

Is Christmas a Biblical, or Christian, celebration? The Bible does not tell us the date of Jesus' birth, nor does history tell us anything about exactly when Jesus was born, but it does give us some clues. We read:

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock”—Luke 2:1-8 NAB

Bethlehem, 7 miles S/SE of Jerusalem, is at 2,700 feet above sea level. In that area, by the eighth month on the ancient Jewish calendar (late October-early November), the **“autumn rain” (Deuteronomy 11:14 LSV)** of the **“rainy season”** begins (**Ezra 10:9,13 NIV**), and **“winter”** begins by the **“ninth month” (Jeremiah 36:22 NIV)** (late November-early December). **“The Festival of Dedication”** occurs on Kislev 25 (early December) when it is **“winter” (John 10:22 NIV)**. Jesus said, **“Pray that your flight not take place in winter” (Matthew 24:20)** when conditions can be harsh in the Jerusalem area (2,500 ft. elevation). In the month of Tebeth (late December-early January), nighttime temperatures are cold, sometimes below freezing, and there are occasional snowfalls.

In view of this, it is highly unlikely that the Roman government would require the residents of Palestine to travel to their birthplace to register at such a difficult time. Also, shepherds, during the cold rainy season, did not keep their flocks out in the open at night, much less, live out in the fields with them. They were brought in under shelter at night in the winter.

The Biblical facts indicate the likelihood of Jesus being born on December 25 is slim to none.

So, why is December 25 so widely celebrated as the day Jesus was born on earth? To give us some background, we have quoted two articles below, on this subject. Here is the first one:

*Although most Christians celebrate December 25 as the birthday of **Jesus Christ**, few in the first two Christian centuries claimed any knowledge of the exact day or year in which he was born. The oldest existing record of a **Christmas** celebration is found in a Roman almanac that tells of Christ's Nativity festival led by the church of Rome in 336 A.D. The precise reason why Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25 remains obscure, but most researchers believe that Christmas originated as a Christian substitute for pagan celebrations of the **winter solstice**.*

*To early Christians (and to many Christians today), the most important holiday on the Christian calendar was Easter, which commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, as **Christianity** began to take hold in the Roman world, in the early fourth century, church leaders had to contend with a popular Roman pagan holiday commemorating the "birthday of the unconquered sun" (*natalis solis invicti*)—the Roman name for the winter solstice.*

*Every winter, Romans honored the pagan god Saturn, the god of agriculture, with **Saturnalia**, a festival that began on December 17 and usually ended on or around December 25 with a winter solstice celebration in honor of the beginning of the new solar cycle. This festival was a time of merrymaking, and families and friends would exchange gifts. At the same time,*

Mithraism—worship of the ancient Persian god of light—was popular in the Roman army, and the cult held some of its most important rituals on the winter solstice.



Saturnalia

What Is Saturnalia? Saturnalia, the most popular holiday on the ancient Roman calendar, derived from older farming-related rituals of midwinter and the winter solstice, especially the practice of offering gifts or sacrifices to the gods during the winter sowing season. The pagan celebration of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture and time, began as a [...]

After the Roman Emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity in 312 and

sanctioned Christianity, church leaders made efforts to appropriate the winter solstice holidays and thereby achieve a more seamless conversion to Christianity for the emperor's subjects. In rationalizing the celebration of Jesus' birthday in late December, church leaders may have argued that since the world was allegedly created on the spring equinox (late March), so too would Jesus have been conceived by God on that date. The Virgin Mary, pregnant with the son of God, would hence have given birth to Jesus nine months later on the winter solstice.

From Rome, the Christ's Nativity celebration spread to other Christian churches to the west and east, and soon most Christians were celebrating Christ's birth on December 25. To the Roman celebration was later added other winter solstice rituals observed by various pagan groups, such as the lighting of the Yule log and decorations with evergreens by Germanic tribes.

