

The Birth of Christmas

BY JOSEPH F. KELLY

Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it. How did a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth come into being, and what elements of that feast can we draw upon?

Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it or even pay much attention to the feast's scriptural foundations, the Matthean and Lukan Infancy Narratives. After I survey how a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth came into being, I will consider what elements of that feast modern Christians might draw upon.¹

Modern exegesis stresses the Jewish background of post-Resurrection disciples, who continued to worship in the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 2:46-4:4). Even Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, stressed his own Jewishness (Philippians 3:5). Luke says that he continued to observe the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 16:13) but also saw the first day of the week as a time for breaking bread (20:7). Yet the disciples had little incentive to establish new feasts with the Parousia so imminent (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). As the years passed, however, Christians such as Luke recognized that the Parousia might be quite distant, and in Acts he portrays the Holy Spirit guiding the Church in continuing Christ's work in the world.

We moderns simply cannot conceive how those disciples must have struggled to accept this radically new view of time. The pseudonymous author of 2 Peter (c. 125) tried to explain the delay (3:1-10), but most Christians eventually accepted that the Church would be in the world for an indeterminate time. Charisms such as prophecy and glossolalia declined as Christians established the necessary elements for an ongoing community—such as organized if uncharismatic offices, a canon of their own sacred writings, and specifically Christian feasts.

Not only had time changed, so had geography and demographics. The Christians evangelized the Gentiles with considerable success. By the early second century, even before all the New Testament books had been written, we hear of prominent Gentile leaders such as Papias of Hierapolis, Clement of Rome, and Polycarp of Smyrna. The Church would develop in the Gentile world of the Roman Empire.

ORIGINS OF THE FEAST

The basics for Christmas appeared soon. Although Athanasius of Alexandria first listed the now accepted twenty-seven books as the New Testament in 367, canon formation began early. By the mid-second century all canon lists included the four Gospels, guaranteeing that Matthew and Luke's Infancy Narratives would be part of Scripture and thus always play a role in Christian life and thought.

The Jewish feast of the Pasch (Passover) metamorphosed for Christians into the feast of Easter (to use the early Medieval English word), but Christians could not celebrate the feast unless they knew the date of Jesus' resurrection. This led to what scholars call the "Paschal Controversy" in the mid-second century. Christian scholars ultimately concluded that they could not determine the exact date of Easter, which is why it migrates through a five-week period in the spring. The dating of Christmas would engender another controversy.

Contemporary with the establishment of Easter was the observation of martyrs' feast days. Roman tradition required families to celebrate a memorial meal on the anniversary of a loved one's death. Christians similarly honored the anniversaries of martyrs' deaths but with an important twist: for them, the martyrs did not die but were born anew in a heavenly afterlife. The date of martyrdom became their "true" birthday. This is important for Christmas since some early Christians, especially Origen of Alexandria, objected to birthday celebrations because the Bible mentions only two of them: one for Pharaoh (Genesis 40:20) and one for Herod (Mark 6:21; Matthew 14:6) which both resulted in executions! However, when Christians became interested in Christ's birthday, acceptance of the martyrs' "birthdays" guaranteed that no real opposition would occur.

But while scholars were debating about Jesus' birth, an anonymous Syrian made an end run around them. *Circa* 150 in the region of Antioch appeared the *Protoevangelium of James*, a "prequel" to the Nativity because it purported to tell of events before Jesus' birth. It enjoyed enormous popularity, partly because of its vivid, fictionalized account but mostly because Christians who had come to accept being in history were taking an interest in Jesus' own history.

The *Protoevangelium* tells of the birth of Jesus' mother Mary to Joachim and Anna (the first mention of those names), of Mary's being dedicated to the Temple, of the high priests choosing Joseph for her spouse because a

dove flew out of his staff, of Mary's being sixteen at Jesus' birth, of Joseph's being elderly, and of the presence of a midwife at the birth. All of these details became staples of medieval and renaissance art. Never a serious candidate for the New Testament canon, this work appealed to average believers if not to scholars, the first but hardly the last time that popular attitudes would influence the development of an ecclesiastical feast.

