

Why I Don't Celebrate Christmas

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 1994

Everything is right at Christmas. I quickened my pace and studder-stepped around the last corner for home. Stooping, I looked through the trees toward the house with hopes of seeing Grandpa's 1950 Buick. Being a Junior Higher, I fettered the little-boy impulse to run and maintained my "grown-up" stride. It seemed a long time since I had been with Grandma and Grandpa and I could already taste Grandma's German pastries and breads. Excitement shivered deep inside me at the thought of being with them again. Reaching the level ground of the city park I could see my house at the far end of the open field. And parked in front was Grandpa's car—they had finally arrived.

Breaking into an easy trot, I crossed the open, grassy play field. Our house was across the street from a beautiful city park known for its array of trees from all over the world—Japanese Apple, Dogwood, Oak, and Maple of every variety, as well as evergreens. The colors were magnificent at fall, and even with the light dusting of snow falling that day, the few triumphant leaves which were clinging to the otherwise naked limbs burst forth in their earthy colors. I crossed the street and bounded up the stairs to the front door of our house, my finger aimed at the doorbell. As soon as the door was opened, I called out for Grandpa and Grandma who emerged from the kitchen with smiles, hugs and kisses. It was Christmas time again, and everything was right.

Mom had decorated the house with all of her usual touches—the tree was decked with the once-a-year ornaments, each having its own story to tell. The blinking lights enhanced the tinsel which we had hung, a piece at a time, blanketing the branches with the illusion of snow. Already the number of presents under the tree had grown to an embarrassing heap, and Mom did what she could to keep the pile from usurping too much of the floor. The nativity scene was on the hutch as usual, and the little angel candles which made the chimes revolve were working their special magic. The house was fragrant with pine boughs, the mistletoe hung in the kitchen doorway, red bows adorned candles of every size, and the lights on the tree gave a special glow to the fast approaching darkness. Outside the falling snow become wonderfully distinct against the emerging street lights.

We talked and laughed and reminisced and did what families do at Christmas—gave way to the wonderful spirit of the season. Even the little things that often disrupted family times were ignored. The wonderful mood which Christmas brings easily dulled Grandpa's sharp tongue and quick temper. It was, indeed, a time for peace and good cheer.

Being good Baptists, and not believing in Santa Claus (though we jokingly gave each other gifts marked "from Santa"), we opened presents on Christmas Eve so that no one would think we were waiting for the old fellow. Mom and Grandma had prepared a special dinner which we ate in the dining room. When the dishes were finally done, and the kitchen put in order, we all gathered in the living room around the Christmas tree. Dad read the story of Christ's birth, and prayed. Finally, the time had come to distribute the gifts from under the tree, something to which my brother and I gladly applied ourselves. Then, one by one, beginning with the youngest, each opened a gift while the others looked on. Camera's flashed, ooh's and ah's crescendoed, and hugs and kisses were exchanged with thank you's. It was everything Christmas should be.

When the last present was opened, it was time to eat again. Grandma's famous finger foods decked the table with cookies and treats of every kind. And then, just when the gifts were finally assembled, it was time to pile into the cars and take our annual Christmas Eve trip around the city to see the lights. Granted, it seemed unfair to leave all the new things unexplored, but Dad reminded us that they would be there when we returned, and with that we were out the door.

Snuggling down in my covers that night, I dreamed of the morning and the time I could spend with my new things—trying on the clothes, reading new books, and investigating some of the experiments

in my new chemistry set. I also knew I would awaken to the wonderful smell of turkey roasting in the oven— “Yes, everything is right at Christmas.”

These were the kinds of traditions with which I grew up, traditions that made Christmas my favorite time of the year. From the day after Thanksgiving until New Year’s Day, my life was filled with the anticipation and celebration of Christmas. I would walk the downtown streets of our not-so-big town and take in the wonder of humanity striving for the peace and happiness which seemed so illusive during most of the year. Even in the hustle of crammed schedules and financial squeezing, people seemed very intent on making Christmas a happy time for all.

So what’s changed? Why would I now, in my adulthood, write to inform you about the reasons I no longer celebrate Christmas? What has taken place in my thinking which would keep me from passing on the Christmas traditions to my sons with the hope that they would have many similar fond memories? Why would I, someone so deeply in love with the traditions of Christmas, and so desirous to honor God for the unspeakable gift of His Son, stop celebrating the very holiday which marks His birth?

I hope that in the following pages I can honestly and clearly express to you the answer. I want to communicate as clearly as possible the burden I bear regarding Christmas, and to explain why I can no longer celebrate it. But I want to do so without judging you, the reader or anyone else, for that matter. I rather pray that each one will be fully convinced in his or her own heart as we together attempt to worship the Lord in spirit and truth. My goal is to speak the truth in love.