*The word Christmas entered the English language originally as *Christes maesse*, meaning "Christ's mass" or "festival of Christ" in Old English. A popular medieval feast was that of St. Nicholas of Myra, a saint said to visit children with gifts and admonitions just before Christmas. This story evolved into the modern practice of leaving gifts for children said to be brought by "Santa Claus," a derivative of the Dutch name for St. Nicholas—*Sinterklaas*.*

The second article was published in Biblical Archaeology Review on December 17 2024 gives even more background information on this subject, entitled, "**How December 25 Became Christmas**". It's quoted, as follows:

On December 25, Christians around the world will gather to celebrate Jesus'

birth. Joyful carols, special liturgies, brightly wrapped gifts, festive foods—these all characterize the feast today, at least in the northern hemisphere. But just how did the Christmas festival originate? How did December 25 come to be associated with Jesus' birthday?



A blanket of snow covers the little town of Bethlehem, in Pieter Bruegel's oil painting from 1566. Although Jesus' birth is celebrated every year on December 25, Luke and the other gospel writers offer no hint about the specific time of year he was born. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

The Bible offers few clues: Celebrations of Jesus' Nativity are not mentioned in the Gospels or Acts; the date is not given, not even the time of year. The biblical reference to shepherds tending their flocks at night when they hear the news of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8) might suggest the spring lambing season; in the cold month of December, on the other hand, sheep might well have been corralled. Yet most scholars would urge caution about extracting such a precise but incidental detail from a narrative whose focus is theological rather than calendrical.

The extrabiblical evidence from the first and second century is equally

spare: There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 130–200) or Tertullian (c. 160–225). 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.¹ As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.

This stands in sharp contrast to the very early traditions surrounding Jesus’ last days. Each of the Four Gospels provides detailed information about the time of Jesus’ death. According to John, Jesus is crucified just as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed. This would have occurred on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, just before the Jewish holiday began at sundown (considered the beginning of the 15th day because in the Hebrew calendar, days begin at sundown). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, however, the Last Supper is held after sundown, on the beginning of the 15th. Jesus is crucified the next morning—still, the 15th.^a

Easter, a much earlier development than Christmas, was simply the gradual Christian reinterpretation of Passover in terms of Jesus’ Passion. Its observance could even be implied in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:7–8: “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the festival...”); it was certainly a distinctively Christian feast by the mid-second century C.E., when the apocryphal text known as the Epistle to the Apostles has Jesus instruct his disciples to “make commemoration of

[his] death, that is, the Passover.”

*Jesus’ ministry, miracles, Passion and Resurrection were often of most interest to first- and early-second-century C.E. Christian writers. But over time, Jesus’ origins would become of increasing concern. We can begin to see this shift already in the New Testament. The earliest writings—Paul and Mark—make no mention of Jesus’ birth. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide well-known but quite different accounts of the event—although neither specifies a date. In the second century C.E., further details of Jesus’ birth and *childhood* are related in apocryphal writings such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the *Proto-Gospel of James*.^b These texts provide everything from the names of Jesus’ grandparents to the details of his education—but not the date of his birth.*

*Finally, in about 200 C.E., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born. According to Clement of Alexandria, several different days had been proposed by various Christian groups. Surprising as it may seem, Clement doesn’t mention December 25 at all. Clement writes: “There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in *the 28th* year of Augustus, and in *the 25th* day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar] ... And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in *the 16th* year of Tiberius, on *the 25th* of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on *the 25th* of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on *the 19th* of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on *the 24th* or *25th* of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21].”²*

Clearly there was great uncertainty, but also a considerable amount of interest, in *dating Jesus' birth* in the late second century. By the fourth century, however, we find references to two dates that were widely recognized—and now also celebrated—as Jesus' birthday: December 25 in the western Roman Empire and January 6 in the East (especially in Egypt and Asia Minor). The modern Armenian church continues to celebrate Christmas on January 6; for most Christians, however, December 25 would prevail, while January 6 eventually came to be known as the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating *the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem*. The period between became the holiday season later known as *the 12 days of Christmas*.

The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus' birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked: *natus Christus in Betleem Judeae: "Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea."*³ In about 400 C.E., Augustine of Hippo mentions a local dissident Christian group, the Donatists, who apparently kept Christmas festivals on December 25, but refused to celebrate the Epiphany on January 6, regarding it as an innovation. Since the Donatist group only emerged during the persecution under Diocletian in 312 C.E. and then remained stubbornly attached to the practices of that moment in time, they seem to represent an older North African Christian tradition.