As Christian interest in Jesus' birth grew, scholars in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa began to investigate the date of the Nativity. They initially hoped to determine the exact day—unmentioned in the Gospels—by determining the date of his death. Why?

Jewish tradition taught that great figures, such as Moses, were born and died on the same calendar day. If Scripture says Moses lived 120 years, then it must mean *exactly* 120 years. Determining the date of the Crucifixion proved very difficult to do, partly because the Gospels do not provide enough information and partly because no one knew the year when Jesus died. Undeterred, third-century Christian scholars pushed ahead, and knowing that Jesus died near Passover, the North African Tertullian and the Roman Hippolytus concluded that Jesus died on March 25, which would also mean that he was born on that date.

But allegory, a favorite interpretive tool of ancient scholars, quickly entered the discussion. According to the Julian calendar, March 25 was the spring equinox—for pagans the anniversary of the creation of the world.

That date for Jesus' birth appealed to many Christians because Paul identified Christ as the new Adam (Romans 5:14) and Revelation 21 used images of re-creation. But a different allegory soon challenged it.

Matthew says Jesus' face shone like the sun at the Transfiguration (17:2), an image repeated in Revelation (1:16). Mark says that the women went to the tomb as the sun rose (16:2). In the Synoptic Gospels, when

Jesus died the sun was darkened (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45a), while John speaks of the Logos as the light shining in the darkness (1:5). Supporting this solar imagery was Malachi 4:2, that on the day of reckoning would appear the sun of righteousness, an image applied to Jesus by many early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, and an anonymous North African scholar who

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around 243 produced *De Pascha Computus* (*On Computing the Paschal Feast*). For author of the *Computus*, March 25 was indeed the anniversary of the creation but not of Jesus' birth which would be more appropriate on March 28, the fourth day of creation when God formed the sun. This approach never caught on, but it demonstrated the power of sun symbolism and the willingness of writers to go beyond the supposed factual information.

Celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 presented a unique opportunity for Christians to counter three pagan feasts: the cult of the *Sol Invictus*, the veneration of a Persian virility deity named Mithra, and the festival of Saturnalia.

Contemporary with the *Computus*, another North African, Sextus Julius Africanus, introduced a theological variant on March 25. Having travelled widely in the Eastern Mediterranean and studied in Alexandria, he knew of Gnostics who belittled the importance of Jesus' physicality and of Docetists who outright denied that Jesus had a body. For Sextus the central issue was the Incarnation, the taking on of flesh by the Son of

God. Keeping the anniversary of the creation, he argued that on March 25 Jesus had become incarnate via his conception in his mother's womb at the annunciation by Gabriel. Following the Jewish exact-dating theory, Sextus believed Jesus had been born precisely nine months later on December 25. This enabled Sextus to keep the sun imagery in an effective way. According to the Julian calendar, December 25 was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, when the sun was at its weakest. Every day thereafter it grew stronger and stronger, just as a baby would.

This sounds like we have Christmas, but, as always in scholarship, things were more complicated. Julius was not an influential writer because, while still a pagan, he had served in the army of a persecuting emperor and later worked as a librarian for another emperor. So, many Christians had difficulty accepting him. But at least December 25 had entered the discussion.

Something else had entered the discussion: pagan sun worship. Elagabalus, a member of a Roman dynasty but son of a Syrian, had served as a priest of a Syrian sun god until a palace coup in 218 made him emperor. He introduced into Rome the cult of *Deus Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun God) to whom he made human sacrifices. In 222, his incompetence and immorality cost him his life via another coup, but he had popularized worship of the sun god which had been growing in Rome before his reign.