Christmas—Some History

No one can be certain about the exact origins of Christmas. It is certain, however, that the earliest believers were not at all concerned about celebrating the birthday of the Messiah, Yeshua. We know this from the simple fact that the early believers had no interest in the precise date of Christ’s birth. Luke simply records that He was born “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius,”¹ not even mentioning a month, not to speak of the day of the month. Mark begins his gospel of Christ’s life and work with His baptism—His birth is a “given” and no more. In fact, the celebration of birthdays is unknown in traditional Jewish ritual. Interestingly, in the entire Scriptures only Pharaoh and Herod are noted to have held a birthday celebration.²

Early church fathers were likewise not certain about the exact date of Christ’s birth.³ Clement of Alexandria (born 150 CE⁴) lists five dates in three different months to which various persons had assigned the birth of Jesus, one of which corresponded to December 25th.⁵ Clement himself chose “the 25th day of *Pachon*” (= May 20).⁶ Clearly, no date for Christ’s birth had been set by the end of the second century, proving that an official and recognized celebration was also unknown at this time.

On the other hand, the date of the Magi’s visit (known as Epiphany in the Church calendar) was considered important enough for a precise date, and January 6 was accepted. The feast of Epiphany was celebrated by the Basilidian Gnostics on this date toward the end of the second century.⁷ Though the earliest record of December 25 as a church festival is in the Philocalian Calendar (copied 354 but representing Roman practise in 336⁸), the eastern church seems to have originally celebrated Epiphany as both the

1 Lk. 3:1.

2 Gen. 40:20; Matt. 14:6; Mk. 6:21.

3 It would appear that only after the complete Hellenization of the church did the date of Christ’s birth become an issue.

4 BCE (before the common era); CE (common era) correspond to BC and AD respectively.

5 T. G. Crippen, *Christmas and Christmas Lore* (Gale Research Co., 1971), p. 5. It is clear that the interest in the date of Christ’s birth had nothing to do with the celebration of it, but rather with general chronological studies, and especially the dating of the crucifixion and resurrection.

6 *Strom.* i.21.

7 *Ibid.* Cp. the remarks of A. H. Newman, “Christmas” in *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., 15 vols. (Baker Book House, 1950), 3:47.

8 See the comments of J.B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, 5 vols. (Baker Book House, 1981 reprint, orig. 1889-90) 1:246; 2:391-3.

physical and spiritual birth of Christ.⁹ In fact, Epiphany was considered the most important holiday of the church as late as the fourth century. The sixth Edessene canon prescribes

the Epiphany of our Saviour, which is the chief of the festivals of the Church, on the sixth day of the latter *Kanun* (i.e., 6th January).¹⁰

In time, however, the western church adopted December 25th as the date of Christ's birth, and the eastern church appears to have accepted this as well, while still retaining the celebration of Epiphany on January 6th, even to this day.¹¹ In the Holy Land the celebration of Christ's birth was held on January 6th until the 7th century, when December 25th was permanently accepted.¹² The Armenians alone never accepted December 25th.¹³

What we learn from the writings of the early church fathers regarding the celebration of Christmas is that the holiday preceded the church-wide agreement as to the date of Christ's birth. Once the celebration of Christmas was initiated, the church sought a method of computation which would position the birth of Christ on December 25th.

The manner in which the Western church arrived at December 25th is not absolutely clear, but perhaps the best explanation is given by Chrysostom based upon Hippolytus of Portus,¹⁴ among others. Assuming that Zacharias was high priest and that the Day of Atonement fell on September 24, John would have been born on June 24th and Christ six months later, on December 25th. This theory is completely untenable, not the least of reasons being that Zacharias could not have been the high priest according to any extant records.¹⁵

Another suggestion, popularized by L. Duchesne,¹⁶ was that the church determined the date of Christ's birth mystically. Since fractional numbers have no place in symbolical systems, the ancients postulated a full number of years for the life of Christ. This being the case, it was believed that the date of His conception and of His crucifixion was the same. Since the standard date held for the crucifixion was March 25, His birth was calculated to be nine months later, on December 25th.

