

The Truth About  
**Christmas**

By

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## The Truth About Christmas

Have you ever wondered about Christmas? From the time you first found out there really was no Santa Claus, did you ever question other aspects of this incredible holiday – one that so much of the world takes for granted? Did you ever wonder where Christmas came from? Is it in the Bible? From where do all the unusual symbols surrounding the celebration of this day come? Why a Christmas tree? Where did the idea of Santa Claus originate? Why does Santa wear a red suit with fur? Why does he supposedly come down the chimney? Why are stockings left on the fireplace? Why is this day celebrated on the 25th of December? Where did the Christmas wreath come from, or the Yule log? How about the exchanging of gifts? What about mistletoe? What do all these symbols and festivities really mean? What does the Bible say about this holiday? And what is God's perspective on these things? If you were surprised when you first discovered the truth about Santa Claus, you will be even more surprised by the rest of the story

## Childhood Memories

From our earliest childhood, most of us looked forward to Christmas more than any other holiday. We were given time off from school. Stores were decorated and downtown city streets were brightly lit. Additionally, many neighborhood homes would put up lights and other decorations. For weeks, we would anticipate and fantasize about all the presents we would receive. Then the whole family would go out looking for just the right tree. Once found, it was brought home and showered with tinsel, balls, and lights. The family would work together to decorate the tree to everyone's delight. Then, as the great day arrived, we hung our stockings up and went to bed, hardly able to sleep because of our excitement about what the morning would bring. When morning came, we would run to the tree, and there we would kneel down before it and receive our gifts according to whether we had been "bad" or "good."

This was the experience of so many of us as we grew up. None of us ever questioned any of these things deeply. We simply took all of it for granted. When told that we celebrated all this to honor Christ, we did not study the Bible to find if any of it were true. Perhaps as some of us found out the truth about Santa Claus, we were somewhat disillusioned, but most of us did not question these practices any further.

Now, however, it is time! We need to make informed choices about this issue because it affects our worship of God and as such, our very salvation. It is time to follow the Bible's admonition and "prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good" (1Thess. 5:21).

## The Business of Christmas

Recently, Hallmark, one of the nation's top three wrapping paper manufacturers announced that during the Christmas season, it will produce over 24,000 miles of wrapping paper. Additionally, the number of Christmas trees sold in Los Angeles alone will top 1.1 million. Further, Americans will spend over seven billion dollars on children's toys during the Christmas season. Collectively, agencies and photo studios suit up and ship out as many as 20,000 Santa Clauses to malls, parades, and parties. It has been estimated that retail stores can generate \$35,000 in additional income simply by having a photographer and a rented Santa Claus for the season. Further, it is estimated that mall traffic increases by 15% when Santa Claus is in one of the big stores.

The city of Los Angeles alone consumes over ten million kilowatt hours of electricity to support its Christmas lights. This is the average monthly usage for many third world countries. The average American family will receive 26 cards while 3000 letters addressed to Santa Claus will go through the Los Angeles Post Office alone. Additionally, 650 million Christmas packages will be sent to friends and loved ones through the mail during this season. The city of Beverly Hills will spend over one million dollars on their holiday decorations while See's Candy will sell over 12 million pounds of candy. Tragically, however,

35% to 40% of Americans will become so depressed they will use alcohol or drugs to simply cope with the emptiness they feel at this "joyous" time of the year.

In this light, many religious leaders, reacting to the gross commercialism of Christmas have been heard to exclaim: "We ought to put Christ back in Christmas." The truth is Christ was NEVER in Christmas and He never will be!

As shocking as this may sound, Jesus Christ was not born on or near December 25. Further, the original apostles who knew Jesus personally never celebrated this holiday. Additionally, the Bible nowhere encourages the celebration of Christmas, but rather condemns such observances.

## Christmas Is Not Christian!

The word "Christmas" comes from the term "Mass of Christ." Shortened, the term simply became "Christ-mass." The celebration of this holiday actually existed centuries before Jesus was born and did not enter Christianity until centuries after His death. This fact is confirmed by the testimony of both religious and secular authorities. The 1911 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia* illustrates that Christmas did not originate in Palestine but rather in Egypt.

Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church...the first evidence of the feast is from Egypt... Pagan customs centering around the January calends gravitated to Christmas.

Origen (A.D. 186-238), a leading third century theologian and the man regarded by some to be the "father of Biblical criticism," wrote:

...In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners [like Pharaoh and Herod] who make great rejoicings over the day in which they were born into this world. (1911 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, article "Natal Day")

The celebration of Christmas was not embraced during the days of the apostles or the early New Testament church. Consider the words of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1944 edition which states:

Christmas... was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth.

## The Origin of Christmas

Virtually all Biblical authorities and secular historians agree that the celebration of Christ's birth did not enter the church until hundreds of years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It was not until the fifth century that the Roman Catholic Church ordered this day to be celebrated. Furthermore, the church directed this celebration to take place on the same day as the pagan festival dedicated to worshipping the sun god.

The connection between Christmas and a variety of pagan practices is thoroughly documented. Not only the day, but its symbols, are intimately connected to religious practices embraced by the pagan world. William Walsh, a recognized authority on Christmas, writes:

...the Christmas festival...is a gradual evolution from times that long antedated the Christian period... It was over laid upon heathen festivals, and many of its observances are only adaptations of pagan to Christian Ceremonies. (*The Story of Santa Klaus* p. 58)

Walsh went on to explain that the celebration of Christmas was intimately connected to the Greek veneration of their god Dionysus (also called Bacchus). The Greeks paid homage to Bacchus with a celebration bearing his name (Bacchanalia).