The emperor Aurelian (270-275) also worshipped the Unconquered Sun. Realizing that traditional polytheism had declined, he established solar mono-

theism with a cult centered in Rome itself, although he did nothing to interfere with the multifarious local religions. The great feast-day of the Sun was December 25, the winter solstice and the Sun's birthday. Initially Aurelian treated the Christians fairly but by 274 he decided to persecute them, likely because Christianity was the only monotheistic religion capable of challenging the worship of *Sol Invictus*. His murder in 275 by palace officials in a coup prevented the persecution.

Did their challenge to the Unconquered Sun push the Christians toward utilizing December 25 as Christ's birthday? No Christian author said so explicitly, but it is probable because, where feasible, Christians would replace local pagan traditions with Christian ones, substituting veneration of a local martyr for that of a mythical hero. (This did not always work; many bishops complained about the persistence of pagan traits in Christians celebrations.)

December 25 presented a unique opportunity for Christians to counter three pagan feasts. The cult of the *Sol Invictus* survived Aurelian. Furthermore, many Roman soldiers and other men venerated a Persian virility deity named Mithra, whose birthday fell on December 25. To this can be added the festival of Saturnalia (December 17 to 23), a week of vigorous drinking, eating, sexual misconduct, and the overturning of social and even gender roles. Celebrating Christ's birthday on December 25 would directly oppose two pagan feasts and weaken another, as the bishops would have realized.

But had Christmas actually become a feast by the late third century? The earliest reference to Christmas as an established feast dates it to Rome in 336, but how long before 336 had it been accepted?

Augustine in *Sermon 202*, dated 412, reproaches the Donatists for not celebrating Epiphany as other African Christians did, yet he does not mention Christmas, a far more important feast in the Western churches. The Donatists split from the larger church in 311 and many scholars believe that if they had also rejected Christmas Augustine would have mentioned that as well, so Christmas could date to the early fourth century. For an argument from silence, this is a good if not conclusive one.

The Roman church produced the key text, the *Chronograph of 354*, which incorporates material dating to 336. It twice says that Christ was born on December 25, once in a list of consular dates and then in a list of martyrs' deaths, thus linking the birth of Christ with the "birthdays" of the martyrs. But the *Chronograph* does not explain the date. Possibly the Romans preferred Sextus' chronology and also wanted to counter *Sol Invictus* whose cult had been instituted in their city.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEAST

December 25 caught on quickly in the West and within half a century had won favor in the East, reaching Cappadocia by 370, Constantinople by 380, Antioch by 386, and Alexandria by 432. Jerusalem held out, observing the traditional Eastern date of January 6 until *circa* 575 when the Byzantine

emperor Tiberius II (574-582) imposed the new date. Some Eastern Christians, such as the Armenians, still celebrate Christ's birthday on January 6 but most use it for the Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi.

This feast also had some theological advantages. Against the Apollinarians who denied Christ's full humanity, it celebrated his human birth. Against the Arians who denied Christ's divinity, it celebrated the Son of God become

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human. Since the feast of Jesus' birth was also that of Mary's maternity, Marian devotion became widely popular, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Artistic creations soon appeared. Writers such as Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, and the Spanish layman Prudentius wrote Nativity poems, hymns, and prayers. Visual artists, all now anonymous, produced magnificent nativity

scenes via frescoes, wall paintings, and sarcophagi (the large stone tombs favored by aristocratic Romans). Nativity scenes on those reminded Christians why Jesus had been born. As the Appalachian carol "I Wonder as I Wander" says, "Jesus our Savior is come for to die."

When fascination with the Nativity demanded more information than the plain text of the Gospels could provide, Christian scholars filled in the details—especially with the Magi, the only Gentiles (other than Caesar Augustus) mentioned in the Gospels and thus important to the Gentile Christians. Via allegory and typology of Old Testament passages, the unnamed, unnumbered Magi became three (the three gifts?), took on royalty, migrated from Persia, and acquired names. Writers also hypothesized about the size and brightness of the star, the childhood of Jesus, and the adventures of the Holy Family in Egypt.

