachings of the Bible.

He wasn't alone in his disagreement with such trends. *“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”* (**The Encyclopedia Britannica**, 11th edition, Vol. 6, p. 293, “Christmas”).

Christmas was not made a Roman holiday until 534 (ibid.). It took 300 years for the new name and symbols of Christmas to replace the old names and meaning of the midwinter festival, a pagan celebration that reaches back so many centuries. Only after Constantine developed the “church” as we now know it, and incorporated it into the Roman government, did the pagan worship of Christ's Mass become thought of as a Christian event.

### **The Origin Of Santa Claus**

How did Santa Claus enter the picture? Why is this mythical figure so closely aligned with the Christmas holiday? Here, too, many books are available to shed light on the origins of this popular character.

“Santa Claus” is an American corruption of the Dutch form Sinterklaas, short for Sint Nikolaas, a figure brought to America by the early Dutch colonists. This name, in turn, stems from St. Nicholas, bishop of the city of Myra in southern Asia Minor, a Catholic saint honored by the Greeks and the Latins on Dec. 6.

He was bishop of Myra, and was “sainted” during the tolerant reign of Constantine (**The Encyclopedia Britannica**, 11th edition, Vol. 19, p. 649, “Nicholas, St.”). Various stories claim a link from Christmas to St. Nicholas, all of them having to do with gift-giving on the eve of St. Nicholas, subsequently transferred to Christmas Day (ibid.).

How, we might ask, did a bishop from the sunny Mediterranean coast of Turkey come to be associated with a red-suited man who lives at the North Pole and rides in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer?

Knowing what we have already learned about the ancient pre-Christian origins of Christmas, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that Santa Claus, too, is nothing but a figure recycled from ancient pagan beliefs.

The trappings associated with Santa Claus — his fur-trimmed wardrobe, sleigh and reindeer — reveal his origin from the cold climates of the far North. Some sources trace him to the ancient Northern European gods Odin (or Woden) and Thor (Count, pp. 56-64). Odin, portrayed with a long, white beard, was said to ride the sky with his eight-legged horse Sieipnir.

Others trace Santa Claus even farther back in time to the Roman god Saturn and the Greek god Silenus, companion and tutor of the wine god Dionysus (William Walsh, **The Story of Santa Klaus**, pp. 70-71).

### **Was Jesus Born In December?**

Knowledgeable Bible scholars who have written on the subject of Jesus' birth conclude that, based on evidence in the Bible itself, there is no possible way Christ could have been born anywhere near Dec. 25.

Alexander Hislop points out regarding Jesus' birth: *“There is not a word in the Scriptures about the precise day of His birth, or the time of the year when He was born. What is recorded there, implies that at what time soever His birth took place, it could not have been on the 25th of December.”*

*“At the time that the angel announced His birth to the shepherds of Bethlehem, they were feeding their flocks by night in the open fields .... The climate of Palestine.... from December to February, is very piercing, and it was not the custom for the shepherds of judea to watch their flocks in the open fields later than about the end of October”* (p. 91).

He goes on to explain that the autumn rains beginning in September or October in Judea

would mean that the events surrounding Christ's birth recorded in the Scriptures could not have taken place later than mid-October. More likely, Jesus' birth took place in the spring.

Further evidence supporting Jesus' birth could not have been mid-winter is that the Romans would not have set the time for taxation and travel in the dead of winter.

Since Joseph's lineage was from Bethlehem, and since he had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, and since his expectant wife Mary traveled with him, it would have been nearly impossible for Joseph and Mary to make the trip in the winter. As recorded by **Luke**, Mary delivered Jesus in Bethlehem during the time of census and taxation — which no rational official would have scheduled for December.

### **What Difference Does It Make?**

The Bible gives us no reason — and certainly no instruction — to support the myths and fables of Christmas and Santa Claus. They are tied to the ways of this world and contrary to the ways of Christ and His holy truth. *“Do not learn the way of the Gentiles,”* God tells us:

*1. Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel:*

*2. 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.*

*3. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cuts a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe.*

*4. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.*

**Jeremiah:10:1-4**

How can any Christian read this without thinking of a Christmas tree?

Professing Christians should examine the background of the Christmas holiday symbols and stop telling their children that Santa Claus and his elves, reindeer and Christmas gift-giving are connected with Jesus Christ. Emphatically, they are not!

God hates lying! *“These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto Him: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that are swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”*

**(Proverbs: 6:16,-19)**

Parents should tell their children the truth about God and this world's contrary and confusing ways. If we don't, we only perpetuate the notion that it is acceptable for parents to lie to their children!

Can a Christian promote a pagan holiday and its symbols as something that God or Christ has approved? Let's see what God thinks about people using customs and practices rooted in false religion to worship Him and His Son. We find His views clearly expressed in both the Old and New Testament.

God specifically commands His people not to do what early church leaders did when they incorporated idolatrous practices and relabeled them Christian. Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, God gave them a stern warning:

*“Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them [the pagan inhabitants of the land] . . . and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise.”*

*“Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods:..... What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”*

**(Deuteronomy:12 :30-32)**

Many centuries later, the apostle Paul traveled to and raised up churches in many gentile cities. To the members of the Church of God in Corinth, a city steeped in idolatry, Paul wrote: "What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?.....

*14. Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?*

*15. And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?*

*16. And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I WILL DWELL IN THEM, AND WALK IN THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.*

*17. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."*

**(2 Corinthians: 6:14-17)**

Instead of allowing members to rename and celebrate customs associated with false gods, Paul's instructions were clear: They were to have nothing to do with them.

Jesus said: ***".....THIS PEOPLE HONORETH ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME. HOWBEIT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING FOR DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN."***

**(Mark 7:6-7)**

With God no substitutes are acceptable! It makes no difference that Christians mean well when they observe Christmas. God is not pleased.

Almighty God, who made us, preserves us and gives us life, has made His will in this matter known to you through His Word, the Bible. Will you honor God or follow the traditions of mankind?

---