It was on or about December 21st that the ancient Greeks celebrated what are known to us as the Bacchanalia or festivities in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine. In these festivities the people gave themselves up to songs, dances and other revels which frequently passed the limits of decency and order. (p. 65)

According to Walsh, the Romans celebrated the Bacchanalia as well as the Saturnalia during the same period as today's celebration of Christmas.

...the Saturnalia, held in honor of Saturn, the god of time, began on December 17th and continued for seven days. These also often ended in riot and disorder. Hence the words Bacchanalia and Saturnalia acquired an evil reputation in later times. (p. 65)

The excesses and decadence practiced during this festival were legendary. Gerard and Patricia Del Re document this.

At its most decadent and barbaric, Saturnalia may have been the excuse among Roman soldiers in the East for the human sacrifice of the king of the revels. (The Christmas Almanac, p.16)

## Why December 25?

Today, most of the world celebrates Christmas on the twenty-fifth of December. However, the actual date of Christ's birth cannot be determined with absolute certainty. There is, however, strong biblical evidence that suggests Jesus was born in the fall. As for the celebration of December 25, this too, traces its roots directly to the pagan world. Werner Keller writes in *The Bible as History*:

December 25 is referred to in documents as Christmas day in A.D. 324 for the first time. Under the Roman emperor Justinian [in the 500's] it was recognized as an official holiday. An old Roman festival played a major part in the choice of this particular day. December 25 in ancient Rome was the 'Dies Natali Invictus,' 'the birthday of the unconquered,' the day of the winter solstice and at the same time, in Rome, the last day of the Saturnalia, which had long since degenerated into a week of unbridled carnival... (p. 331)

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* adds some interesting insights with respect to the December 25th celebration of Christmas. Not only did the day coincide with the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, but other pagan deities are directly connected to this date.

...In the Roman world, the Saturnalia was a time of merrymaking and exchanging of gifts. December 25th was also regarded as the birth date of the Iranian Mystery god, Mithra, the Sun of Righteousness. On the Roman New Year houses were decorated with greenery and lights and gifts were given to children. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites...Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir tree, gifts and greetings all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life have always been associated with the winter festival, both pagan and Christian. (Vol. II, 1973)

Christmas is so inextricably linked to celebrations practiced by the ancient Roman world that if a Roman citizen of that day were somehow raised from the dead to live in our age, he would immediately recognize Christmas today as the same holiday celebrated so many centuries ago.

It is clear from the record of history that Christmas originated during pre-Christian times and was celebrated by the pagan world for centuries after the death of Christ. This day then became embraced by the Roman Catholic church in the fifth century. However, one very important question remains. Where did the pagans get their ideas regarding such a celebration?

## The Tower of Babel

Virtually all pagan practices had their beginnings in the city of Babylon during the time of Nimrod. Nimrod was the grandson of Ham, the son of Noah (Gen. 10:6-8). He was the founder of Babylon (v. 10). Nimrod formed cities instead of going out and replenishing the earth as God had commanded Noah to do. One of Nimrod's accomplishments was building the tower of Babel. Some believe he did this to protect people from the potential threat of another flood from God. The scriptures reveal that Nimrod was "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (Genesis 10:9). The word "before" is better translated "against" and it is clear that he became the first post-flood dictator. The name "Nimrod" is translated from the Hebrew word "marad" and literally means "he rebelled. Ancient traditions regarding this apostate leader show that he rebelled against God, and in so doing, created a worldwide apostasy. According to tradition, Nimrod married his own mother, Semeramis.

Then, upon his death, Semeramis began to teach that her son had been reincarnated in the form of a full-grown evergreen tree which supposedly sprang up from a dead tree stump. On each anniversary of Nimrod's birthday, December 25, Semeramis would visit this evergreen tree, claiming that Nimrod would leave gifts for her there.

Through her politics and the use of her son's name, Semeramis became the queen of Babylon, the home of the Chaldee Mysteries. She was also regarded as the "queen of Heaven" and "the mother of the divine son." After generations of these idolatrous practices and traditions, Nimrod came to be considered the son of Baal, the sun god. He and his mother became the chief entities of worship as a Madonna and child.

This belief and practice spread to Egypt, where the names of the gods were Isis and Osiris. The son Osiris was born December 25. In Asia it was Cybele and Deonius. In Rome they were called Fortuna and Jupiter. Throughout the world we still find the remnants of mother and child worship to this day. It is no surprise that this same system still exists at the end of the age. It is called "Mystery Babylon" (Revelation 17:5). Shockingly, it is disguised as Christianity and is still practiced in the celebration of Christmas.

## From Paganism to Christianity

The prominent historian Will Durant described how paganism actually took upon itself Christianity and converted it to pagan purposes.

Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it... From Egypt came the idea of a divine trinity... [and] the adoration of the Mother and Child... From Phrygia came the worship of the Great Mother... The Mithraic ritual so closely resembled the Eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass that Christian fathers charged the Devil with inventing these similarities to mislead frail minds. [Modern day] Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world. (*The Story of Civilization*, p. 595)

It is clear that a wide range of pagan practices became assimilated into the Roman Catholic church. It began with embracing the birthday of the sun god and establishing the date of this celebration as December 25.