In the East, January 6 was at first not associated with the magi alone, but with the Christmas story as a whole.

So, almost 300 years after Jesus was born, we finally find people observing his birth in mid-winter. But how had they settled on the dates December 25 and January 6?

There are two theories today: one extremely popular, the other less often heard outside scholarly circles (though far more ancient).⁴

*The most loudly touted theory about the origins of the Christmas date(s) is that it was borrowed from pagan celebrations. The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times. 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. Christmas, the argument goes, is really a spin-off from these pagan solar festivals. According to this theory, early Christians deliberately chose these dates to encourage the spread of Christmas and Christianity throughout the Roman world: If Christmas looked like a pagan holiday, more pagans would be open to both the holiday and the God whose birth it celebrated.*

Despite its popularity today, this theory of Christmas's origins has its problems. It is not found in any ancient Christian writings, for one thing. Christian authors of the time do note a connection between the solstice and Jesus' birth: The church father Ambrose (c. 339-397), for example, described Christ as the true sun, who outshone the fallen gods of the old order. But early Christian writers never hint at any recent calendrical engineering; they clearly don't think the date was chosen by the church. Rather they see the coincidence as a providential sign, as natural proof that

God had selected Jesus over the false pagan gods.

It's not until the 12th century that we find the first suggestion that Jesus' birth celebration was deliberately set at the time of pagan feasts. A marginal note on a manuscript of the writings of the Syriac biblical commentator Dionysius bar-Salibi states that in ancient times the Christmas holiday was actually shifted from January 6 to December 25 so that it fell on the same date as the pagan Sol Invictus holiday.⁵ In the 18th and 19th centuries, Bible scholars spurred on by the new study of comparative religions latched on to this idea.⁶ They claimed that because the early Christians didn't know when Jesus was born, they simply assimilated the pagan solstice festival for their own purposes, claiming it as the time of the Messiah's birth and celebrating it accordingly.

More recent studies have shown that many of the holiday's modern trappings do reflect pagan customs borrowed much later, as Christianity expanded into northern and western Europe. The Christmas tree, for example, has been linked with late medieval druidic practices. This has only encouraged modern audiences to assume that the date, too, must be pagan.

There are problems with this popular theory, however, as many scholars recognize. Most significantly, the first mention of a date for Christmas (c. 200) and the earliest celebrations that we know about (c. 250-300) come in a period when Christians were not borrowing heavily from pagan traditions of such an obvious character.

Granted, Christian belief and practice were not formed in isolation. Many

early elements of Christian worship—including eucharistic meals, meals honoring martyrs and much early Christian funerary art—would have been quite comprehensible to pagan observers. Yet, in the first few centuries C.E., the persecuted Christian minority was greatly concerned with distancing itself from the larger, public pagan religious observances, such as sacrifices, games and holidays. This was still true as late as the violent persecutions of the Christians conducted by the Roman emperor Diocletian between 303 and 312 C.E.

This would change only after Constantine converted to Christianity. From the mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan festivals. A famous proponent of this practice was Pope Gregory the Great, who, in a letter written in 601 C.E. to a Christian missionary in Britain, recommended that local pagan temples not be destroyed but be converted into churches, and that pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs. At this late point, Christmas may well have acquired some pagan trappings. But we don't have evidence of Christians adopting pagan festivals in the third century, at which point dates for Christmas were established. Thus, it seems unlikely that the date was simply selected to correspond with pagan solar festivals.

The December 25 feast seems to have existed before 312—before Constantine and his conversion, at least. As we have seen, the Donatist Christians in North Africa seem to have known it from before that time. Furthermore, in the mid- to late fourth century, church leaders in the eastern Empire concerned themselves not with introducing a celebration of Jesus' birthday, but with the addition of the December date to their

traditional celebration on January 6.⁷

There is another way to account for the origins of Christmas on December 25: Strange as it may seem, the key to dating Jesus' birth may lie in the dating of Jesus' death at Passover. This view was first suggested to the modern world by French scholar Louis Duchesne in the early 20th century and fully developed by American Thomas Talley in more recent years.⁸ But they were certainly not the first to note a connection between the traditional date of Jesus' death and his birth.



The baby Jesus flies down from heaven on the back of a cross, in this detail from Master Bertram's 14th-century Annunciation scene. Jesus' conception carried with it the promise of salvation through his death. It may be no coincidence, then, that the early church celebrated Jesus' conception and death on the same calendar day: March 25, exactly nine months before December 25. Kunsthalle, Hamburg/Bridgeman Art Library, NY

Around 200 C.E. Tertullian of Carthage reported the calculation that the 14th of Nisan (the day of the crucifixion according to the [Gospel of John](#)) in the year Jesus died^c was equivalent to March 25 in the Roman (solar)

calendar.⁹ March 25 is, of course, nine months before December 25; it was later recognized as the Feast of the Annunciation—the commemoration of *Jesus' conception*.¹⁰ Thus, 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.^d

This idea appears in an anonymous Christian treatise titled *On Solstices and Equinoxes*, which appears to come from fourth-century North Africa. The treatise states: “Therefore our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the kalends of April in the month of March [March 25], which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on that day he was conceived on the same he suffered.”¹¹ Based on this, the treatise dates Jesus' birth to the winter solstice.

Augustine, too, was familiar with this association. In *On the Trinity* (c. 399–419) he writes: “For he [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on *the 25th of March*, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon *December the 25th*.”¹²

In the East, too, the dates of Jesus' conception and death were linked. But instead of working from *the 14th of Nisan* in the Hebrew calendar, the

easterners used the 14th of the first spring month (Artemisios) in their local Greek calendar—April 6 to us. April 6 is, of course, exactly nine months before January 6—the eastern date for Christmas. In the East, too, we have evidence that April was associated with Jesus’ conception and crucifixion. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis writes that on April 6, “The lamb was shut up in the spotless womb of the holy virgin, he who took away and takes away in perpetual sacrifice the sins of the world.”¹³ Even today, the Armenian Church celebrates the Annunciation in early April (on the 7th, not the 6th) and Christmas on January 6.^e

Thus, we have Christians in two parts of the world calculating Jesus’ birth on the basis that his death and conception took place on the same day (March 25 or April 6) and coming up with two close but different results (December 25 and January 6).

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. One of the most poignant expressions of this belief is found in Christian art. In numerous paintings of the angel’s Annunciation to Mary—the moment of Jesus’ conception—the baby Jesus is shown gliding down from heaven on or with a small cross (see photo above of detail from Master Bertram’s Annunciation scene); a visual reminder that the conception brings the promise of salvation through Jesus’ death.

The notion that creation and redemption should occur at the same time of year is also reflected in ancient Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud preserves a dispute between two early-second-century C.E. rabbis who share this view, but disagree on the date: Rabbi Eliezer states: “In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born ... and in Nisan they [our ancestors] will be redeemed in time to come.” (The other rabbi, Joshua, dates these same events to the following month, Tishri.)¹⁴ Thus, the dates of Christmas and Epiphany may well have resulted from Christian theological reflection on such chronologies: Jesus would have been conceived on the same date he died, and born nine months later.¹⁵

In the end we are left with a question: How did December 25 become Christmas? We cannot be entirely sure. Elements of the festival that developed from the fourth century until modern times may well derive from pagan traditions. Yet the actual date might really derive more from Judaism—from Jesus’ death at Passover, and from the rabbinic notion that great things might be expected, again and again, at the same time of the year—than from paganism. Then again, in this notion of cycles and the return of God’s redemption, we may perhaps also be touching upon something that the pagan Romans who celebrated Sol Invictus, and many other peoples since, would have understood and claimed for their own, too.¹⁶

The Bible tells us to, **“find out what pleases the Lord” (Ephesians 5:10 NIV)**. In the New Testament, Christians are commanded by Jesus Christ himself **“do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19,20 NIV)**, that is, to celebrate **“the Lord’s supper” (1 Corinthians 11:20,23-26)**, and they actually did so. Celebrating “the Lord’s supper” “pleases the Lord”.

Does Christmas ‘please the Lord’? While Christmas is never mentioned in the Bible, we can draw principles from the scriptures, such as, **“You meticulously observe days and months and seasons and years” (Galatians 4:10 NASB)**, that were not required to be observed by Christians.

Is Christmas a Biblical, or Christian celebration? No, not all, based on the scriptures and all the facts.