But at least the Christians did not have to deal with commercialization and "caloric abuse"? Not exactly. Saturnalia partly survived and transmogrified into the secular revelry of Christmas. In *circa* 400, bishop Asterius of Amasea in Cappadocia complained that at Christmas people wanted presents so badly that they went into debt; other bishops complained about excessive eating and drinking. Yet the new feast endured.

The last stage of early Christmas began in the fifth century. It had become second only to Easter in importance, and some churches thought that it too deserved a preparatory period. Fourth-century Gallic and Spanish churches

had such a period before Epiphany for baptizands because January 6 was the supposed day of Jesus' baptism. By the fifth century, as the Western churches elevated December 25 over January 6, those churches observed a preparatory period for Christmas. Northern Italy had such a period by the fifth century, and Advent, with that name, appears in Rome in the sixth century. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) codified the Advent period as one of four Sundays, although he saw Advent more as a liturgical period than a penitential one.

LESSONS FOR CELEBRATING THE FEAST TODAY

History is the greatest show on earth and perennially fascinating, but does learning how Christmas originated tell us anything about celebrating the feast today? Absolutely.

The ancient writers took Scripture very seriously, struggling to keep close to the Bible when determining the date, and their attempt to learn more about the biblical figures always started with Scripture. For example, Origen claimed there were three magi in an explication of Genesis 26:26-31 about three pagans who honored Isaac, a traditional type of Christ. Even some rather far-fetched apocrypha built upon the scriptural text.

The early writers' use of the exact-days theory showed respect for Jewish customs and played a key role in choosing December 25. The early Christians also showed respect for the differing cultures within their own faith. Greek-speakers in the Eastern Mediterranean and Latin-speakers in the Western Mediterranean combined to produce this feast. They also showed openness to those who did not accept the consensus, such as the Armenians who still favor January 6. We can extend such understanding not just to those who celebrate Christmas differently but to those who do not celebrate it at all.

The writers used the contemporary culture where appropriate, such as the Julian rather than the Jewish calendar, and accepted it where it did no harm, such as commemorating the martyrs' "birthdays," a direct borrowing from pagan Roman funeral customs. Many contemporary Christians see the secular Christmas as a threat to the religious one. We would do well to see the many good elements of the secular holiday, such as the trees, lights, music, family dinners, and all-around good cheer that make Jesus' birth the most beloved of Christian days. Indeed, if I may jump to nineteenth-century America, the secular Christmas observed by so many Christians caused even recalcitrant Calvinists to rethink their opposition to the feast. In 1856 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow observed, "The old Puritan feeling prevents Christmas from being a cheerful, hearty holiday, though every year makes it more so."²

The early Christians transformed their culture, and so do we, even if we often think we do not. Let me give a potent example. Every December television abounds with Christmas movies burdened with commercials urging

people to buy and buy. But has anyone ever seen a television Christmas movie about a child who got an enormous hoard of presents and rejoiced to show them all off and lord it over friends who received less? On the contrary, the movies typically deal with families getting together, troubles put aside, estranged siblings being reconciled, misers recognizing the true joy of Christmas, and good people helping those who have less. All of these are values we believers promote. Even the most ruthless advertisers pay us a compliment by recognizing that people will not watch shows exalting greed and selfishness but rather want to see programs that portray the *Christian values of Christmas*.

The religious character of Christmas may occasionally become obscured, but the great religious feast created by learned Christians almost two millennia ago still survives and, if I may say so, flourishes.³

NOTES

1 I use "Nativity" to refer to Jesus' birth and "Christmas" for the feast celebrating the Nativity.

2 This is in the poet's journal entry for December 25, 1856, in Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: with Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence*, vol. II (Boston, MA: Ticknor and Company, 1897), 324.

3 I develop these reflections further in *The Birth of Jesus according to the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) and *The Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).



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