Regardless of the method for finally arriving at December 25th as the birth date of Christ, it is clear that the celebration of this event was not earlier than the fourth century. Chrysostom (in 386) states that the celebration of the birth of Christ "according to the flesh" was not inaugurated at Antioch until ten years before that date.¹⁷ The earliest testimony to an Eastern Feast of Christmas is a sermon of Basil dated 379.¹⁸ On December 25, 379 or 380, Gregory of Nazianzus preached a Christmas sermon in Constantinople. He later referred to himself as the founder of the feast.¹⁹

The evidence clearly shows that the earliest church did not celebrate Christmas. Indeed, the manner in which Passover and Pentecost were to be celebrated is prescribed as late as the 4th century in the *Testament of our Lord* (c. 350)^{20*} but nothing is mentioned about celebrating the birth date of Christ. For over 350 years from the time Christ was born, the church simply did not celebrate His birth.

9 See the remarks of A. J. Maclean, "The Christian Calendar" in James Hastings, ed. *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, 2 vols. (T & T Clark, 1906), 1:261-62.

10 Quoted from Maclean, *Ibid.*

11 I have noted with interest that families we have recently sponsored from Russia, who are Pentecostal, celebrate Christmas on January 6th. The influence of the Russian Orthodox Church is obvious.

12 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 3:656.

13 *Ibid.*

14 See J.B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, Op. cit., 2:391-2.

15 On Chrysostom's calculations, see the remarks of "Christmas and its Cycles" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 3:656. The gospels consider Zacharias to be one of the common priests who was given service on a rotating basis, determined by the casting of lots, cf. Lk. 1:5-13; 1 Chron. 24:7-10.

16 L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution* (London, 1949), 261-63.

17 in *Diem Natalem*, ed. Montfaucon, Paris, 1718, ii.355A. Reference from Hasting, Op. cit., p. 262.

18 *Homilia in s. Christi generationem*.

19 In *sancta lumina oratio* 39.14.

20 Maclean, "The Christian Calendar," Op. cit., p. 261.

So why did such a celebration begin in the 4th century? What forces or circumstances combined to inaugurate an ecclesiastical holiday which, in time, would eclipse all other celebrations within the church?

A number of factors gives us the answer to this question. First, it seems very possible that the Arian controversy of the 4th century supplied impetus for the celebration of Christ's birth. At a time when both His humanity and deity needed to be stressed; when the virgin birth became the obvious foil against the Arian heresy; when certain leaders in the church had risen to positions of supreme authority, a celebration of the birth of Christ is ecclesiastically understandable. Secondly, the expanding church had become predominantly Gentile and the effects of paganism were very heavy within the "community of the faithful." Gentiles, untrained in the Scriptures, carried with them into the church many pagan customs and ideals. It cannot be coincidental that the church celebrated Christmas on December 25th (out of the wide number of dates suggested by prominent church leaders for the birth date of Christ). This date too obviously doubles as the date of a number of pagan festivals, the most significant being the Roman festival Brumalia (which was connected with Saturnalia) and the celebration of Mithra, the Iranian mystery god.

December 25 and Pagan Festivals

According to the calendar initiated by Julius Caesar in 45 BCE, December marked the winter solstice

when the mighty parent of fertility, having reached its lowest point in the heavens, began again to rise over the world with renewed power and splendor. Among Romans this was known as Brumalia²¹

Eager to establish the divinity of the Emperor, the celebration of the sun was tied to the recognition that the Emperor was the embodiment of divinity upon the earth.

The great temple of the Sun which Aurelian, the son of a priestess of the deity, founded upon the Campus Martius, with its high pontiffs and stately ritual, did honor not only to the great lord of the heavenly spheres, but to the monarch who was the august image of his power upon earth and who was endued with his special grace.²²

Under Aurelian (270-275 CE), December 25 was decreed *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun. The importance placed upon Sun worship by Aurelian was carried on by his successors Diocletian, Constantine the Great (before his conversion to the religion of the Cross), and also by Julian, champion of solar paganism.

The exact manner in which Brumalia was celebrated is not known. Historians agree, however, that it lacked the kind of religious fervor needed to attract the masses. It was this lack of ritual and religious appeal that made Mithraism an obvious adjunct to the celebration of Brumalia, for Mithra was also identified as the "Unconquered Sun." What the Roman festival lacked by way of customs, Mithraism amply supplied with its mystical doctrines, its meaningful rites, its ties of brotherhood, and its promise of immortality. The appeal of Mithraism was so strong in the early centuries, and

considering its rapid spread throughout the length and breadth of the Empire, and its strong appeal to the minds of intelligent men, the opinion has been hazarded that if the Christian Church had been stricken with some mortal weakness, Mithraism might have become the religion of the western world.²³

That Christmas replaced, for the church, the pagan festival of the Sun is clearly announced by Chrysostom (Bishop of Constantinople 398-403) in one of his homilies:

