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The Real Miracle of Christmas

BY RICHARD JORDAN

It seems that with each passing year the Christmas season begins earlier and earlier. We noticed this year that as early as October merchants were trying to generate the Christmas buying spirit. While such commercialism certainly gives the thoughtful observer pause, for believers there are other more basic considerations which should govern our attitudes concerning the celebration of the winter holidays.

Frankly, once we come to an appreciation of the *real miracle* of this universally observed season, we will be liberated from its false emphasis and pagan trappings and find the real cause of rejoicing.

A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION?

December 25 was observed by ancient pagans for centuries before the birth of Christ to worship the birth of a new *sun*. For example, *Collier's Encyclopedia* identifies Dec. 25 as "the day the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the sun god (natalis solis invicti, the birthday of the unconquerable sun)." Placing the birth of Christ on a date to harmonize with the pagan birthday celebration of the sun-god is a case study in how far apostate religious leaders will go in their efforts to merge truth and error.

The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas--or even the birth of Christ. Thus they had little interest in the actual date of His birth. In fact, Origen spoke for a lot of early Christians when he said in 254 A.D. that celebrating Jesus' human birth would be sinful. It would be, he declared, like celebrating the birth of a "Pharaoh of Egypt" instead of the Son of God.

By the fifth century there were a lot of different dates given for the Savior's birth: Jan. 6, March 25, April 9, May 20, Nov. 17 to mention a few. So, says the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, the bishop of Rome asked his scholars to decide what the official date would be. They settled on Dec. 25.

Most historians agree that Dec. 25 was chosen mainly because that date was the winter solstice under the Julian calendar. (In the year 1582 the Gregorian Calendar--the one we use today--was adopted. It was a little different from the earlier Julian Calendar and the date of the winter solstice was changed from Dec. 25 to Dec. 21.) The winter solstice is the day the sun begins moving back to the northern skies; days begin to lengthen again and people start hoping for spring, warmth and the rebirth of vegetation.

"Solar monotheism"--the worship of the sun god presiding over many lesser gods--was prevalent in the Roman Empire. The Emperor Aurelius had proclaimed the old Persian sun god, Mithra, to be the principle patron of the empire. Very popular with the Romans, they celebrated Mithra's birthday on the date of the winter solstice.

This pagan sun-worship of Mithraism was the "largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of Dec. 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds." This winter festival was called "the Nativity"--the "nativity of the *sun*." In fact, the winter solstice was the time at which all the sun gods from Osiris to Jupiter and Mithra had celebrated their birthdays, the celebration being adorned with the evergreens (Today's use of the "Christmas tree" is, of course, a carry over from paganism--in a modified form, of course. See Jer. 10:1-5. Cf. Deut. 12:2, I Kings 14:23, II Kings 16:4; 17:10) and wreaths of Adonis (symbols of life), the holly and mistletoe of Saturn (symbols of fertility and eternal life), along with the drinking of toasts from Wassail bowls (forerunner of our eggnog), exchanging gifts, the general feelings of geniality, and so forth.

Emperor Constantine helped bring Dec. 25 into Christendom by choosing Jesus over Mithra as the one to celebrate. The festival of the sun god's birth--with all its trappings--was transformed into a celebration of Jesus' birth.

Thus Christmas--literally "Christ's-Mass"--was adopted by the Roman church during the 5th and 6th centuries as a part of Rome's consistent pattern of

assimilating pagan religious ideas, changing their meanings and absorbing them into the developing church's life.

WHEN WAS CHRIST BORN?

Often we hear the almost sheepish admission that Dec. 25 is not really the Savior's birthday. This is generally followed by the declaration that we do not really know when He was born. This latter assertion, however, is simply not so. The fact is the Scriptures do indeed inform us of when Jesus Christ was actually born--information that sheds light on why Dec. 25 has been so universally a part of pagan celebrations of the sun god and what part it really plays in the purposes of God.

Luke 1 contains information concerning the conception and birth of both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus. Luke's record is characteristic of his stated determination to be an exacting historian. As he is inspired by the Spirit to record these events, he includes precise dating information as sign posts to guide us. Follow these passages closely:

1. Luke 1:5-9:

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth.

"And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

"And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

"And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

"According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord".

Zacharias was a priest. When his "course" of ministry in the temple at Jerusalem came, he was found there faithfully discharging his duties. It was at this point he learned he and Elizabeth would be the parents of a special child--one who would

"be great in the sight of the Lord" and who would "go before him in the spirit and power of Elias [i.e., Elijah]" (vs. 15, 17).

2. Luke 1:23, 24:

"And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

"And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months...."

After his service in the temple, Zacharias traveled home with the good news. He lived in "the hill country" some 30 miles south of Jerusalem (v. 39). It would have been interesting to have been present as he sought to explain all this to Elizabeth, especially since he could not speak! At any rate, in an obvious venture of faith, Elizabeth conceived John at this time.

3. Luke 1:26-27, 35-36:

"And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

"To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary."

