

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

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#9 Archeology of the Bible — The Ancient Christmas Traditions

“WARNING: CHRISTMAS IS A PAGAN HOLIDAY AND NOT BIBLICAL”

A quick search on the internet will reveal dozens of sites that warn Christians not to celebrate Christmas because it is an “unbiblical pagan holiday.” Is all this hype true? Or is this just another example of “FAKE NEWS?” This article will examine the true ancient Christmas traditions from a biblical and historical perspective.

Night shot of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem



Beneath this ancient church is the shepherd's cave where Jesus was born. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2022]

The history of this exact spot is traced to the early second century when Roman Emperor Hadrian, in 135 A.D., desecrated all the Christian holy places in Judea. Because Christians were worshipping at the cave where Jesus was born, Hadrian built a shrine to Adonis (an immoral Roman god) above the cave. This historical fact reveals that early Jewish Christians worshipped at the birth site of Jesus. Why would we not do the same?

IS CELEBRATING THE BIRTH OF JESUS UNBIBLICAL?

In the Old Testament, God inspired prophets to foretell the birth of the Messiah (see: Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7 & Micah 5:2.) The beginnings of both Matthew and Luke dedicate much information to the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. In a nutshell, the coming of Jesus was celebrated by Joseph & Mary, by the priest Zacharias & his wife Elizabeth (parents of John the Baptist), by angels who appeared to shepherds and commanded them to go and worship the baby Jesus, by Magi/ Wise Men from the east who came to worship the newborn

King, and by an old woman named Anna & an old man named Simeon who were awaiting the birth of the Messiah. So NO, it is not unbiblical to celebrate the birth of the Messiah. In fact, it would be shameful for Christians not to celebrate the birth of their Savior and King when the Bible places such an emphasis on the first coming of Jesus to this earth.

Aerial View of the Ancient Bethlehem Tell. RED highlights Ancient Tel Bethlehem. GREEN shows the oldest



standing church in Israel, Church of the Nativity. YELLOW is the location of the cave beneath this church. Based on history and archeology, we can be certain that Jesus was born right here, in a shepherd's cave. [Photo by permission, Joel Kramer]

IS CHRISTMAS A PAGAN HOLIDAY?

The short answer is NO, ABSOLUTELY NOT. Very early in Christian history birth dates for Jesus Christ were recorded. Written documents from as early as the second century state that Christians believed Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit, in the womb of the Virgin Mary, during the feast of Passover. Passover in 1 A.D. (A.D. means, “in the year of our Lord”) was March 25th and December 25th is exactly nine months later. According to the earliest Christian texts, this is how December 25th was chosen for Christmas. This date has NOTHING to do with pagan festivities that happened to occur on or near the winter solstice - it is connected to the Jewish festival of Passover.

Evidence for a December 25th Christmas comes from the writings of the following early church fathers: Theophilus (AD 115-181), Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202), Hippolytus (A.D. 170—236), and Sextus Julius Africanus (A.D. 160—240). It is remarkable that we have so many early historical references to this date. It should be noted that these are just the written documents and tradition usually pre-dates written records. So, the date of December 25th for the birth of Jesus is an incredibly early Christian tradition supported by several ancient texts.

Another myth about the authentic date of Christmas being December 25th is the idea that shepherds in Israel are not in the fields with their sheep in the winter months. My good friend, Joel Kramer, spent two years living with and filming Bedouin shepherds. Joel says, and I quote: “Trust me, shepherds are in the fields all year long, yes, even in the dead of winter.” Jamie and I just returned from Israel on December 17th and the weather in Jerusalem, in the dead of winter, was awesome (highs in the 60's and 70's). To watch videos by Joel regarding shepherds in the Holy Land, go to: SourceFlix.com and subscribe to his YouTube channel: Expedition Bible.

Stone Manger



Baby Jesus was laid in a stone manger like this one located at Mamre, Israel. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2016]

Skeptics accuse Christianity of syncretism – that is connecting Christ's birth to pagan Roman festivals which happened during the winter solstice (the darkest season of the year). Historically, however, facts reveal that Roman Saturnalia happened from December 17-23 (IF it ever was extended longer to include December 25th, Christmas would pre-date this change). The feast of Sol Invictus (the Roman sun god), which did fall on December 25th, was instituted no earlier than 274 A.D. (So, it is more likely that this feast was created to combat a growing Christian church, not the opposite.) Also, as previously noted, ALL the early Christian documents connect the conception which led to the birth of Jesus with the Jewish feast of Passover. NONE of the early writers even mention the winter solstice or any of the pagan festivals. As a Christian myself, it seems amazingly symbolic that Jesus was born during the darkest season of the year. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness but have the light of life” (John 8:12).

An Old Testament prophecy about the coming Messiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). It seems likely that this season was intentionally chosen by God for the birth of Jesus - the One who would bring the “Light of Life” to our dark and dying world.