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Christmas - Its' Origin, Symbols and Development

Christmas & the Roman Saturnalia

Comparison of the Two Festivals

Source: Gordon J. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion* (New York: Longmans, 1931), pp. 58, 62–65.

[p. 58] The festival of Saturn fell on December 17, but its popular celebration lasted for seven days. It began as a country festival in the time when agriculture was one of the chief activities of the Romans, but it soon came to be celebrated in urban centers also. It was a period of indulgence in eating, drinking, and gambling, and during these seven days city officials condoned conduct that they would not have tolerated at any other season. One feature of the occasion was the license allowed to slaves, who were permitted to treat their masters as if they were their social equals. Frequently indeed masters and slaves changed places and the latter were waited on by the former. Another feature of the celebration was the exchange of gifts, such as candles (cerei) which are supposed to have symbolized the increasing power of the sunlight after the winter solstice, and little puppets of paste or earthenware (sigillaria), the exact significance of which is obscure. It was a season of hilarity and good-will...

[p. 62] The extremists who have said that Christmas was intended to replace the Saturnalia have vastly overstated the case. Nor is it of any importance that Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis in Cyprus in the fourth century, places the Saturnalia on the twenty-fifth of December. This is not the only error in the list of dates in which it occurs. Without doubt, however, many of the customs of the Saturnalia were transferred to Christmas. Although the dates did not exactly coincide, for the Saturnalia proper fell on the

seventeenth of December, the time of year was practically the same, and it has already been pointed out how frequently festivals of the merry-making type occur among various peoples at this season. Fowler, mentioning the good-will that so generally characterizes these celebrations, raises the question whether this was one of the reasons why Christmas was put at the winter solstice. Possibly, as has also been suggested, the postponement of the festivities from the date of the [p. 63] Saturnalia to Christmas week was in part at least caused by the institution of the Advent fast covering the period of the four Sundays before Christmas.

Certainly many of the customs of the Christmas season go back to the Roman festival. In it lies the origin of the excessive eating and drinking, the plethora of sweets, the playing of games, and the exchange of gifts. Nor can we fail to connect our custom of burning candles with the candles (cerei that were so conspicuous a part of the Saturnalia. Moreover, our Christmas holidays, like the Roman festival, are approximately a week...

In mediaeval times there were still other survivals [p. 64] , and the king of the Saturnalia is obviously the prototype not only of the Abbot of Unreason who at one time presided over the Christmas revels in Scotland, but also of the Lord of Misrule in England and the Abbé de Liesse in Lille. This mock dignitary had other titles...

[p. 65] We hear also of the Boy-Bishop (Episcopus Puerorum), whose authority lasted from St. Nicholas' day (December 6) till Childermas (December 28) and whose tradition (as well as that of the Bishop of Unreason) still survives to a certain extent in Santa Claus. Apparently the compromise made by the early Church in adapting the customs of the Saturnalia to Christian practice had little or no effect in checking the license of the festival. This continued through the whole Christmas festival and sometimes lasted till the day of Epiphany (January 6). We find many criticisms by churchmen or councils. In England Henry VIII issued a proclamation in 1542, abolishing the revels, but Mary restored them in 1554.

Origin of Christmas

Source: Francis X. Weiser, Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), pp. 60–62. Copyright 1952 by Francis X. Weiser. Used by permission of the publishers.

[p. 60] The early Christians, who attributed to Christ not only the title (Kyrios) but also many other honors that the pagans paid to their "divine" emperors, naturally felt inclined to honor the birth of the Saviour. In most places the commemoration of Christ's birth was included in the Feast of the Epiphany (Manifestations) on January 6, one of the oldest annual feasts.

Soon after the end of the last great persecution, about the year 330, the Church in Rome definitely assigned December 25 for the celebration of the birth of Christ. For a while,

many Eastern Churches continued to keep other dates, but toward the end of the fourth century the Roman custom became universal.

No official reason has been handed down in ecclesiastical documents for the choice of this date. Consequently, various explanations have been given to justify the celebration of the Lord's nativity on this particular day. Some early Fathers and writers claimed that December 25 was the actual date of Christ's birth...

[p. 61] It was expressly stated in Rome that the actual date of the Saviour's birth was unknown and that different traditions prevailed in different parts of the world.

A second explanation was of theological-symbolic character. Since the Bible calls the Messiah the "Sun of Justice" (Malachi 4, 2), it was argued that His birth had to coincide with the beginning of a new solar cycle, that is, He had to be born at the time of the winter solstice... This explanation, though attractive in itself, depends on too many assumptions that cannot be proved and lacks any basis of historical certitude.