It is interesting to note that the practice of sun worship began in early Egypt. There the priests would make a round wafer to represent the sun. The celebrants would eat the wafer, symbolizing the sun god's life and the nourishment of man's soul. Clearly, the church was embracing paganism in an attempt to

increase its numbers and draw in a non-believing world. In reality, it was the church being absorbed by those who practiced beliefs totally contrary to Christianity. Alexander Hislop, in his book, *The Two Babylons* characterized it this way:

Long before the fourth century, and long before the Christian era itself, a festival was celebrated among the heathen at that precise time of the year, in honor of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven; and it may fairly be presumed that, in order to conciliate the heathen, and to swell the number of the nominal adherents of Christianity, the same festival was adopted by the Roman Church, giving it only the name of Christ. This tendency on the part of Christians to meet paganism half-way was very early developed... (p. 93)

The church eventually adopted and merged several different pagan ceremonies to eventually end up with the modern day practice of Christmas and the New Year celebrations we witness today.

## Christmas Through History

During the latter part of the third century, Deus Sol Invictus became the official deity of the Roman Empire. At that time, a great temple was built in honor of the sun and the sun's birthday was officially set as December 25. This date was chosen because it was the accepted date of the winter solstice. Less than 100 years later, Emperor Constantine came to power in Rome. At the beginning of Constantine's rule, it was a violation of Roman law to practice Christianity. Christians were hated by the state and were subjected to great persecution which included torture and even burning at the stake.

However, Constantine saw something in Christianity he believed could be very valuable in holding the empire together. Despite great persecution, Christians remained dedicated to their faith. This commitment so impressed Constantine that he issued "The Edict of Toleration" in 313 A.D. and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. As a result, state persecution of Christians stopped. However, the news was not all good. Because Christianity became the state religion, the church became very political and the doctrines embraced by the church were watered down and seriously compromised. Jesse Hurlbut describes this period in his book, *The Story of the Christian Church*.

...the establishment of Christianity as the state religion became a curse... Everybody sought membership in the church, and nearly everybody was received. Both good and bad, sincere seekers after God and hypocritical seekers after gain, rushed into the communion. Ambitious, worldly, unscrupulous men sought office in the church for social and political influence...

The services of worship increased in splendor, but were less spiritual and hearty than those of former times. The forms and ceremonies of paganism gradually crept into the worship. Some of the old heathen feasts became church festivals with change of name and of worship.

The emergence of pagan practices in the church is well chronicled in history. Historian John Romer characterizes this subtle incursion this way:

Subtly, so subtly that the bishops themselves had not seen them, the old gods had entered their churches like the air of the Mediterranean. And they live still in Christian ritual, in the iconography and the festivals of Christianity. When Julian arrived in Antioch in 362... the great Christian city was in mourning, bewailing in the Levantine manner the annual death of Adonis, Venus's beautiful lover. At Ephesus, though the sanctuary of Diana, goddess of the city, was taken down... her statues were carefully buried in dry sand. And when the Third Council of the church assembly at Ephesus solemnly voted that henceforth the Virgin Mary should be honoured with the title of Theotokos, the God-bearer, Ephesus, itself for centuries the city of the virgin hunter Diana, became the city of

the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. In Egypt, too, the ancient sign of life, the *ankh*, which the gods had carried in their sculptures for thousands of years, was easily transformed into the Christian cross; the figure of Isis nursing her child Horus, Isis Lactans, became the figure of the Virgin with Jesus at her breast.

At Rome, Romulus and Remus were swapped for the biblical saints Peter and Paul. And still in the fifth century, the Pope had to stop the early morning congregation of St. Peter's from walking up the church steps backwards so as not to offend Sol, the rising sun god. Similarly, 25 December, now Christ's birthday, was also the day of Sol Invictus' festival and Constantine's birthday. This festival was celebrated by cutting green branches and hanging little lights on them, and presents were given out in the god's name. Sol's weekly festival Sol-day – Sunday – became the Christian Sabbath. Just as Apollo of Delphi had made a beautiful transformation to become the Roman Sol Invictus, so later he became a Christ of the sun. All three of them are sometimes pictured in their fiery chariots... with... radiant haloes. (Testament: *The Bible and History*, pp. 230-231)

Legalizing Christianity solved one problem for the church, but it caused another. Millions of pagans were suddenly made "Christians" literally overnight. These pagans had no desire to give up their pagan practices, however. Try as it would, the church could not prevail on the people to give up the paganism that they embraced. The church's answer was to finally "Christianize" numerous pagan practices. Charles Guignebert, in his 1927 book, *The Early History of Christianity*, gave the following explanation:

Now at the beginning of the fifth century, the ignorant and the semi-Christians thronged into the church in numbers... They had forgotten none of their pagan customs... The bishops of that period had to content themselves with redressing, as best they could, and in experimental fashion, the shocking malformations of the Christian faith which they perceived around them... [To properly teach new converts] was out of the question; they had to be content with teaching them no more than the symbol of baptism and then baptizing them *en masse*, postponing until a later date the task of eradicating their superstitions, which they preserved intact... This "later date" never arrived, and the church adapted to herself, as well as she could, them and their customs and beliefs. On their side, [converts] were content to dress their paganism in a Christian cloak. (pp. 208-210)

This adopting of pagan festivals was not without opposition however. While many professing Christians welcomed the liberty to celebrate these pagan practices, others objected. Many at the time understood that such practices were rankly pagan, ungodly practices which should never have been brought into the church. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* states the following.

The pagan Saturnalia and Brumailia were too deeply entrenched in popular custom to be set aside by Christian influence..

The pagan festival with its riot and merrymaking was so popular that Christians were glad of an excuse to continue its celebration with little change in the spirit and in manner. Christian preachers of the West and the Near East protested against the unseemly frivolity with which Christ's birthday was celebrated, while Christians of Mesopotamia accused their Western brethren of idolatry and sun worship for adopting as Christian this pagan festival.

