

December 25 and the Birth of the Messiah

by Matthew Janzen, December 2021

In the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, there's nothing written about a birth-date for the Messiah, whether on a Hebrew or Roman calendar. We do get a time statement in Luke 2:2 (Quirinius was governing Syria), but that doesn't help us with a specific date.

Luke 2:8, Shepherds

We do get a brief statement in Luke 2:8 that shepherds in the region around Bethlehem were *out in the fields* keeping watch over their flock *by night*. Some of the prominent, older commentators use this as proof against a late December birth. For example, Adam Clarke and John Gill both say that the flocks were kept out in the open fields at night beginning around Passover and ending with the first rains of the autumn season, around what we call October/November. Clarke says that on this ground the Nativity in December should be given up.¹ I've heard a lot of people in the Torah Community use this verse to say it's impossible the Messiah could've been born on December 25. I used to be one of these people.

Further research shows that there are scholars who do not see this as conclusive. They say that the weather in and around Bethlehem (southern Israel) would be cool in December, but not a crazy rain, cold, or blizzard season. They point out that it rains on average 12 days in December there (leaving about 19 dry days), and the weather can be in the 40's or sometimes 50's at night. They go on to say that shepherds of old wouldn't care about what we think is cold. One extensive paper I've read speaks of this man who was known as the "Shepherd Boy of Galilee" mentioning how members of his tribe that lived in southern Israel kept their sheep out in the open fields all winter long, so long as it wasn't storming or snowing.² Hoehner mentions that the Mishnah (writings and commentary on the Torah; *Shekalim* 7.4) implies that sheep around Bethlehem were outside all year, even in February, one of the coldest and rainiest months of the year.³ We really can't conclusively say anything *against* a winter birth based on Luke 2:8, but there's nothing in Matthew or Luke pushing *for* a winter birth either.⁴

¹ Adam Clarke and John Gill (among others stating similar cases) may be read in the commentaries section at BibleHub.com. The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (also found at BibleHub.com) gives an alternate view on Luke 2:8.

² *Could Jesus Have Been Born on December 25? An Analysis of the Gospel Evidence*, K.R. Harriman, pages 47-49. (May be read at Academia.edu)

³ *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Harold W. Hoehner, page 26.

⁴ Hoehner's work (fn3) notes that there are arguments made for every month of the year. Benson's Commentary on Luke 2:8 (BibleHub.com) mentions the same.

Dates in Scripture

This is for certain: Yahweh isn't bashful about inspiring dates to be mentioned in Scripture. Look at all the commanded festival dates in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16 (among other places). In the gospels, we know for sure that Yeshua died at Passover time, because the authors record it. We know for sure that the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts 2 at the Feast of Pentecost, because the author records it. What's missing in the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke is any reference to the date of Messiah's birth. It's just not there. As forth-giving as Holy Scripture is on specific dates, if the date of Messiah's birth was so important, it surely would've been recorded.⁵

December 25

Why is it that people think Yeshua was born on December 25? Some Christians will say, "We don't really know when he was born, but that's the date we choose to celebrate," and then go on to explain that Christians co-opted a pagan, winter solstice festival, the re-birth of the sun, and turned it into something righteous. These Christians don't find a problem with this theory; they reason that it's okay to take something bad and turn it into something good.

Other Christians will say, "Our tradition actually goes back to a December 25th date for the birth of Christ. The Church fathers based the date on specific calculation," and they will tell you it has nothing to do with re-branding pagan or heathen practice.

These two theories are called the "History of Religions Theory"⁶ and the "Calculation Theory," and you'll find scholarship behind both. Which one is true? Is there a way for us to know? Could Yeshua have been born on December 25 of the then, Julian calendar?

Clement of Alexandria

The first mention of a proposed date for the birth of Messiah (that I've been able to find) is from the pre-Nicene church father Clement of Alexandria. He writes:

⁵ Using the E-sword app, you can do a search using the words "day month" and pull up 101 verses and 280 matches. The first match is Genesis 7:11 where we read of the second month and the seventeenth day of the month. Dates like this are found all through Scripture, so it is very plausible that if we were supposed to know the date of the Messiah's birth, Yahweh would have moved upon an author of Scripture to record it for all future generations.

⁶ *Why is Christmas on Dec. 25? A brief history lesson that may surprise you...* is a summary of the two views was nicely done by Valerie Strauss of The Washington Post back on December 25, 2015. One thing of particular interest is that it appears the History of Religions Theory began in the 19th century in an attempt to group or lump all religions into the same "pot" so to speak.

From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of Pachon... others say that he was born on the 24th or 25th day Pharmuthi.⁷

Pachon and Pharmuthi are names of Egyptian months. Josephus mentions Pharmuth and talks about it overlapping the Hebrew month of Abib.⁸ Pharmuthi is the 8th month on the Egyptian calendar, but the 24th or 25th day of Pharmuthi corresponds to April 19 or 20 on the then Julian calendar. Pachon is the 9th month on the Egyptian calendar, and the 25th day of Pachon corresponded to May 20 on the Julian calendar. So Clement of Alexandria gives us evidence that some early Christians believed Yeshua was born in the spring-time, after Passover but before Pentecost. Late April to late May.⁹

Hippolytus

The third century Church Father Hippolytus may have recorded December 25 as the birth date of Christ. The questionable text is from his commentary on the book of Daniel, chapter 2. Some translations read: "For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem, under Augustus, in the year 5500."¹⁰ Other translations read: "For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, eight days before the kalends of January, the 4th day of the week, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, but from Adam five thousand and five hundred years."