21 William Muir Auld, *Christmas Traditions* (Macmillan, 1931), p. 28.

22 Samuel Dill, *Roman Society*, p. 586, quoted from Auld, *Ibid.*

23 Auld, *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

On this day also the Birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed. They call this (Dec. 25th or viii. Kal. Jan, as the Romans wrote it), the Birthday of the Invincible One (Mithras); but who is so invincible as the Lord? They call it the Birthday of the Solar Disc; but Christ is the Sun of Righteousness.²⁴

In addition to the worship of the sun both by the Romans and the cult of Mithra, the Festival of Saturn, called Saturnalia (December 17-24), also figures into the choice of December 25 by the church for its own festival. Saturnalia celebrated the reign of Saturn, the oldest and most benign deity in ancient Italy. It was fabled that Saturn reigned during the so called "Golden Age," a time of peace and prosperity among mankind which was eventually disrupted by the greed and hatred of men. The Golden Age thus gave way to the Silver, Bronze and Iron Ages, with continual declension and degeneration on the part of mankind. The celebration in honor of Saturn, then, manifests the hope extant among the Romans of a return to a Golden Age when peace and prosperity would reign. It is not difficult to understand how Gentiles who had come to faith in the True Lord of Peace would have wanted to imbue the old festival with new meaning.

Saturnalia was celebrated by a cessation of work and school was dismissed throughout the Empire. War was never declared during this season; and if hostilities were in progress they were suspended till the feast was over. Public places were decked with flowers and shrubs. The practice of giving and receiving presents was common. Mirth and frolic were indulged in by all without restraint, and often the revels were led by a mock king, *rex Saturnalitius*, chosen by lot and given power to issue to his subjects the most ludicrous commands which they must obey, even if it meant standing on their heads divested of all their clothing.

Even beyond the celebration, however, Saturnalia was most loved for the sense of brotherhood which the season fostered. Masters and slaves dined together as equals, living out the ideal that even the unfortunate should have a good time at least once a year. It is, once again, not difficult to understand how such a festival could easily be endowed with new meaning by those saved out of their paganism through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rather than forsake the festivals of pagan origin, the expanding church redressed them as occasions for the worship of Christ.

Many historians agree that while the church's plan was to provide a substitute for the pagan holidays, what actually happened was an incorporating rather than a supplanting of many pagan customs. Take, for example, decorating with evergreens. A letter of Pope Gregory 1 to Augustine of Canterbury advises him to permit, and even encourage, such harmless popular customs as were capable of a Christian interpretation. What Augustine apparently interpreted this to mean was the use of evergreens for decorating both house and church building after the custom of the Saturnalia. Why this was done in the Saturnalia and other mid-winter festivals is explained by the fact that such decorations invited into one's dwelling the spirits and fairies that were suppose to haunt the leafless woods, spirits who in one way or another controlled the coming of spring. Thus, in an attempt to satisfy the masses, the church participated in the occultist symbols of their day. Interestingly, hundreds of years earlier the prophet Jeremiah spoke about the pagan nations who, in fear of the "signs of the heavens" (stars, planets, sun), attempt to placate the gods through the symbols of fertility. They bring a tree into their dwelling out of which an idol is fashioned and decorated with silver and gold.²⁵

Particularly important, along with evergreens, were the use of holly berries and mistletoe. Holly was placed in the window as a particular invitation to the forest spirits.²⁶ The number of carols and Christmas tunes which mention holly attest to the long-term establishment of its use.²⁷ Mistletoe, well known by

24 *Homily* 31.

25 Jer. 10:1-4. Obviously, Jeremiah is not talking about a Christmas tree! But note how often Jeremiah speaks of Israel "playing the harlot" (= participating in the fertility cult) under a "green tree", cp. in Jeremiah, 2:20; 3:6, 13; 11:16; 17:8. Note also Deut. 12:2; 2 Ki 14:23; 16:4; 17:10; 2 Chron 28:4; Is 57:5; Ezek 6:13. The Baal cult believed that a tree with green leaves was a special symbol of fertility. Enacting fertility rituals underneath such a tree was considered most effectual in placating the gods.