There remains then this explanation, which is the most probable one, and held by most scholars in our time: the choice of December 25 was influenced by the fact that the Romans, from the time of Emperor Aurelian (275), had celebrated the feast of the sun god (Sol Invictus: the Unconquered Sun) on that day. December 25 was called the "Birthday of the Sun," and great pagan religious celebrations of the Mithras cult were held all through the empire. What was more natural than that the Christians celebrate the birth of Him Who was the "Light of the World" and the true "Sun of Justice" on this very day? The popes seem to have chosen December 25 precisely for the purpose of inspiring the people to turn from the worship of a material sun to the adoration of Christ the Lord. This thought is indicated in various writings of contemporary authors.

It has sometimes been said that the Nativity is only a "Christianized pagan festival." However, the Christians of those early centuries were keenly aware of the difference between the two festivals—one pagan and one Christian—on the same day. The coincidence in the date, even if intended, does not make the two [p. 62] celebrations identical. Some newly converted Christians who thoughtlessly retained external symbols of the sun worship on Christmas Day were immediately and sternly reprovved.

Date of Christmas

The Sun's Birthday - Winter Solstice - Uncertainty About Date of Christ's Birth

Source: A. H. Newman, "Christmas," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. 3, p. 47. Copyright 1909 by Funk & Wagnalls Company, New York. Used by permission of Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Mich., present publishers.

Christmas: The supposed anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, occurring on Dec. 25. No sufficient data ... exist, for the determination of the month or the day of the event...

There is no historical evidence that our Lord's birthday was celebrated during the apostolic or early postapostolic times. The uncertainty that existed at the beginning of the third century in the minds of Hippolytus and others—Hippolytus earlier favored Jan. 2, Clement of Alexandria (Strom., i. 21) "the 25th day of Pachon" (= May 20), while others, according to Clement, fixed upon Apr. 18 or 19 and Mar. 28—proves that no Christmas festival had been established much before the middle of the century. Jan. 6 was earlier fixed upon as the date of the baptism or spiritual birth of Christ, and the feast of Epiphany ... was celebrated by the Basilidian Gnostics in the second century ... and by catholic Christians by about the beginning of the fourth century.

The earliest record of the recognition of Dec. 25 as a church festival is in the Philocalian Calendar (copied 354 but representing Roman practise in 336).

The Sun's Birthday

Source: Gordon J. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion* New York: Longmans, 1931), pp. 150–153.

[p. 150] One of the dominant religious ideas of the second and third centuries was the belief in the divinity of the Sun...

This divinity is of especial interest for our inquiry, for his annual festival fell on the twenty-fifth of December and its relation to Christmas [p. 151] has been a matter of protracted discussion. Obviously the season of the winter solstice, when the strength of the sun begins to increase, is appropriate for the celebration of the festival of a sun-god. The day in a sense marks the birth of a new sun. But the reason for its being chosen as the day for the commemoration of Christ's nativity is not so evident... [p. 152] The identity of date is more than a coincidence. To be sure the Church did not merely appropriate the festival of the popular sun-god. It was through a parallelism between Christ and the sun that the twenty-fifth of December came to be the date of the nativity... [p. 153] Even Epiphanius, the fourth century metropolitan of Cyprus, though giving the sixth of January as the date of birth, connects the event with the solstice. Moreover, the diversion of the significance of a popular pagan holiday was wholly in accord with the policy of the Church. Of the actual celebration of a festival of the nativity, it should be added, there is no satisfactory evidence earlier than the fourth century. Its first observance in Rome on December the twenty-fifth took place in 353 or 354 (Usener) or in 336 (Duchesne). In Constantinople it seems to have been introduced in 377 or 378.

Winter Solstice, Sun's Birthday

Source: Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (reprint; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960), pp. 89, 90.

[p. 89] A very general observance required that on the 25th of December the birth of the "new Sun" should be celebrated, when after the winter solstice the days began to lengthen

and the "invincible" star triumphed again over darkness. It is certain that the date of this *Natalis Invicti* was selected by the Church as the commemoration of the Nativity of Jesus, which was previously confused with the Epiphany. In appointing this day, universally marked by pious rejoicing, which were as far as possible retained,—for instance the old chariot-races were preserved,—the ecclesiastical authorities purified in some degree the customs which they could not abolish. This substitution, which took place at Rome probably between 354 and 360, was adopted throughout the Empire, and that is why we still celebrate Christmas on the 25th of December.

The pre-eminence assigned to the *dies Solis* also certainly [p. 90] contributed to the general recognition of Sunday as a holiday. This is connected with a more important fact, namely, the adoption of the week by all European nations.

Uncertainty About Date of Christ's Birth

Source: Walter Woodburn Hyde, *Paganism to Christianity in the Roman Empire*, pp. 249, 250. Copyright 1946 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia. Used by permission.

[p. 249] Uncertainty about Jesus' birthday in the early third century is reflected in a disputed passage of the presbyter Hippolytus, who was banished to Sardinia by Maximin in 235, and in an authentic statement of Clement of Alexandria. While the former favored January second, the learned Clement of Alexandria enumerates several dates given by the Alexandrian chronographers, notably the twenty-fifth of the Egyptian month Pachon (May twentieth) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus and the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi (April eighteenth or nineteenth) of the year A.D. 1, although he favored May twentieth. This shows that no Church festival in honor of the day was established before the middle of the third century. Origen at that time in a sermon denounced the idea of keeping Jesus' birthday like that of Pharaoh and said that only sinners such as Herod were so honored. Arnobius later similarly ridiculed giving birthdays to "gods." A Latin treatise, *De pascha computus* (of ca. 243), placed Jesus' birth on March twenty-first since that was the supposed day on which God created the Sun (Gen. 1:14–19), thus typifying the "Sun of righteousness" as Malachi (4:2) called the expected Messiah. A century before Polycarp, martyred in Smyrna in 155, gave the same date for the birth and baptism placing it on a Wednesday because of the creation of the Sun on that day.

Christmas Symbols

Mistletoe: Sacred Plant in the Pagan Religion of the Druids

Source: Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feats and Customs* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), pp. 103, 104. Copyright 1952 by Francis X. Weiser. Used by permission of the publishers.

[p. 103] The mistletoe was a sacred plant in the pagan religion of the Druids in Britain. It was believed to have all sorts of miraculous qualities: the power of healing diseases, making poisons harmless, giving fertility to humans and animals, protecting from witchcraft, banning evil spirits, bringing good luck and great blessings. In fact, it was considered so sacred that even enemies who happened to meet beneath a mistletoe in the forest would lay down their arms, exchange a friendly greeting, and keep a truce until the following day. From this old custom grew [p. 104] the practice of suspending mistletoe over a doorway or in a room as a token of good will and peace to all comers...

After Britain was converted from paganism to Christianity, the bishops did not allow the mistletoe to be used in churches because it had been the main symbol of a pagan religion. Even to this day mistletoe is rarely used as a decoration for altars. There was, however, one exception. At the Cathedral of York at one period before the Reformation a large bundle of mistletoe was brought into the sanctuary each year at Christmas and solemnly placed on the altar by a priest. In this rite the plant that the Druids had called "All-heal" was used as a symbol of Christ, the Divine Healer of nations.

The people of England then adopted the mistletoe as a decoration for their homes at Christmas. Its old, pagan religious meaning was soon forgotten, but some of the other meanings and customs have survived: the kiss under the mistletoe; the token of good will and friendship; the omen of happiness and good luck and the new religious significance.

Santa Claus

Source: Francis X. Weiser, Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), pp. 113, 114. Copyright 1952 by Francis X. Weiser. Used by permission of the publishers.

[p. 113] When the Dutch came to America and established the colony of New Amsterdam, their children enjoyed the traditional "visit of Saint Nicholas" on December 5, for the Dutch had kept this ancient Catholic custom even after the Reformation. Later, when England took over the colony and it became New York, the kindly figure of Sinter Klaas (pronounced like Santa Claus) soon aroused among the English children the desire of having such a heavenly visitor come to their homes, too.

The English settlers were glad and willing to comply with the anxious wish of their children. However, the figure of a Catholic saint and bishop was not acceptable in their eyes, especially since many of them were Presbyterians, to whom a bishop was repugnant. In addition, they did not celebrate the feasts of saints according to the ancient Catholic calendar.

The dilemma was solved by transferring the visit of the mysterious man whom the Dutch called Santa Claus from December 5 to Christmas, and by introducing a radical change in the figure itself. It was not merely a "disguise," but the ancient saint was completely replaced by an entirely different character. Behind the name Santa Claus actually stands the figure of the pagan Germanic god Thor (after whom Thursday is named). Some details about Thor from ancient German mythology will show the origin of the modern Santa Claus tale:

Thor was the god of the peasants and the common people. He was represented as an elderly man, jovial and friendly, of heavy build, with a long white beard. His element was the fire, his color red. The rumble and roar of thunder were said to be caused by the rolling of his chariot, for he alone among the gods never rode on horseback but drove in a chariot drawn by two white goats (called Cracker and Gnasher). He was fighting the giants of ice and snow, and thus became the Yule-god. He was said to live in the "Northland" where he had his palace among icebergs. By our pagan forefathers he was considered as the cheerful and friendly god, never harming the humans but rather helping and protecting them. The fireplace in every home was especially sacred to him, and he was said to come down through the chimney into his element, the fire. 70 [Note 70: H. A. Grueber, *Myths of Northern Lands*, Vol. I, New York, 1895, 61ff.]

[p. 114] Here, then, is the true origin of our "Santa Claus." It certainly was a stroke of genius that produced such a charming and attractive figure for our children from the withered pages of pagan mythology. With the Christian saint whose name he still bears, however, this Santa Claus has really nothing to do.

Development of Christmas

Source: Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* (New York; Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), pp. 62–67. Copyright 1952 by Francis X. Weiser. Used by permission of the publishers.

[p. 62] Middle Ages. The great religious pioneers and missionaries who brought Christianity to the pagan tribes of Europe also introduced the celebration of Christmas...

[p. 63] The period from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries was the peak of a general Christian celebration of the Nativity... It was at this period, too, that most of the delightful Christmas customs of each country were introduced. Some have since died out; others have changed slightly through the ages; many have survived to our day. A few practices had to be suppressed as being improper and scandalous, such as the customs of dancing and mumming in church, the "Boy Bishop's Feast," the "Feast of the Ass," New Year's fires, superstitious (pagan) meals, impersonations of the Devil, and irreverent carols.

Decline. With the Reformation in the sixteenth century there naturally came a sharp change in the Christmas celebration for many countries in Europe. The Sacrifice of the

Mass—the very soul of the feast—was suppressed. The Holy Eucharist, the liturgy of the Divine Office, the sacramentals and ceremonies all disappeared. So did the colorful and inspiring processions, the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. In many countries all that remained of the once rich and glorious religious festival [p. 64] was a sermon and a prayer service on Christmas Day. Although the people kept many of their customs alive, the deep religious inspiration was missing, and consequently the "new" Christmas turned more and more into a feast of good-natured reveling.

On the other hand, some groups, including the German Lutherans, preserved a tender devotion to the Christ Child and celebrated Christmas in a deeply spiritual way within their churches, hearts, and homes.

In England the Puritans condemned even the reduced religious celebration that was held in the Anglican Church after the separation from Rome...

When the Puritans finally came to political power in England, they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas...

[p. 65] Revival in England. When the old Christmas eventually returned with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, it was actually a "new" Christmas. The spiritual aspect of the feast was now left mostly to the care of the ministers in the church service on Christmas Day. What was observed in the home consisted of a more shallow celebration in the form of various non-religious amusements and of general reveling... However, a spirit of good [p. 66] will to all and of generosity to the poor ennobled these more worldly celebrations of the great religious feast. Two famous descriptions of this kind of popular celebration are found in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and in Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*...

Christmas in America... The feast was celebrated with all the splendor of liturgical solemnity and with the traditional customs of the respective nationalities in Florida, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, in Canada, and in the territory of the present State of Michigan.

In the colonies of New England, however, the unfortunate and misdirected zeal of the Puritans against Christmas persisted far into the nineteenth century...

[p. 67] It was not until immigrants from Ireland and from continental Europe arrived in large numbers toward the middle of the last century that Christmas in America began to flourish. The Germans brought the Christmas tree. They were soon joined by the Irish, who contributed the ancient Gaelic custom of putting lights in the windows...

Very soon their neighbors, charmed by these unusual but attractive innovations, followed their example and made many of these customs their own.

Pagan Parallels: Dusares & Mithras Birthdays

(Dusares' Birthday)

Source: Stephen H. Langdon, *Semitic [Mythology]* (Vol. 5 of *The Mythology of All Races*. Boston: Archaeological Institute of America, Marshall Jones Company, 1931), pp. 15–19. Copyright 1931 by Marshall Jones Company, Inc. Used by permission of The Macmillan Company, New York.