Despite opposition by Christians committed to pursuing the teachings in scripture, pagan influence simply overwhelmed the church, transforming it into something far different from that raised up by Jesus through Peter and the apostles. This fact is confirmed by *The Encyclopedia Americana* which states:

Christmas... according to many authorities, was not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian Church... In the fifth century the Western Church ordered it to be celebrated forever on the day of the old Roman Feast of the birth of Sol.

As you can see, ancient rites practiced by the pagan world were eventually grafted into Christianity. Rome had been pagan centuries before the birth of Christianity and it simply was not going to abandon its false religion. When Emperor Constantine ordered Christianity placed on equal footing with paganism, people preferred their old ways. They enjoyed those things they had always known, and simply adapted the old to appear to conform to the new. They changed from worshiping the "sun" to worshiping the "Son" and this was done retaining all their old practices.

Most people today know little or nothing of the pagan origin of Christmas. They are unaware that faithful Christians first opposed these heretical practices. Additionally, most Christians today don't understand that believers dedicated to keeping the truth of God were forced to go underground, some suffering martyrdom rather than allowing themselves to participate in such things.

## Christmas: Its Symbols and Customs

The symbols and customs of Christmas convey powerful images of this holiday. Consider the Christmas tree, mistletoe, the holly wreath, and Santa Claus, just to name a few. These symbols stand as a constant reminder of the season of which they are so much a part. Religions have used symbols and traditions as a means by which to perpetuate their beliefs. Symbols are designed to add meaning to seasons and events.

The symbols of Christmas have great appeal to this holiday's celebrants. However, after careful examination of these symbols and traditions, a much darker picture emerges. The truth is that Christianity has embraced as holy that which has its roots in religions totally contrary to the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the apostles. Consider the following symbols and beliefs.

### The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree is arguably the most prominent symbol of this season. Millions of people bring an evergreen tree into their homes and decorate it with beautiful glass balls, tinsel, and lights. These same millions would never think of the Christmas tree as an idol which God abhors. The tradition of bringing a tree into the home and decorating it came from a fable regarding Saint Boniface. According to tradition, Saint Boniface cut down the "great oak of Jupiter," a tree worshiped by pagan Teutons in Germany.

The story is that Saint Boniface came upon a band of heathens who were worshiping a huge oak tree. This band was about to offer a human sacrifice. Boniface intervened, stopping the sacrifice. He then ordered the tree cut down. Legend has it that a small fir tree sprang up in its place. Boniface proclaimed that this tree was the tree of life and represented Christ. Careful examination of this story reveals striking similarities to the story of Nimrod and Semeramis. As was mentioned earlier, after the death of Nimrod, his mother Semeramis declared that Nimrod was reincarnated in the form of an evergreen tree which sprung up overnight.

History reveals that the worship of trees and nature was a common practice among pagans and continues to this very day. Many people in the New Age movement believe that trees actually have feelings. Some even believe that trees have the ability to reason. This belief is not new at all. Socrates and Plato are both credited with embracing the same beliefs.

The presence of tree worship is woven throughout history. Even the ancient people of Palestine engaged in this practice. They would often tie the tops of trees together in groves and make a shrine to nature. On certain occasions, they would cut an image such as a phallic symbol in the tree and worship before it.

It is important to understand that such practices are abhorrent to God. The tenth chapter of the book of Jeremiah illustrates this point. Here, God commands his people to "learn **not** the way of the heathen." He then goes into great detail describing a tradition in which the heathen cut a tree out of the forest and decorate it. God goes on to characterize this tree as a **graven image**. Although many argue that

Jeremiah is not referring to the Christmas tree, that argument misses the point. What God revealed through Jeremiah is that His children are to avoid practices that resemble those embraced by the pagan world. He did not say that it was appropriate to modify their practices and call them Christian. The Christmas tree is clearly a symbol of a faith that was vastly different from anything advocated by the scriptures and its origin in paganism is thoroughly supported by the testimony of history. Consider the words of Alexander Hislop.

The Christmas tree, now so common among us, was equally common in Pagan Rome and Pagan Egypt. In Egypt that tree was the palm tree; in Rome it was the fir; the palm tree denoting the Pagan Messiah, as Baal-Tamar, the fir referring to him as Baal-Berith.

The mother of Adonis, the Sun-God and great mediatorial divinity, was mystically said to have been changed into a tree, the son must have been recognized as the 'Man the Branch.' (*The Two Babylons*, p. 97)

Other credible works on the tradition of Christmas dramatically declare that the Christmas tree is intimately connected to faiths practiced by the pagan world. The book *Christmas Folklore* reveals the following:

Most people have heard that the Christmas tree originates in the tannenbaum and is some sort of vestige of Teutonic vegetation worship. This is partially true. However, the custom of using pine and other evergreens ceremonially was well established at the Roman Saturnalia, even earlier in Egypt. (p. 209)

The book *Festivals, Holy Days, and Saints' Days* confirms that the origin of the Christmas tree can be traced to people who knew absolutely nothing about the Bible.

The Christmas tree... recapitulates the idea of tree worship...gilded nuts and balls symbolizing the sun...all the festivities of the winter solstice have been absorbed into Christmas day...the use of holly and mistletoe to the Druidic ceremonies; the Christmas tree [today reflects] the honors paid to Odin's sacred fir... (p. 236)

It is clear that the Christmas tree is a powerful symbol and conjures many images concerning the celebration it pictures. However, there is one thing the Christmas tree is NOT – it is not Christian. Everything about the Christmas tree can be traced to beliefs that are strongly condemned in scripture. There is no connection between the Christmas tree and the birth of Christ. It is a pagan symbol that God condemns.

In 1974, *United Press International*, one of the world's leading press agencies, carried an article regarding the origin of the Christmas tree. This article spoke volumes about this symbol that has come to be strongly embraced by the Christian world.

