

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS

by Daud Ben Israel

Christmas is one of the most regarded holidays celebrated by millions every year. This holiday is marked by the commemoration of the nativity of the Messiah. The celebrations connected with this holiday include Christmas tree decorating, placing presents under the tree, exchanging gifts, visiting and feasting with family and friends, and decorating houses with candles and lights, etc. Such celebrations begin prior to Christmas day and last until the beginning of the New Year. The word "Christmas" is derived from the "Christ-mass" or the "Mass of Christ". A special mass service was celebrated on the 25th of December to honor the birth of the Messiah Yahshua (Jesus Christ). It was known to have been celebrated during the third century CE.

However, the day of the "Christ-mass" became an official holiday on the 25th of December in 325 CE. Apparently, since it was understood that the actual birthday of the Messiah could not be determined, the 25th of December was selected as the day of its celebration. On the surface, the reason for choosing the 25th of December as the day to commemorate the nativity of the Messiah seems very plausible. After all! The idea of celebrating the birth of the Messiah is good. Also, it was necessary that a day be selected in order to celebrate his birth annually. So then (as some would say), since any day of the year could have been chosen, why not choose December 25th? Although it seems plausible, there appears to be reason to question the choosing of December 25th as Messiah's birthday and to examine the manner in which the day was celebrated.

Looking at the origins of Christmas, we will consider the significance of December 25th and the customs involved in its celebration.

SIGNIFICANCE OF DECEMBER 25TH

Although many that celebrate Christmas consider December 25th to be as good a selection as any other day of the year, the date held great significance amongst many adherents of pagan religions around the world. The 25th of December was recognized as the birthday of the sun deity within the framework of paganism. Originating from the religious system of Babylon, the sun deity Marduk created an orderly world out of a formless and void world. As part of creating this orderly world, he removed the monsters of chaos and routed them to the underworld. The world ran down as the year came to a close. After crops were harvested, the empty brown of the fields told that life was dying. During this time Marduk fought with the monsters of chaos in the underworld so that death would not become complete. Marduk almost lost the struggle, but on the 25th of December he regained strength to win the fight. By doing this Marduk would renew the world bringing in a new year of vegetation and harvest. Every year Marduk would renew the world in this manner.

It was believed that the sun would encounter a rebirth because on the 25th of December it would be at the greatest level of strength. Therefore, the 25th of December came to be of great significance because the return of strength to the sun signified the rebirth of the sun deity. Each nation that honored the rebirth of the sun referred to the sun deity by different names. The Babylonians called this deity "Marduk", the Canaanites called him "Baal", the Egyptians called him "Ra" and "Osiris", the Greeks called him "Zeus", the Persians called him "Mithra", the Romans called him "Apollo".

CUSTOMS PRACTICED FOR CELEBRATION

The celebrations made by pagan worshippers were a means of supporting the sun deity in his struggle to renew the world with a new year. The celebration of the rebirth of the sun deity would begin

mid-December and last until the beginning of the New Year. The Romans named this period of celebration "Saturnalia", but it was more widely known as the Winter Solstice. It is also known as "Yule" by the ancient Celts and the Norseland people. Some of the customs practiced consisted of merrymaking, wishing each other good luck and good fortune for the New Year, exchanging gifts for good luck, and eating big dinners with family and friends.

The practice of decorating green trees and houses were included in the celebration. The erecting of a green tree in the home to be decorated with ornaments was a means of showing worship to the sun deity. This was done because of the belief that as part of the sun deity's rebirth he came back as a green tree. Also, after the tree was decorated, gifts would be placed under the tree as a means of giving offerings to the sun deity. The decorating of the house and the halls with lighted candles and lamps were done for the purpose of keeping away the hovering spirits of darkness that were afraid of light.

CONSTANTINE'S EDICT OF 325 CE

The edict of 325 CE by Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of his empire. What resulted from this edict was the forced acceptance of Christianity by pagan worshippers. This created a blending of pagan practices into the framework of the church. Although Yahshua (commonly called Jesus) was now considered the unconquered deity, the Saturnalia festival was still being practiced. Since church leaders were unable to stop the new adherents to Christianity from embracing pagan forms of celebration, they began to allow these celebrations with a Christian emphasis. Prior to the third century CE, the church did not concern itself with celebrating the birth of the Messiah. However, in the fourth century the idea of celebrating the birth of the Messiah became paramount. Prior to 325 CE, some congregations celebrated the birth of the Messiah. The dates chosen to celebrate his

nativity varied. Some celebrated His birth on January 6, others in April, and some at other times of the year. From the time of 325 CE, it was established by the church in Rome that December 25th would be the official "Mass of Christ" or the "Christ-Mass". History indicates that this decision was launched from Rome to the rest of the Christian world in 336 or 353 CE.

After considering that paganism had become blended into the church, it is obvious that December 25th was chosen as the Christ-Mass from pagan influences. Remember, the 25th of December was the birthday of the sun deity.

TIME FRAME OF THE MESSIAH'S BIRTH

For those interested in the time frame of the Messiah's birth, one must look to the scriptures. Although it is difficult to locate the exact day, the scriptures provide enough information to locate the time frame of the Messiah's birth. In Luke chapter 2, statements are made which help point to the time of year when the Messiah was born. In verse 25 it states, "...looking forward to the consolation (comfort) of Israel..." . In verse 38 it states, "...looking for the redemption of Jerusalem". The expected comfort and redemption of Jerusalem (Israel) had to do with the coming of Yom Kippur- the Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement, comfort and deliverance from the past year's sins came to Israel. There was an 8 day waiting period in which the people prepared themselves for the Day of Atonement. This period of preparation was called "the Days of Awe" or "the Days of Teshuvah (Repentance)". It was during the days of Teshuvah that Yahshua (Jesus) was brought to the Temple to be presented to the Most High. According to scripture, every male child was to be presented to YHWH after the mother's 40 day period of separation following childbirth (see Lev. 12:1-8 & Luke 2:22-24). Counting backwards 40 days from the day of Yahshua (Jesus) being presented to YHWH locates the time frame of his birth. The Days of Teshuvah occurred from the 2nd thru the

9th of the 7th Hebrew month. So then, the birth of Messiah took place on one of the eight days from the 21st to the 28th of 6th Hebrew month. According to the Gregorian calendar, Yahshua (Jesus) was born in the first part of August.

The purpose of this writing is not to bring condemnation on those who celebrate Yahshua's birth on December 25th, but to inform the believer of the pagan influences that determined the date and manner in which his birth is celebrated. Although it is good both to honor the birth of Yahshua and to show love toward others by giving gifts, the believer should be aware of the origins of what they choose to celebrate. To many unbelievers that celebrate Messiah's birth on December 25th it is only a day of gift giving and merry making without any emphasis on Messiah. In reality, many unbelievers that celebrate Christmas are actually celebrating with the spirit of the winter solstice Saturnalia festival.

Based upon the information provided, the date and popular celebration of Christmas are not in agreement with the scriptures. Hopefully this information will help the believer to redirect their attention toward honoring celebrations that Yahshua celebrated which are consistent with the scriptures.

Be blessed and BE AWARE OF WHAT YOU CELEBRATE.

REFERENCES

- *Collier's Encyclopedia - "Feasts and Festivals"
- *Faiths and Folklore, by Hazlitt
- *Holidays Around the World, by Gaer
- *The Book of Religious Holidays and Celebrations, by Ickis

A PUBLICATION OF
BETH ISRAEL COMMUNITY INTERNATIONAL

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS

