

How December 25 Became Christmas?

Western Christians all over the world celebrate Christmas on December 25. The Orthodox Christians in central and eastern Europe and other parts of the world celebrate Christmas on January 7.

The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated was in 336 A.D., during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the Christian Roman Emperor. A few years later, the pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th of December.

Western Christianity: Refers to the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches. Western Christianity makes up nearly 90% of Christians worldwide.

The Eastern Orthodox Church: Officially the Orthodox Catholic Church is the second largest Christian church in the world, with an estimated 225-300 million members—most of whom live in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, the Middle East, and Russia. Majority of them are in Belarus, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

East-West Schism: There was long dispute between the Greek East and Latin West. Some of the main issues—source of the Holy Spirit; and whether leavened or unleavened bread to be used during the communion.

Nisan: March- April

What does the scripture say about the birth of Jesus?

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 year.

Luke 2: 7-8 mentions about the shepherd tending their flocks at night when they hear the news.

Extrabiblical Evidence: There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such Irenaeus (c. 130-200) or Tertullian (c. 160-225).

Origen of Alexandria (c. 264) mocked the 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. As far as we can tell. Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point—A. D. 264.

Records about Jesus' Life: Each of the Four Gospels provides detailed information about the time of Jesus' death.

Gospel of John tells us Jesus is crucified just as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed.

The celebration of Easter is implied in the New Testament, “Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the festival...” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8). It was certainly a distinctively Christian feast by the mid-second century A.D.

In the Apocryphal text known as the Epistle of the Apostles Jesus has instructed 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 A.D. Christian writers.

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 none of them specifies a date.

In the second century A.D., 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. These texts provide everything from the names of Jesus’ grandparents to the details of his education—but not the date of his birth.

Different Dates Suggested:

In 200 A.D., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born.

According to Clement of Alexandria, several different dates had been proposed by various Christian groups. 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 Parmuthi [April 20 or 21].”

December 25: 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 24, is marked: *natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*: “Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea.”

In about 400 A.D., 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.

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?

Questions About the Birth of Jesus in the Gospels & December 25:

A careful analysis of Scripture seem to suggest that December 25 is an unlikely date for Christ's birth.

1. We know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at the time of Jesus birth (Luke 2:7-8). Usually, shepherds were not in the fields during December. So scholars think that Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night." [*Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, p. 309]. A number of scholars also suggest against the birth [of Christ] occurring on December 25 since the weather would not have permitted shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.
2. Jesus' parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census (Luke 2:1-4). Such census were not taken in winter when temperatures often dropped and the roads were in poor condition. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

If Jesus Christ wasn't born on December 25, does the Bible indicate when He was born?

Some scholars suggests that the biblical accounts point to the fall of the year as the most likely time of Jesus' birth, based on the conception and birth of John the Baptist.

Since Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived (Luke 1:24-36), we can determine the approximate time of year Jesus was born if we know when John was born.

John's father, Zacharias, was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple during the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 in that year [*The Companion Bible*, 1974, Appendix 179, p. 200].

It was during this time of temple service that Zachariah learned that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child (Luke 1:8-13). After he completed his service and travelled home, Elizabeth conceived (Luke 1:23-24).

Assuming John's conception took place near the end of June, adding nine months brings us to the end of March as the most likely time for John's birth. Adding another six months (the difference in ages between John and Jesus) bring us to the end of September as the likely time of Jesus' birth.

Then why December 25?

Two Theories:

1. Borrowed from Pagan celebrations: The most popular theory is that it was borrowed from pagan festivals.

- The Romans celebrated their Saturnalis festival in December.
- Barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times.
- In 274 A.D., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25.

Hence, the argument is that Christians decided to celebrate Christmas on the same date.

Reasons: The early Christians deliberately chose December 25 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 holidays and the God whose birth it celebrated.

The church father Ambrose (c. 339-397) described Christ as the true sun, who outshined the fallen gods of the old order.

Problems:

Despite its popularity, this theory has its problems.

- It is not found in any ancient Christian writings.
- Only by the 12th century we find the first suggestion that Jesus' birth was set at the time of the pagan feasts. On a manuscript of Dionysius bar-Salibi (Syriac biblical commentator) 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.
- 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 first mention of a date for Christmas (c. 200) and the earliest celebrations that we know (c. 250-300) come in period when Christians were not borrowing heavily from pagan traditions.
- In the first few centuries A.D., the persecuted Christian minority was greatly concerned with distancing itself from the larger, public pagan religious observances, such as sacrifices, games, holidays. This was true as late as the violent persecutions of the Christians conducted by the Roman emperor Diocletian between 303 and 313 A.D.
- This was changed only after Constantine converted to Christianity. From the mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan

festivals. Pope Gregory the Great, in a letter written in 601 A.D. to Christian missionary in Britain, encouraged that the local pagan temples be converted into churches and the pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs.

- The December 25 feast seems to have existed before 312—before Constantine and his conversion. The Donatist Christians in North Africa seem to have known it from before that time.

2. Birth of Jesus on December 25 Based on Jesus' Death at Passover:

The second theory suggests that the key to dating Jesus' birth may lie in the dating of Jesus' death at Passover. This was first suggested by the modern French scholar Louis Duchesne in the early 20th century and fully developed by American Thomas Talley in more recent years.

- Around 200 A.D. 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 was equivalent to March 25 in the Roman (solar) calendar.
- March 25, is nine months before December 25.
- March 25 is later recognized as the Feast of the Annunciation—the commemoration of Jesus' conception. 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.
- In an anonymous Christian treatise titled *On Solstices and Equinoxes* from 4th century North Africa 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 day he suffered.
- Augustine wrote in *On The trinity* (c. 399-419): "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."
- In the East, 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 in their local Greek calendar—April 6. April 6 is exactly 9 months before January—the eastern date for Christmas.
- In the eastern orthodox writings there is 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 took away and takes away in perpetual sacrifice the sins of the world." Even today, the Armenian Church celebrates the Annunciation in early April and Christmas on January 6.

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:

- It reflects ancient understanding of the whole salvation being bound up together.
- The notion that creation and redemption should occur at the same time of the year is also reflected in ancient Jewish tradition (recorded in Talmud).
- Rabbi Eliezer states: "In Nisan the word 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."

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.

In the end we are left with the same question we started: How did December 25 become Christmas? The answer is: we do not know for sure. What we can only say is that:

The significance of why we celebrate Christmas is more important than when we celebrate. Whether the date was borrowed from the pagan celebration in order to encourage the spread of Christianity throughout the pagan world; or from the rabbinic understanding that God's work of creation and redemption should take place at the same time of the year—nothing takes away the fact that God sent his son in the most humble way to save us, died for our sins on the cross, resurrected on the third day, and ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us.

Further Reading:

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