Toward the middle of winter, as the sun began setting further in the south, and the nights grew longer, ancient pagan priests put candles which they called fairy lights on trees in an attempt to lure the sun back toward the north. (December 17)

Today, millions of Christian homes around the world are adorned with evergreen trees every Christmas. Tragically, people fail to understand what these trees picture because they simply don't ask. Ancient Israel was once indicted for engaging in practices that included the veneration of trees.

And the children of Israel did secretly [those] things that [were] not right against the LORD their God, and they built them high places in all their cities, from the tower of the watchmen to the fenced city. And they set them up images and groves in every high hill, and under every green tree: And there they burnt incense in all the high places, as [did] the heathen whom the LORD carried away before them; and wrought wicked things to

provoke the LORD to anger: For they served idols, whereof the LORD had said unto them, Ye shall not do this thing. (2Kings 17:9-12)

## Santa Claus

One of the most prominent images associated with Christmas is that of Santa Claus. Every year, children around the world long for his arrival, for he is the giver of gifts. Today, Santa Claus is depicted as a lover of children and a true giver. During the Christmas season, people are even encouraged to join his great army of elves so that children around the world can be touched by his goodness. So popular is Santa Claus that adults tell children stories of his exploits. These stories are conveyed with such conviction that children believe them without question. But who is Santa Claus? And where did his story begin?

Many articles and books have been written to explain that Santa Claus was a bishop by the name of Nicholas who lived in Asia Minor during the fourth century. It is true that such a bishop did exist but much of what is attributed to him is untrue. The second Vatican council formally acknowledged that many concepts associated with him actually came from pagan sources. William Walsh wrote:

Santa Claus comes from Saint Nicholas, the saint whose festival was celebrated in December and the one who in other respects was most nearly in accord with the dim traditions of Saturn as the hero of the Saturnalia. (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p.70)

Tony Van Renterghem writes the following in his book, *When Santa Was a Shaman: The Ancient Origins of Santa Claus & the Christmas Tree*

In the newly Christianized areas where the pagan Celtic and Germanic cults remained strong, legends of the god Wodan were blended with those of various Christian saints; Saint Nicholas was one of these. There were Christian areas where Saint Nicholas ruled alone; in other locations, he was assisted by the pagan Dark Helper. In other remote areas... ancient pockets of the Olde Religion controlled traditions.

Here the Dark Helper ruled alone. Sometimes in a most confusing manner, using the cover name of Saint Nicholas or 'Klaus,' without in any way changing his threatening, Herne/Pan, fur-clad appearance.

By absorbing such pagan feasts and traditions, the Christian Church turned Herne into Saint Nicholas' captive, chained Dark Helper; none other than Satan the Dark One, symbolic of all evil...

In Holland and several other European countries, the Saint Nicholas figure is still highly esteemed. He appears as a tall, dignified, bearded, white-haired old man, dressed as a Catholic bishop, complete with a bizarre, quite un-saintly habit of riding through the skies on a white horse, followed by his Dark Helper. It seems that our Catholic saint inherited some of these customs from the pagan god Wodan, who has also been a bearded, white haired old man, also dressed in a hat and cloak, carried a staff, rode a white horse, and dragged along the same dark slave/helper on a chain. (pp. 96-97)

Renterghem continues to explain that in Holland, "Sinterklaas" was believed to reward good children with gifts, while "Zwarte Pier" carried a sinister rod and punished bad children. Renterghem stated that in Germany, Saint Nicholas' Dark Helper was a frightening, horned little man brandishing a besom (broom).

The *Worldbook Encyclopedia* provides some interesting insights into some of the traditions regarding Santa Claus.

Some of Santa Claus's characteristics date back many centuries. For example, the belief that Santa enters the house through the chimney developed from an old Norse legend.

The Norse believed that the goddess Hertha appeared in the fireplace and brought good luck to the home.

Other traditions from the Druidic time suggest that Santa's red suit is a leftover from the times when ancient peoples worshiped the god of fire. Tradition has it that this fire god came down the chimney. Consider too, that in ancient times, Druid homeowners would leave a treat consisting of milk and pastries to appease this god who came down the chimney into their fireplace. This is how the tradition of leaving milk and cookies out for Santa began. The idea of placing stockings on the fireplace mantel also comes from this legendary pagan practice.

It is clear that the modern Santa traces his origins back to ancient pagan traditions. Over the centuries, names and customs may evolve. It is interesting that by rearranging the letters in the name "Santa," the name becomes "Satan." In light of the history of this character, it is hard to imagine that the author of this modern day figure we call Santa could be anyone other than Satan.

## Christmas Presents

Most people believe the tradition of giving Christmas presents comes from the Bible. The assumption is that the wise men gave gifts to Jesus, therefore it is appropriate for us to give gifts to each other. However, careful examination of this tradition will reveal that gift giving has nothing to do with Magi or the gifts they presented to Christ. Both religious and secular history reveal a clear connection between giving gifts during the Christmas season and pagan practices. Consider the following insights concerning this practice.

The interchange of presents between friends is a like characteristic of Christmas and the Saturnalia, and must have been adopted by Christians from the Pagans, as the admonition of Tertullian plainly shows. (*The Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 12, p. 153)

Tertullian wrote in his work, *On Idolatry* that during the pagan feast of the Saturnalia which was celebrated in December, gifts were "carried to and fro." According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, exchanging gifts at this time of the year may have been influenced by similar customs practiced by the pagans on January 1.

"Gifts are exchanged by the French on January 1, by the Spanish and Italians on January 6, and by other nationalities on December 25. In most parts of Europe it was the Christ Child who brought the gifts. After the Reformation, the day itself was personified, and the figure of Father Christmas was later combined with St. Nicholas, [who later became] Santa Claus." (p. 659)

William Walsh provides additional insights into the tradition of exchanging presents.