26 Crippen, *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

27 "The Holly and the Ivy," "Bright, Bright the Holly Berry," "As the Holly Groweth Green," etc.

readers of Virgil (in which it is known as the Golden Bough), was always felt to contain magical powers. Aeneas is enabled to descend into hell and come back safely by the powers of the Golden Bough. The Druids held it a sacred plant, calling it “all-heal,” and ascribed to it all sorts of magical powers. It not only healed every kind of disease, but also gave fertility to cattle and livestock, and kept one safe from all evil spells and enabled the bearer to see ghosts and make them speak. The Druids had a special ritual for mistletoe found growing on an oak tree, believed to be the most special of all mistletoe. A golden knife cut it, and all care was taken not to let it touch the ground. This mistletoe could calm even the most savage enemies, and all who came under it were overpowered by its spell. From such practices have come the present day custom of kissing under the mistletoe. Because of its obvious occult attachments, the church historically banned the use of mistletoe in the sanctuary until recent times.²⁸

That homes of Christians continued to be decorated after the fashion of Saturnalia (even before the celebration of Christmas) is clear from a comment by Tertullian (2nd century):

Let those who have no light, light their lamps daily; let them over whom hell fire is imminent affix to their posts laurels doomed presently to burn; to them the testimonies of darkness and the omens of their penalties are suitable. You are a light of the world, a tree ever green; if you have renounced temples, make not your own gate a temple.²⁹

It seems hardly in need of comment that the present-day traditions of Christmas tree, yule log,³⁰ gift-giving, holly and mistletoe owe their existence to these pagan rituals. This obvious connection of Christmas to paganism was ample reason for the early Puritans of America to outlaw it.³¹

Summary - The Origin of Christmas

The data seem rather conclusive—the celebration of Christmas as a recognized holiday and festival of the Christian church does not pre-date the fourth century. As far as any recorded history is concerned, for three centuries following the life of Christ on this earth, no Christian group celebrated His birth in any organized way. Furthermore, when the fourth century church decreed December 25 as the official and proper day for such a celebration, she did so under the influence and pressure of long-standing, pagan festivals celebrated at the same time. Clearly, the impetus for celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25 was to give a substitute holiday for the masses who had not yet divested themselves completely of their pagan festivals. But though the church attempted to initiate a festival to supplant the pagan celebrations, she was not able to divest the new of the vestigial remains of the old, and many pagan customs therefore became attached to the newly formed celebration of Christ’s birth.

True Worship and Syncretism

So how do these facts affect the contemporary church? Can’t we sanctify for the Lord’s use what in history was employed for worshiping pagan gods? And furthermore, if Christmas has pagan origins, by all practical measures these have been eclipsed in our day. Ask almost anyone what Christmas stands for, and the forthcoming answer is simple: Christmas commemorates the birth of Jesus. So perhaps it is irrelevant to the modern day believer that Christmas originated as a redress of pagan celebrations.

Or is it? What does God say about borrowing pagan symbols and celebrations for His worship? And

28 Crippen, Op. cit., 22. Apparently mistletoe is outlawed to this day in many Italian church buildings.

29 Tertullian, (*Treatise on Idolatry*)

30 The yule log comes from the celebration of some winter festival among the Norse and Germanic peoples of antiquity, a celebration which lasted two months, from the middle of November to the middle of January. Exactly how the Yule log was used is not clear, but apparently it was to burn throughout the entire celebration.

31 Crippen, Op. cit., pp. 87-93, who gives a detailed history of the public injunctions enacted against the celebration of Christmas by the Puritans.

furthermore, even if for us the symbols of Christmas have lost their pagan connections, how do those spirit beings engaged in the real battle we are fighting³² view the use of these “refurbished” symbols, customs and rituals? What messages are the angels receiving from us as they attempt to understand God’s marvelous plan of redemption?³³

The term “syncretism” means “to attempt union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenants or practices, especially in philosophy or religion.”³⁴ In short, syncretism is mixing things that essentially differ.

From the beginning of God’s revelation to man, He has made known the simple fact that He does not accept syncretism. The central issue of holiness is bound up in the concept of separation. The Sabbath is blessed and set apart at creation,³⁵ a day prepared for Israel³⁶ who would also be set apart from all other peoples.³⁷ Throughout the Patriarchal narratives the people who belong to God are set apart from the rest and from the pagan religions. Abram is called away from his land and people and given a covenant which marks him and his descendants as unique; he therefore secures a bride for Isaac from his own clan and not from the neighboring nations; God preserves the family of Jacob, His chosen, through Joseph’s intervention, signalling His elective, distinguishing love. In each case the issue is the same: God has taken a people for His own name and sanctified them (set them apart) unto Himself.

In the giving of the Torah (Law) the issue is made repeatedly clear. Israel was not to mix differing things, whether crops³⁸ or linen with wool,³⁹ nor were they to inter-breed animals.⁴⁰ Clean animals were to be separated from unclean, with no admixture allowed.⁴¹ Why? Is there something morally wrong with mixing crops, putting wool and linen in the same garment, or inter-breeding animals? Is there a moral issue which separates the clean animal from the unclean? Apparently not. The reason seems clearly to lie in the message God intended His people to see constantly: the one who calls Him Lord is to love Him with all one’s heart, all one’s mind and all one’s might.⁴² There is no room for “heart-mixture” in God’s economy, and the practical, every day laws given to Israel illustrated this. Whether of crops, clothes, livestock, or food, the picture was ever before them—no mixing of things that essentially differ.