"And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

"And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren."

Six months after the conception of John, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the supernatural conception of the Messiah—"Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name Jesus" (v.31).

From these facts it is clear that Jesus was conceived--and thus born—*six months after John*. Clear. Concise. Obvious. And if we can fix the time of John's conception, everything would fall into place with ease! But how can this be done?

It was as a young believer--over 30 years ago!--that I discovered this chronology. I can still remember the delight of my young heart at the possibility of locating precisely *from Scripture* just when Christ was born! And the information needed to date John's conception was also clearly given--although at first I had trouble identifying it. Read again verse 5 and 8:

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, OF THE COURSE OF ABIA....

"And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God IN THE ORDER OF HIS COURSE."

Clearly Zacharias was in Jerusalem ministering in the temple during "*the course of Abia.*" But what is "the course of Abia?" I checked the concordance--no help. I asked others- -again, no help. Then, one day as I read through I Chronicles, there it was! My problem was that "Abia" was the Greek form of the Hebrew name "*Abijah*" Names are often spelled differently in different languages. With this obstacle cleared away, the last piece fell into place.

In I Chronicles 24 we learn of the arrangements set in place by King David for the ministry of the priests in the temple. There were to be twenty four "courses," or divisions, when each priestly family would serve in the temple at Jerusalem. Each course lasted one week (II Kings 11:9, II Chron. 23:8). Thus each priest would serve "in the order of his course" for one week every six months.

Each Israelite male (including the priests) was required to travel to Jerusalem for the three great pilgrimage feasts: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). Thus David instructed that each week between Passover and Tabernacles and between Tabernacles and Passover a different family of priests would serve in the Temple. Then, three weeks out of the year all the priests served together--during Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles.

When was it that Zacharias served the course of Abijah? According to I Chron. 24:10 the course of Abijah was the eight in order. Eight weeks after the Passover puts the course of Abijah in the middle *of June*. This would be when Zacharias was serving in the temple and had the conversation with the angel about the birth of John.

After his week of service, he then traveled the some thirty miles to his home in Juda and at this time Elizabeth became pregnant. This puts the *conception* of John in *late June*. It was in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy when Gabriel announced to Mary the conception of Christ. Consequently we would count six months from late June to arrive at the date for the *conception* of Jesus—*late December!*

The *birth* of John would thus be *in late March* (nine months after his June conception) and the *birth* of Christ would be *in late September* (nine months after His December conception).

The most fascinating thing in all this is the connection between the *conception* of Christ and late December--the time of the winter solstice! The importance of this becomes all the more revealing when we consider

THE REAL MIRACLE

It may be startling to consider, but the real miracle does not center around the actual birth of Jesus. The birth process itself was perfectly natural--a normal birth like so many others!. The surroundings were, of course, touching and instructive, but there was nothing unusual in the birth itself.

What was miraculous is found in the wondrous fact that Christ was *conceived* by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin:

"Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,

"Behold, AVIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us"(Matt. 1:22, 23).

"*Emmanuel--God with us!*" The one whom Jehovah calls "*the man, that is My Fellow [i.e., equal]*" (Zech. 13:7). Thus we read that "*unto the Son He saith, THY THRONE O GOD, is forever and, ever: a sceptre of righteousness....therefore GOD, EVEN THY GOD, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness.....*"(Heb. 1:8, 9).

God came down "*in the likeness of sinful flesh*"(Rom. 8:8)-"*came into the world to save sinners*" (I Tim. 1:15). Thus Jehovah declared through the prophet: "*They*

shall look upon ME WHOM THEY HAVE PIERCED" (Zech. 12:10), for "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself" (II Cor.5:19).

Jesus Christ is the unique person of the universe. He is the manifest person of the Godhead. He is the "*one mediator between God and men*" –the bridge between God and men, between heaven and earth.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

"The same was in the beginning with God.

"All things were made by Him; and without him was not any thing made that was made."

"AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH, and dwelt among us..." (John 1:1-3, 14).

Little wonder Thomas bowed before Him, declaring, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20: 28).

What a joy to worship a God Who can be touched by the feelings of our infirmities! The incarnation of Jesus Christ demonstrates that our God is a God of history and event, for God Himself has stepped out of eternity into time and has set forth in the bold relief of His Son the profound truth that He is a God Who enters into the events of human history--into the events of our lives. And He does it all through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many sincere believers have been rightly troubled over the use of the birthday of pagan gods--Dec. 25--to honor the birth of the true Savior of the world. After all, Paul clearly exhorts: "Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry"(I Cor. 10: 14).

Once we recognize, however, that the central truth--the *real miracle*--of the incarnation of Christ is the *conception*—a conception which took place on or about Dec. 25!—it becomes obvious that the pagan winter festivals are only Satanic corruptions of a marvelous truth. Thus we are free to use this time of year to give thanks for the genuinely stupendous miracle which is the foundation stone of the Christian faith.

"This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (I Tim. 1:15).

"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (II Cor.8:9).