[p. 15] Babylonian influence becomes particularly prominent in the great Nabataean kingdom whose principal capitals were Petra [p. 16] and Damascus, and whose history can be traced from their first mention by Ashurbanipal in the middle of the seventh century B.C., to their absorption into the Roman Empire in 106 A.D. They were a North Arabic race who used the Aramaic script, and their principal male deity is Dusura, rendered into Greek as Dousares, and identified by the Greeks with Dionysus. The name means "he of Shara" (dhu Säär), "he of the mountain range eshÐsharaµ," at Petra, and he is a Sun-god according to Strabo Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, writing in the fourth century, preserves the only illuminating information about the mythology of this great cult of the Nabataeans. As he was born and educated in Palestine, and served in a monastic order there, his statement must be taken authoritatively. He says that the Nabataeans praised the virgin whose Arabic name is Caabou'. In Nabataeans the Arabic nominative ending in u is regularly preserved in proper names, and Epiphanius undoubtedly heard the word kaÕbu, "square stone," symbol in Nabataean religion for both Dusares and the great Mother-goddess Allat of the Nabataeans. An Arabic writer says that a four-sided stone was worshipped as Allat, who in a Nabataean inscription was called "Mother of the gods." ... Epiphanius states that Dusares was the offspring of the virgin Chaabou and only son of the "lord" (despojtou). The panegyarchs of Nabataean cities came to Petra to assist in the festival of his birth, which was celebrated on the twenty-fifth of December.

[p. 17] Worship of a dying god, son of the Earth-mother, was the principal cult of this North Arabian people during the period immediately before and after the life of Jesus of Nazareth in Palestine. The title of the Mother-goddess Allat is "Mother of the gods" here, and a translation of the title of the great Mother-goddess of Babylonia, beÆlet ilaµni, "queen of the gods," whose title in Sumerian is also "goddess Mother." Dusares and Allat of the Nabataeans are an Arabian reflex of the great Babylonian myth of Tammuz and Ishtar, and if the god is identified with Dionysus, the original character common to both is that of a Sun-god and patron of fertility. Strabo describes the Nabataeans as a particularly abstemious people; the Greeks and Romans called Dusares the Arabian Dionysus or Bacchus; and a statue of him found in the Hauran (see Fig. 5) portrays him as a deity of the vine. The cornucopia and patera are also characteristic of Dusares on coins of Nabataean cities. As an Arabian [p. 18] Bacchus, Dusares is a Greek and Roman deity; as a god of Fertility, represented by a baetyl, he is a local Arabic Earth and Sun deity; and, as son of the virgin Earth-goddess, he is a Babylonian deity. The celebration of his birth in December at Petra and the northern cities of Bostra and Adraa in the Hauran with games and festivities is a replica of the spring festivities at Babylon, when the death, burial, and resurrection of Marduk were celebrated with weeping, which was exchanged for rejoicing.

The meaning of the actia dusaria at Petra may be inferred from the similar festival at Alexandria in Egypt, there called after an unexplained Egyptian word Kike□llia, or in Greek the Cronia, which also occurred by night on the twenty-fifth of December. In this festival an image of a babe was taken from the temple sanctuary and greeted with loud acclamation by the worshippers, saying, "the Virgin has begotten." On the night of the fifth of December occurred a festival before the image of Core□; it ended with bringing forth from beneath the earth the image of Aio□n, which was carried seven times around the inner sanctuary of Core□'s temple. The image was then returned to its place below the surface of the earth. Epiphanius, in whose writings this Egyptian cult is described, identifies the virgin mother of this myth with the Greek Under-world goddess Core□, as he does the virgin mother of Dusares, Chaabu of the Nabataeans. There is a wide [p. 19] syncretism here in this Arabic religion, composed of Babylonian, Greek, and Egyptian elements; and beyond all doubt the Nabataeans possessed an elaborate cult of Tammuz and Ishtar, of Osiris and Isis, of Dionysus and Basilinna, the equivalent of Proserpine-Core□, in which this deity was represented as a youth, son of the Mother-goddess, who was reborn yearly in midwinter and who died in the summer.

The Mother-goddess of the Nabataeans, Allat, identified with Core□ by the Greeks, is essentially the North Semitic Ashtart, and the Babylonian Ishtar.

Worshippers of Mithras Won by Making December 25 Birthday of Christ

Source: H. Lamer, "Mithras," Wörterbuch der Antike (2d ed.; Leipzig: A. Kröner, 1933). Used by permission. German.

While Christianity won a comparatively easy victory over the Graeco-Roman religion, it had a hard struggle with the Mithras religion. The worshippers of Mithras were won by taking over the birthday of Mithras, December 25, as the birthday of Christ.