The Torah is very specific as well about incorporating pagan practices into the worship of God—all such things are clearly prohibited. But more than mere prohibition, the language used in such negative commands clearly expresses God’s utter hatred for syncretism, for it goes contrary to His very nature. “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”⁴³

Consider the following:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. (Deut 18:9)

For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you. (Deut 18:12)

But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you ... in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against

32 Eph 6:12.

33 Eph. 3:10; 1 Pt. 1:12.

34 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols., (Oxford, 1971), 2:3210.

35 Gen 2:1–3.

36 Ex 31:13.

37 Ex 8:22; Deut 7:6; 14:2, 21.

38 Lev 19:19.

39 Lev 19:19, cp. Deut 22:11.

40 Lev 19:19.

41 Lev 20:25.

42 Deut 6:4ff; 11:13ff; Matt 22:37; Mark 12:29, 30; Lk 10:27.

43 1Jn 1:5.

the Lord your God. (Deut 20:17–18)

These verses explicitly teach God’s abhorrence of mixing pagan worship with the worship He has prescribed for His people. “But,” someone might say, “Christmas is not the worship of a pagan god, but the celebration of the true God incarnate. Surely these verses cannot be applied to the celebration of Christmas!” In measure I would agree. I doubt seriously that any true believer who celebrates Christmas does so with a purpose to worship pagan gods. I know with certainty this was not my motivation in years past as I participated in the holiday. But my question is this: Have we been deceived or misled to believe that God looks favorably upon modes and symbols of worship which we have taken from paganism? Do we know for certain that our redressing of these pagan customs have actually made them fit as offerings to our King? Is the key our own perspectives and motivations or God’s perspective?

Consider the history of Israel in the books of Samuel. There is evidence of subtle yet real syncretism. For instance, where is the Ark of the Covenant housed at the beginning of the story—in a temple?⁴⁴ This structure which housed the Ark and in which Eli and Samuel ministered could not have been the Tent since this temple is described as having a “doorpost” (Heb. מְזוּזָה, *mezuzah*),⁴⁵ something characteristic of only permanent dwellings.⁴⁶ It would appear that Eli as high priest had adopted a pagan temple for Israelite worship in direct violation of Torah, which commanded both the destruction of the Canaanite places of worship⁴⁷ and conducting true worship in one place only, the place chosen by God.⁴⁸ This place, rather than being a singular, physical location, denoted the tabernacle in which the Ark was to dwell. Wherever the Tent moved, this was the place of God’s choosing, the place where He was pleased “to set His name ... for His habitation.”⁴⁹

Apparently, the priesthood had neglected God’s careful warnings about mixing things that essentially differ. The effects of this syncretism are evident in the priestly sins. Eli’s sons were practicing fertility rites at the door of the temple⁵⁰ as well as despising the sacrifices which the people brought.⁵¹ Worship of the true, unique God, which was to be itself unique and distinguishable from the worship practices of the pagan nations, had been mixed with what essentially differed—subtly at first, but overt in the end.

Other aspects of syncretism are found throughout the Samuel story. Samuel is pictured, for instance, as “laying down in the temple of the Lord where the Ark of God was.”⁵² Where is there any provision for priests to sleep in the Holy Place of the Tabernacle, not to speak of those who, like Samuel, had not yet undergone priestly ordination?⁵³ Secondly, why would the priests bring the Ark out to the battle ground⁵⁴

44 1 Sam 1:9; 3:3.

45 1Sam 1:9.

46 Cp. Ex 21:6; 12:7, 22, 23; Deut 6:9; 1 Ki 6:31, 33; 9:3.

47 These pagan sanctuaries were usually on a high place of the city, believing that the worshiper who ascended to the sanctuary actually drew closer to the deity. No sanctuary has been unearthed in Shilo, and most believe that such a building would have been fully eradicated when the Roman occupation leveled the ground to bedrock, see the comments of S. Holm-Nielsen, “Shilo” in *IDB*, Supp. vol., p. 822-23. 1 Ki 3:2 would also indicate that sacrifices were being conducted on high places up until the time of Solomon “because there was no house built for the name of the Lord” Having come to the land in which they would dwell permanently, sacrificing on the moveable altar of the Tabernacle must have come into disrepute in favor of the more luxurious temples already existing on the high places.

