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The Feast of the Nativity

**An intensely spiritual observance? A secular holiday? A pagan festival?
Here's some light on the origins of Christmas**

by James McBride

Christmas-time has etched itself into our calendar. For some it's an intensely religious experience. To others a welcome mid-winter break. And an opportunity, for some, for a good knees-up! Overall, it has become an almost universal festival observed even in non-Christian religions!

Most 20th century Western Christians, however, realize that the trappings of Christmas are transferred from ancient pagan worship. It's common knowledge in our sceptical age. Whether it's the tree, or "the holly and the ivy" or the trinkets inside the pudding, or the over-indulgence in food and alcohol, or even the cheery "Merry Christmas" - all are of course in direct descent from pre-Christian pagan ritual.

How on earth could such elements have been grafted onto the pure religion of Jesus Christ? Those who oppose the celebration of Christmas point to the medieval compromises of the Church: bring in the heathen by christianizing their customs. Make it easy for them to convert. *And multitudes did.*

It's certainly an important reason. But is it sufficient to account for the universal distortion of this much celebrated of festivals? Could there be some hidden grain of truth around which gathered the mythical pagan practices?

It's a recognized historical fact, confirmed by all treatises on the matter, that the early Christians *did not celebrate* Christmas. It was established in the calendar only around the 5th century. But does this mean that there was no recognition of this momentous event? Could the "becoming flesh" of the Creator

God go unnoticed, uncelebrated? Of course not!

Nativity Festival

In fact, the time of the birth of Jesus Christ was a festival observed, in anticipation possibly from the beginning of human existence!

Notice what the noted author John Brady had to say back in 1815. Having explained that the Roman calendar calculations were seriously adrift in the time of Christ, he writes: "Hence arose the inaccuracy, which has been so often and so pathetically lamented, in keeping the day of our Lord's Nativity; which it is now settled, by arguments incontrovertible, did not take place on the 25th of December, *but at the time the Jews kept their Feast of Tabernacles*" [*Clavis Calendria*, v.2, pp 340-341].

The scholarly Dr. Bullinger confirms this: "Without the shadow of a doubt.. [the Saviour's] birth took place on the *15th Ethanim* [or *Tishri* - the first day of the Festival of Tabernacles]" (*Companion Bible*, Appdx. 179). You will find an exposition of this Festival in the Bible in *Leviticus 23*. It was one of the three annual harvest festivals celebrated throughout the ancient world, and most likely instituted in the time of Adam.

Foretold In The Stars

The birth of a future Saviour was announced to man even before he was ejected from the Garden of Eden because of his sin! Notice Genesis 3:15-16: "I (God) will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman; also between your offspring and her offspring: He

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will bruise your head and you will bruise his heel". A human descendant ("born of a woman") of Eve would be injured by Satan. But ultimately would be *the Victor*.

That offspring was Jesus the longed-for Messiah, the "desire of all nations". He was temporarily "bruised" in his death. But he rose triumphantly from the grave to conquer and destroy (yet future) the Devil! The birth of a Saviour was in the mind and plan of God before even the foundation of the world!

Indeed the very configuration of the planets was arranged with this in mind. During the week of recreation, God said "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; *and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years*" (Genesis 1:14).

Let's look more closely at that statement.

The "... seasons (Heb. *moed*)" is the very word used to describe the festivals listed in Leviticus 23, including, for example, the Festival of Tabernacles. Written into the very fabric of the heavens is the magnificent plan of God for a Deliverer to come to mankind. Truly "The heavens declare the glory of God"! As the psalmist continues: "Day after day pours forth speech, and night after night declares knowledge. There is no speech nor are their words. Yet their line (influence) goes out through all the earth, their words to the ends of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4).

We are here told that although the heavens are silent - yet they carry an eloquent message to discerning man. Included in that message of the stars, and transcribed into the annual round of agricultural festivals, is the plan of God for a Saviour of mankind! It is God's unwritten *torah* [instruction] (vv.7-9).

