



Christmas History, Tradition & Symbols

The Origin of Christmas

Christmas is the annual festival commemorating the birth of an infant in Bethlehem and is celebrated by Christians around the world.

In the Bible's Gospel of Luke 2:4, the apostle offers his version of the first Christmas. According to Luke, the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus had decreed that his subjects return to the cities of their birth to register for a census and be taxed. Thus Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth while Mary was great with child to the city of David called Bethlehem, as this was the ancestral home of Joseph.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

While Christmas is a religious holiday that originates with the birth of Christ, Christmas in modern times is celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike. Traditions associated with the holiday include family gatherings, special holiday meals, music, exchanging gifts, sending Christmas cards, hanging stockings, decorating Christmas trees and adorning homes inside and out with items such as lights, wreaths, garlands, holly and mistletoe.

Derived from the Old English phrase 'Cristes Mæsse,' ~ meaning the 'mass of Christ' ~ the celebration of Christmas was likely not widespread until the Middle Ages. Before that time,

birthdays were rarely noted and early church leaders opposed commemorating the occasion since they believed the birth of Christ should not be celebrated in the same manner as the festivals of pagan gods.

The true date of Christ's birthday is not known. Nowhere in the Bible is a date given for his birth. Some clues do exist though. The Gospel of Luke mentions *shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*. Luke also writes, *Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child*. During that time, flocks were typically brought in to be penned during the winter - not kept out in the fields. Additionally, some biblical historians doubt that a census would be held during the coldest part of the year when travel would be most difficult. But if Christ were not born in late December, why would the date of December 25 be selected?

Many scholars believe December 25 was chosen as it corresponded with pagan rituals, such as the Roman festival to their sun god *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, and the winter solstice in the Northern hemisphere. These were traditional times of celebration among many ancient cultures. This would have allowed the Christian church to compete with the popular pagan holidays and perhaps gain more converts. Others believe that date may have been selected as it fell nine months after the spring equinox, which occurred March 25 on the Roman calendar. (in 221 A.D., Christian historian Sextus Julius Africanus proposed that Mary had conceived during the spring equinox). Regardless, December 25 is now universally recognized as the day on which the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is celebrated.

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