48 Deut 12:1-14.

49 Deut 12:5. Eventually, when the Temple was constructed, the city of Jerusalem took on the special significance of the place where God was pleased to make His name dwell, cp. 1 Ki 9:1-3; Ezra 6:12; Neh. 1:9; 2 Chron. 6:20. Apparently, according to Jer. 7:12, God had instructed that the Tent reside at Shilo. All indications are, however, that Eli and his sons succumbed to natural tendency to favor a permanent temple over the temporary Tent, and moved the Ark to the high place, occupying a pagan sanctuary.

50 1Sam 2:22.

51 1Sam 2:12–17.

52 1Sam 3:3.

53 The explanation of Keil and Delitzsch (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1973), 2:48-9), that the priests had constructed “cells” in the court of the Tabernacle in which they lived during their time of service, is without historical corroboration, as far as I know.

54 1 Sa 4:1ff. While the text notes that the sons of Eli were “with the Ark” (בְּנֵי-עֵלִי עִם-אָרוֹן בְּרִית הָאֱלֹהִים), it seems to indicate that the people themselves took the Ark from Shilo (וַיִּשְׁלַח הָעָם שְׁלָה)

unless they had come to believe (like the nations) that their God could be controlled or persuaded by cultic ritual to fight for them? A third example is the “yearly sacrifice” noted not only in the Hannah story, but later in David’s conflict with Saul.⁵⁵ The Torah specifically required all males to sacrifice three times each year.⁵⁶ And what exactly was this “annual feast” which David feigned as an excuse for his absence at Saul’s table? The text (1 Samuel 20:6) indicates it was attached to the clan or family and was therefore held in Bethlehem—a sacrifice apart from the priesthood at Shilo! The examples are many: mules are present in the Israelite community, against the direct command of Torah;⁵⁷ marriage laws appear to be disregarded;⁵⁸ mediums are available (even though the “official” ban was enacted).⁵⁹

Perhaps the historical comment in Nehemiah is most telling:

And the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.⁶⁰

From this statement it seems clear that the annual celebration of Sukkot was totally neglected during David’s reign,⁶¹ a king described as “a man after God’s own heart.” How is this possible? Why did the exiles of Nehemiah’s day so quickly see the neglect and make it right, when David and his generation appear blinded to God’s righteous ways, giving up the very festivals which God had granted them as a blessing? The answer to this question lies in the subtle but devastating effects of syncretism. Mixing things that essentially differ injects the soul with a deadening anesthesia—it woos the soul away from God with a soothing, melodious lullaby.

Syncretism of all kinds, both subtle and overt, continued to grow after the reign of David. Solomon not only failed to destroy the pagan places of worship, he became known for sacrificing upon them.⁶² When the kingdom was divided Jeroboam feared that the people’s regular pilgrimages to Solomon’s temple for sacrifice in Jerusalem would affect their loyalties to his rule. He therefore instituted a new feast in the eighth month and erected two golden calves which he proclaimed to be “the gods ... that brought you up from the land of Egypt.”⁶³ He further consecrated new non-Levitical priests to carry on the cultic aspects of this religious innovation since many of the established priests (along with faithful Israelites) refused to accept such anti-Torah practices.⁶⁴ Still, most of the people blindly followed Jeroboam’s idolatry.⁶⁵ Even Rehoboam continued to maintain the high places in Judah⁶⁶ and the people synthesized the “worship” of God with that of Baal.

In fact, the “high places” become a kind of watermark for evaluating the kings. Throughout the history of the kings of Judah and Israel, the summary statements often sound like this:

(וַיִּשְׂאוּ מִשָּׁם אֶת אֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת) against the Torah which states that only the priests should handle the Ark.

55 1 Sam 1:3, 21; 2:19; 20:6.

56 Ex 23:14, 17; 34:23, 24; Deut 16:16.

57 2 Sam 13:29; 18:9, cp. Lev 19:19.

58 2 Sam 13:13.

59 1 Sam 28:7. Note how Saul’s court officials so quickly come up with the location of a medium!

60 Neh 8:17.

61 The assertion of some [See Edwin Yamauchi, “Ezra-Nehemiah” in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Gaebelien, ed., 12 vols. (Zondervan, 1988), 4:728] that the statement in Nehemiah must be interpreted as meaning that Sukkot had not been celebrated *to such an extent* or *with as much joy* (emphasis mine) since the time of Joshua is not well founded. That 1 Ki 8:65 and 2 Chron 7:9 speak of a feast in the seventh month celebrated at the dedication of Solomon’s temple does not mean this feast was necessarily Sukkot. There is nothing in the text to indicate the people constructed booths. The statement of Nehemiah may be taken at face value and reconciled with the historical comments of 1 Ki and 2 Chron if the feast celebrated at the dedication of Solomon’s temple was simply a special feast of dedicating the temple.