An Unlikely Story

But as John Brady states, and as confirmed by numerous others. December 25 is perhaps the most unlikely time for the birth of Jesus!

Given the Palestinian climate which dictated agricultural practice, no sheep would have been out on the hills at that inclement time of year. Nor would the authorities impose a census in mid-winter. Nor

was a young full-term woman likely to tackle a ninety-mile journey through wild hill country.

That very time of year, however, did have great significance for the majority society of that era. Again, the heavens had a part! For towards the end of December the sun reached its lowest point, and visibly began once again to climb daily higher in the sky. The cycle of nature was being renewed! A time for celebration indeed.

And what better time for the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) to first become flesh - as a *fertilized ovum* in the womb of His mother Mary!

It is also significant that *nine months later* as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), Jesus *visibly* entered our world - as a baby - in the very Festival, the Festival of Tabernacles, which portrays the reign of Messiah over a world at total peace!

God With Us

Follow this. Since Jesus was born at the Feast of Tabernacles - which was always in September/October - when would He have first *become flesh*? John tells us "The Word became flesh" (John 1:14). Human gestation - the time from conception to birth - is about forty weeks. Jesus gave up his status as a part of the divine Family to become flesh - Immanuel, God with us. He took on human life as a male sperm cell, at that moment prior to conception becoming human flesh. Nine months later, at the beginning of the Festival of Tabernacles (late September) Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

John completed his sentence: "...the Word became flesh (at the latter part of December) ... and *dwelt* [Gk = "tabernacled"] among us" (ch 1:14). Two separate events - conception, and birth.

Clearly, it would be impossible to be specific about the time of conception. Who could prove it! How could the specific day be pinned down for observance! For example, over the past ten years the conception of Jesus (working on the assumption of forty weeks gestation leading to the first day of Tabernacles) fell on the same day only twice. It varied from December 17 to January 11 on our present calendar. And never once on December 25!

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Observed Today!

But the *birth* of a child is obvious to all - and a time for celebration. Especially, the birth of the Son of God is certainly a time for the greatest rejoicing, in company with all the heavenly angels.

The pagan Saturnalia feast, now called Christmas, serves to befoul the beautiful plan of God, and to obscure the most momentous event in history - the Word of God becoming flesh (in his human conception) at that time of year. And nine months later, at the Festival of Tabernacles, his birth as the Saviour of mankind (Luke 2:8-14).

The Church of God has long observed this festival. Indeed it was observed annually by the apostolic church. Notes John Brady: "The first Christians...on the day of the Feast of Tabernacles ornamented their churches (long after the era of the apostles - there were no "churches" as such for many decades after their death.) with green boughs, as a memorial that Christ was actually born at that time" [*Clavis Calendria*, v.2, p.341]. In fact, this is how ancient Israel observed this Festival some fifteen hundred years before the time of Jesus (Leviticus 23:40). This body of research is today studiously avoided by most ministers!

Modern Saturnalia

The apostle Peter may have had Saturnalia - the pagan feast at the same time of our Christmas - in mind when he wrote: "Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you" (I Peter 3:3-4).

What an excellent portrait of modern Christmas celebrations. And of the abuse meted especially to Christians who refuse to "join in"!

Peace On Earth

God has given the perfect time to honour the birth of His Son into our world - at the Festival which He long ago appointed for His people. But like ancient King Jeroboam (I Kings 12:32), Christians have shifted the observance to an unhallowed time of year!

The *Festival of Tabernacles*, however, celebrates what Christians daily pray for - the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. A time of "peace on earth among men in whom he is well pleased". It was the beautiful song of the heavenly angelic host who announced the birth of the Saviour (Luke 2:14) on that quiet early autumn night in ancient Judaea.

Hear the prophet Isaiah:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the House of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains... For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" [Isaiah: 2:1-4]

Let's not "learn the way of the heathen..." (Jeremiah 10:2) by keeping "the days of Baal". Let's *keep the Feast* (of Tabernacles) in celebration of that momentous event the - nativity of our Saviour.

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