Christmas gifts themselves remind us of the presents that were exchanged in Rome during the Saturnalia. In Rome, it might be added, the presents usually took the form of wax tapers and dolls – the latter being in their turn a survival of the human sacrifices once offered to Saturn. It is a queer thought that in our Christmas presents we are preserving under another form one of the most savage customs of our barbarian ancestors. (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p.67)

## Gifts to a King

It is important to understand that the wise men did not give gifts to each other. Additionally, the gifts they brought to Christ were not birthday presents. Jesus did not receive toys from these visitors, but rather unusual offerings that many believe carry great significance. It has been suggested that gold is a gift given to a king, frankincense a gift given to a priest, and myrrh a gift given to a condemned man. The latter because myrrh was used in preparing a body for burial. It is clear that the wise men presented gifts

to Jesus because they understood Him to be a great King. The protocol at that time was to never approach the presence of kings or dignitaries without bearing a gift. Adam Clark's commentary expresses it this way:

"The people of the east never approach the presence of kings and great personages without a present in their hands." (Vol. 5, p. 46)

The truth is that gift giving at this time of year is not scriptural and has no basis in the story of the wise men. The giving of gifts at this time of year came from the practice of the ancient Saturnalia.

## Commercialism, Not Christianity

In the United States, retailers have glamorized Christmas as no other holiday. They lavishly decorate their stores, pipe in special music, and hire "Santa Clauses" all for one purpose: to lure shoppers into a spirit of consuming. So important is Christmas to the economy of the United States that the absence of such a holiday could literally paralyze the country. It has been suggested that 50% of annual profits enjoyed by retailers is generated by Christmas-related sales. Recently, an executive of one of America's largest retail chains suggested that 75% of their profits were generated between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Regardless of how Christmas has been packaged, it is a day dedicated to materialism wrapped in colorful paper, dressed up in a red suit, and swathed in soft fuzzy angel hair. People tell themselves they are worshiping Christ but this holiday is really about materialism and has nothing to do with Jesus Christ!

### The Yule Log, Holly, Wreaths, and Mistletoe

Today, most people think the word "Yule" refers to the time of Christmas. However, this word is actually a derivative of the Nordic word *geol*. The Nordic people pronounced their "g" with our "y" sound. The word *geol* has two meanings. It can mean "noise and revelry" or it can mean "wheel." According to the Encyclopedia Britannica 11th Edition, the translation "wheel" reflected the shape of the sun and pictured the turn of the year. In essence, "Yule tide" defines a period of one month before and one month after the winter solstice which was a time of great revelry at year's end. Alexander Hislop explains the assimilation of the Yule log into the Christmas tradition.

As Christianity spread to northern Europe, it met with the observance of another pagan festival held in December in honor of the sun. This time it was the Yule-feast of the Norsemen, which lasted for twelve days. During this time log-fires were burnt to assist the revival of the sun. Shrines and other sacred places were decorated with such greenery as holly, ivy, and bay, and it was an occasion for feasting and drinking.

Equally old was the practice of the Druids, the cast of priests among the Celts of ancient France, Britain and Ireland to decorate their temples with mistletoe, the fruit of the oak-tree which they considered sacred. Among the German tribes the oak-tree was sacred to Odin, their god of war. (*The Christian Calendar*, p. 22)

Gerard and Patricia Del Re explain that in the pagan world, fertility played a major part in worship and that winter vegetation was used to reflect this belief.

In midwinter, the idea of rebirth and fertility was tremendously important. In the snows of winter, the evergreen was a symbol of the life that would return...

Evergreens were used for decoration... Light was important in dispelling the growing darkness of the solstice, so a Yule log was lighted with the remains of the previous year's log. (*The Christmas Almanac*, p. 18)

The book *Christmas Folklore* explains that the symbols of holly and mistletoe were borrowed from the Romans who used them to depict reproduction.

Many of the plants used at Christmas are symbols of fertility. Certainly any evergreen with its ability to return verdure in the barren months is appropriate, but by far the most interesting are the holly, the ivy, and the mistletoe.

Holly, with its pricking leaves, white flowers, and red berries symbolizes the male reproductive urge... holly is the male and the ivy is the female. This use of the plants was... borrowed by the Christians along with other customs of the Roman Saturnalia." (pp. 22-23)

The pagan custom of kissing under the mistletoe was part of the first steps in the revelry of the ancient Saturnalia. It came from the Druid superstition in the winter solstice that only good could pass by the parasitic plant.

As benign as these symbols may appear, make no mistake about it: they are deeply rooted in practices God condemns throughout the scriptures. God does not need the Yule log, holly, mistletoe, or any other form of vegetation used in the worship of false gods. The Bible records that while speaking to a woman from Samaria, Jesus said that God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24). The belief that these symbols are legitimately connected to Christ's birth is totally false. They are pagan to the core and should be forsaken.

## The Birth of the Messiah

The belief that Jesus was born on or near December 25 has no basis in fact. Actually, this date has a very sullied past. It was the birthday of the sun god Mithra and of Nimrod and is connected with many vile practices associated with paganism. Virtually all credible records indicate that the early Church did not even celebrate birthdays. The *World Book Encyclopedia* reveals the following:

The exact date of Christ's birth is not known. The early Christians did not celebrate His birth, because they considered the celebration of anyone's birth to be a pagan custom. The first mention of the observance of Christ's birthday appears about A.D. 200. For many years, several dates were used. December 25 was first mentioned in 336. (article "Christmas")

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, it is impossible to identify the date of Christ's birth. However, despite this, Catholic scholars have set that date as December 25.