62 1 Ki 3:3, 4.

63 1 Ki 12:26-31.

64 1 Ki 12:31, cp. 2 Chron 11:13-17.

65 1 Ki 12:30.

66 1 Ki 14:21ff.

But the high places were not taken away; nevertheless the heart of Asa was wholly devoted to the Lord all his days. (1 Ki 15:14)

And he walked in all the way of Asa his father; he did not turn aside from it, doing right in the sight of the Lord. However, the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burnt incense on the high places. (1 Ki 22:43)

Only the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. (2 Ki 12:3)⁶⁷

The single black mark on the career of a king like Asa was simply that he failed to purge Israel of the high places—even with a heart wholly devoted to the Lord, he allowed the mingling of things which essentially differ.

In contrast, the praise of a king like Josiah is that he destroyed the high places.

And Josiah also removed all the houses of the high places which were in the cities of Samaria, which the kings of Israel had made provoking the Lord; and he did to them just as he had done in Bethel. (2 Ki 23:19)

What, then, may we learn from the syncretism outlined in the history of Israel? First, syncretism may be practiced even by those whose hearts are fully given over to the Lord (like David and Asa). How? By accepting and practicing the traditions of one's community without testing them against the pure, dividing word of God. Secondly, it is obvious that God does not necessarily punish syncretism immediately. Israel continued in her downward spiral of syncretism for hundreds of years before God punished them with exile. Thirdly, it seems clear that unchecked syncretism inevitably leads to increasing compromise in matters of obedience to the Lord. The overt worship of Baal within the context of Israelite worship did not happen overnight. It began by accepting, a little at a time, things which essentially differed with the true worship of God.

Conclusion

I have researched and written this short paper to explain why I don't celebrate Christmas. I have come to believe that the holiday we call Christmas not only had its beginning as a substitute for a number of pagan holidays, but that it was never able to shake off the syncretistic pagan practices which it inevitably incorporated. I further believe that the symbols of Christmas, the Christmas tree, reindeer, elves, holly, mistletoe, etc., maintain their connections to the paganism from which they were derived, and that the spiritual realm (where our battle is truly fought) continues to view them as attached to the demonic womb from which they were born.

I have come to grieve over the fact that a holiday like Christmas (and Easter, but that's another paper!) has all but eclipsed the festivals which God ordained for His people, and has therefore robbed the church not only of a sense of her Jewish roots, but also of much edification and instruction. In an age when as never before we as believers in the true Messiah ought to shine distinctively as lights in a dark place, the church and the world celebrate Christmas in a common fashion—the same symbols, the same traditions, the same effects. In celebration of the birth of Messiah, the One Who is the ultimate dividing mark between light and dark, between righteousness and sin, between holy and profane, the church and the world unite in a unified celebration complete with pagan implements and materialistic self-indulgence.

For these reasons, I can no longer celebrate Christmas. I celebrate the birth of Messiah as never before, but I have come to understand that Christmas and the birth of Messiah have nothing in common. Contrary to the popular Christmas carol, Christ was not born on Christmas day. I personally feel that the Festival

⁶⁷ cp. also 2 Ki 14:4; 15:4, 35; 21:3.

of Booths (Sukkot) is best suited to remember the “dwelling of God with man,” both historically and eschatologically. I have found it very encouraging, while sitting in the Sukkah, to consider the love of God displayed in sending His own dear Son to dwell with me in my humble and temporary abode.⁶⁸ What is more, Sukkot adds to the celebration of Christ’s incarnation the hope of His future dwelling upon the earth, a time when all the nations will celebrate the festival.⁶⁹

Finally, I was careful not to title this short essay “Why *You* Shouldn’t Celebrate Christmas,” though some who read it may think this was my purpose. In fact, it is not. You must consider these things before the Lord and come to your own conclusions—it is not my place to judge the motives of others. I only ask you to consider openly whether or not your celebration of Christmas has incorporated into it things which displease God—things which essentially differ from the purity of His holiness,⁷⁰ and to encourage you, if you do find matters of syncretism, to purge them from your life and to pursue God with your whole heart.

68 Jn 1:14 “... and the Word became fleshed and “tabernacled” among us.”

69 Zech 14:16-21.

70 “... be holy, for I am holy.” Lev.11:44, cp. 1 Pet 1:16.