## Jesus Was Not Born in Winter

The scriptures reveal that at the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were "abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Lk. 2:8). This could never occur in Judea during the dead of winter. At that time, shepherds brought their flocks in from the mountains and fields corralling them around October 15. This was done to protect the sheep from the cold wet weather during this time of year. Adam Clarke relates in his commentary that it was the custom of shepherds to send their sheep out in the spring, around the time of the Passover, and to bring them back at the beginning of the first rains (Vol. 5, p. 370). Werner Keller, in his book *The Bible As History*, provides some clear insight regarding this issue.

At Christmas-time Bethlehem is in the grip of frost, and in the Promised Land no cattle would have been in the fields in that temperature. This fact is born out by a remark in the Talmud to the effect that in that neighborhood the flocks were put out to grass in March and brought in again at the beginning of November. (pp. 331-332)

Notice that even the Talmud indicates that Jesus could not have been born anywhere near December 25.

## When Was Jesus Born?

The Bible not only rejects a winter birth of the Messiah, but actually presents a strong case that Jesus was born in the autumn. This is because the scriptures provide benchmarks that can assist in determining when Jesus was conceived. The gospel of Luke (Lk. 1:5-17) records an event in which the angel Gabriel visited a priest named Zacharias and informed him that his wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son (John the Baptist). Gabriel made this announcement while Zacharias was serving in the temple. Luke indicates that Zacharias performed this service during "the course of Abia" (or Abijah). According to First Chronicles, Abijah served during "the eighth course" (1Chron. 24:10). The great Jewish historian Josephus wrote that each course was one week long with priests rotating so that each would serve twice during the year. In this case, Zacharias would have served from Iyar 27 through Sivan 5. This period would coincide with late May or early June.

Luke's gospel goes on to state that Zacharias returned home immediately after his days of service were complete (Lk. 1:23). Shortly after his return, his wife Elizabeth conceived. This would mean her conception would have taken place during June or perhaps July at the latest. The birth of John the Baptist would therefore have taken place in the spring (March - April), probably during the time of the Days of Unleavened Bread.

But what does this have to do with the birth of Jesus? Luke's gospel indicates that Gabriel also spoke to Mary and informed her that she would give birth to the Messiah (Lk. 1:26-36). When Mary asked how she would know this was true, Gabriel explained that her cousin Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy.

And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. (Luke 1:36)

Mary then left her home to seek Elizabeth. When she arrived, Elizabeth confirmed that Christ had already been conceived in Mary (Lk 1:39-42). The time of this visit was during the winter, probably December or January. This being the case, Jesus would have been born nine months later – in other words, in the fall.

It is interesting to note that Jewish tradition believes the world was created on the first day of the civil year, the Feast of Trumpets, which occurs in mid-September or early October. Although the Bible does not specifically identify the exact date of Jesus' birth, some authorities have suggested that He, too, was born on this day. Clearly, however, Jesus was not born on or near December 25 and any representation to the contrary is completely false.

## The Wise Men

One of the most popular scenes depicted during the Christmas season is that of three wise men offering gifts to Jesus while He is in a manger. Some have suggested that these men were magicians or perhaps astrologers. However, this is simply not true. *Halley's Bible Handbook* provides a credible explanation regarding the identity of these visitors.

These wise men came from Babylon, or the country beyond the land where the human race had its origin, the land of Abraham, land of the Jewish Captivity, where many Jews still lived. They belonged to the learned class, advisers of kings. Perhaps they were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, and knew of the expectation of a coming Messianic King. It was the land of Daniel, and no doubt they knew of Daniel's 70 weeks' prophecy; and also Balaam's prophecy about "A Star out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17). They were

men of high standing, for they had access to Herod. They are commonly spoken of as the "three Wise-men." But, the Scripture does not say how many. (pp. 418-419)

The traditional view is that there were three *magi*, or wise men. This view is held because of the number of gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) mentioned in the scriptures. However, the gospels make no mention of a specific number of visitors. It has even been suggested that there may have been twelve, one representing each of the tribes of Israel. According to Halley, there may also have been a significant number accompanying the magi.

There were probably more, or at least they were with an entourage of scores or hundreds, for it would not be safe for a small group to travel a thousand miles over desert wastes that were infested with bandits (especially carrying gold). Their arrival in Jerusalem was of sufficient show of importance to stir the whole city. (p. 419)

Halley also explains that these wise men had four functions. The first was to pay homage to Christ as representatives from distant lands. It has been suggested that these men may have been the first Gentiles to worship the Messiah. The second function was to call attention to Jerusalem of the Messiah's arrival. The third was to provide financial resources (the gifts) that would be used to pay for Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt with Jesus. And fourth, these wise men may have laid the groundwork in their country for the future preaching of the gospel. (*Halley's Bible Handbook*, p.419)

It is also important to understand that contrary to most nativity scenes which show the wise men visiting Jesus in a manger, they actually visited Him in a home. Matthew's gospel proves this conclusively.

And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshiped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. (Mt. 2:11)

Additionally, this visit may not have taken place until Jesus was several months old. According to the scriptures, the *magi* first visited Herod and explained the reason for their visit (Mt. 2:2). When Herod heard that the *magi* had come to visit the King of the Jews, he instructed them to return and inform him where this king might be found (Mt. 2:8). This was done because Herod feared such a king and wanted to have Him destroyed.

When the *magi* failed to return to inform Herod of the Messiah's location, this evil ruler became enraged. He then ordered the murder of all male children two years old and younger in Judea and its surrounding areas (Mt. 2:16). Herod probably concluded, based on the discussions with the *magi* that several months had passed since Jesus' birth. Therefore, he conservatively estimated that Jesus would be younger than two years old. Thus the order was given.

## The First Noel

One of the most popular Christmas carols is the song "The First Noel." This song begins with the words "The first noel the angels did say..." Many Christians assume that noel refers to Christmas. However, this is not true. The word noel is of Celtic origin and comes from *no*vo and *hel*. The word simply means "new sun," and again finds its roots in sun worship and ancient pagan religious practices based on the winter solstice. Once again, something that seems so beautiful on the outside has its roots in religious practices that go totally contrary to true Christianity.

## Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men

Millions of Christians around the world believe that Christ came to bring peace on earth and good will toward men. This belief is based on the words found in Luke 2:14. There, an angel informs shepherds that the Messiah was born. At that moment, the shepherds heard an angelic chorus praising God with the words "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men."

These words appear to be conveying that Christ was bringing peace to the world. However, this is not true; Jesus' own words contradict the idea that His intent was to bring peace to mankind. Jesus clearly stated that His life produced conflict. This is because the truth that He taught compelled people to take sides – either the were for Him or against Him. Notice what He said.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Mt. 10:34-37)

It is ironic that even as a result of His birth, an act of great violence occurred. In response to Jesus' birth, King Herod committed one of the most violent and bloody acts recorded in scripture. He conspired and carried out a plan to murder innocent children.

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men. (Mt. 2:16)

With this understanding, how should Luke 2:14 be translated? When this verse is carefully examined, it is clear that the angels' anthem was two-fold. First, it exalted God who reigns over everything. Second, the angels speak of peace, but a peace that comes only to men who seek God and on whom His favor rests. Jesus spoke of this peace to His apostles just hours before His death. On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus said:

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (Jn. 14:27)

With these words, Jesus was stating that there would be a special peace to those who followed Him. That peace is the peace of mind that comes from knowing God is actively involved in the lives of His children and that He will never forsake them. With this understanding, Luke 2:14 is better rendered "Peace on earth to men of good will." This is similar to the Knox Translation which states "And peace on earth to men that are God's friends."

However, there are those who do not love God or His way. To those there can be no true peace, but only conflict. Jesus' birth brought with it the potential for great peace as well as great war. It is interesting that when Christ returns to this earth to set up His millennial Kingdom, the world will be engaged in a great war. However, once the earth is conquered by the Messiah, there will be great world peace.

## Should Christians Celebrate Christmas?

It is undeniable that Christmas is the most anticipated time of the year for millions of Christians. It is a time of beautiful music, delicious food, bright colors, and family reunions. However, there is one thing Christmas is not; it is not now, nor has it ever been, Christian.

The Puritans understood this vital point. William Prynne wrote the following during the time of King Charles:

Our Christmas lords of Misrule... were derived from the Roman Saturnalia and Bacchanalian festivals; which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them. (*Book of Christian Folklore*, p. 8)

As innocent and appealing as this day may appear, it has at its very roots a dark and godless origin. Tom Flynn, in his book, *The Problem with Christmas*, provides a very interesting observation about the message Christmas sends.

If His purpose in coming was anything like what is supposed, then in celebrating His birthday each year Christians do violence, not honor, to his memory. For in celebrating a birthday at all, we sustain exactly the kind of tradition His coming is thought to have been designed to cast down. (p.42)

It is absolutely essential to understand that God hates a lie, no matter what form it takes. Satan himself was characterized as the father of lies (Jn. 8:44) and the deceiver of the whole world (Rev. 12:9). The scriptures also reveal that Satan appears as an angel of light. Is it any wonder that festivals honoring him would possess great beauty and appeal?

Some would argue that although the symbols are pagan, they have been stripped from the hands of paganism and offered to God. A leading evangelical minister once characterized these pagan symbols as "confiscated for Christ." This is not the first time such a claim has been made. Fifteen centuries before the birth of Christ, the children of Israel were led out of Egypt with a high hand. No sooner were they free from bondage than they wanted to return to the pagan practices they had just left. While Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the children of Israel appealed to Aaron to fashion a golden calf just like the idols of Egypt.

...the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, "Up, make us gods, which shall go before us..." (Ex. 32:1)

Aaron consented to their request and instructed the children of Israel to gather their jewelry so that he could fashion it into an idol (Ex. 32:2-3). Aaron then made a molten calf and declared, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. (Ex. 32:4)

Aaron then made a proclamation that seems unimaginable in light of the great miracles Israel witnessed in their deliverance. After making this idol, Aaron proclaimed "**a feast to the Eternal.**" God was so angry at this behavior that He actually suggested to Moses that the children of Israel be wiped out. Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. (Ex. 32:10)

It is clear God was furious with the Israelites for trying to "confiscate" the pagan religious practices of Egypt for use in worshiping Him. As the scriptures repeatedly demonstrate, God despises the perverse religions of man.

### **A Final Thought**

Is Christmas Christian? The simple answer is "no;" it is an emphatic "no!" Christmas is not Christian; it is pagan to the core. Its images and symbols were embraced from pagan practices and should be abandoned by all true believers. While speaking to the children of Israel, God gave a strong admonition concerning the assimilation of false religions into the worshiping of Him.

Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise."

Thou shall not do so unto the Eternal thy God: for every abomination to the Eternal, which He hates, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it. (Deut. 12:30-32)

The Bible reveals that Jesus Christ will return to this earth and establish His millennial Kingdom. When He comes, will He find His children have returned to Egypt? And what about you? Will you accept the teachings of a world that embraces pagan practices and dresses them up as Christianity, or will you worship Him in spirit and in **TRUTH**?