Scholars debate these readings, but there are indeed some who see the eight days before the kalends of January to be the authentic reading. Counting back inclusively arrives at December 25 on the Julian calendar, which was at one point the date for the winter solstice.

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, Book 1 Chapter 21, page 333 of Volume 2 Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1986 Eerdmans.

⁸ *Antiquities of the Jews* 2.14.6

⁹ In my reading through various scholarly research papers, I have seen where the dates listed in Clement could refer to the *conception* of Christ rather than his nativity, based upon the Greek word genesis used elsewhere in Clement's writings, as well as other sources from around that period. For more on this see *Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' Canon and Chronicon* by Thomas C. Schmidt.

¹⁰ Volume 5, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, *Fragments from Commentaries on Daniel*, Chapter 2, page 179, 1986 Eerdmans. An easy-to-understand summary of the manuscript variants is found in *Hippolytus and the Original Date of Christmas*, by Thomas C. Schmidt (blog) posted November 21, 2010.

Who Borrowed from Who?

Here's where it gets interesting. Hippolytus' work dates to the early 200's A.D. but it's not until the late 200's that we have a reference to a festival of Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun) on December 25. Emperor Aurelian mentions Sol Invictus in 274 A.D. and it later shows up on a calendar in 354 A.D.¹¹ Some scholars argue that the Romans may have instituted this festival to combat the Christian view of Christ being born around/at the time of the winter solstice. While it's popular to think that Christians borrowed from pagans, the opposite may be the case here.

Conception Calculation

There are other Christians writings from 200 to 300 A.D. that show some early Christians believed Christ was *conceived* around the time of the spring equinox, which was once March 25 on the Julian calendar.¹² Some say his conception was on March 25, while others place it four days after March 25, on the day they believe the sun was created (based on Genesis 1:14-19). They saw the creation of the world or the sun as a backdrop for the conception of the Christ, the Son of God.¹³ If they believed his conception in the womb of Mary took place around March 25, about 9 months later would be around December 25. This is what is meant by the *Calculation Theory*, and is presented as evidence against the *History of Religions Theory*. These earlier Christians, prior to the legalization of Christianity in Rome, were very much against pagan practice; they often suffered persecution for their beliefs from heathens. It wasn't until the mid-4th century, when Christianity became the official religion of Rome (after the time of Emperor Constantine), that persecution began to die down, *so the dating of Christ's birth on December 25 in the early 3rd century wouldn't have stemmed from Christians trying to adopt pagan customs and re-brand them.*¹⁴ They arrived at the date from making calculations based upon when they believed Christ was conceived.¹⁵

¹¹ *The Origins of Christmas and the Date of Christ's Birth*, Kurt R. Simmons, 2015.

¹² *Early Christians Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: In Defense of the Calculation Theory*, C. Philipp E. Nothaft, 2013. The primary source material he pulls from on this is the *Paschal Table of Hippolytus* (222 A.D.) Also see *March 25 - the date of annunciation, the crucifixion, and the origin of December 25 as the date of Christmas?* by Roger Pearse.

¹³ Some read of this early solar symbolism or parallelism and immediately think syncretism or paganism. What they fail to recognize is the solar symbolism put forth for both God and Christ in Hebrew Scripture. In Malachi 4:2 a Messianic prophecy speaks of the "sun of righteousness," and Psalm 84:11a even says, "For the LORD (YHWH) God is a sun and shield." Such symbolism likely stems from the ordination of the sun as part of the calendar back in Genesis 1:14-19.

¹⁴ For example, see Tertullian's condemnation of the Roman festival of Saturnalia in Volume 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, pages 44 (*Apology*), 66, 69-70 (*On Idolatry*).

¹⁵ *The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research*, C. Philipp E. Nothaft, 2012.

Equinox and Solstice

Some early Christians viewed Christ's conception at the spring equinox and birth at the winter solstice as a sign of increasing light.¹⁶ The days and nights are equal at the spring equinox, but then the light of the sun begins to increase, and the days are longer than the nights. At the winter solstice the day is the shortest it will be all year, but immediately after the day-length begins to increase. Some Christians quoted John the Baptizer's statement "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30) to go along with this theory. They believed John was conceived around the fall equinox (when the days started getting shorter), and born around the summer solstice (when the days started getting shorter); vice versa for Yeshua.

Speculation

Now, there's nothing in Scripture that sets any of this in concrete. We read none of this in the birth narratives of the gospel of Matthew or Luke. What we do find are early Christian writers using what they find as certain clues in Scripture to state their case. The point here is that *the December 25th date is a possibility for the birth of Christ*, and the date was not put forth in 3rd (or even 4th) century Christianity due to a desire to adopt pagan practice. It was chosen based upon a calculation theory from when the conception in the womb of Mary was thought to have taken place (from spring equinox/conception to winter solstice/birth). Nothing is pagan about the equinoxes and solstices. Pagans have used them, but they are occurrences of the heavenly luminaries, created and founded in Genesis 1:14-18. What if Yahweh caused His Messiah to be born in Bethlehem at the time on the heavenly calendar when the light began to overtake the darkness?

Which Date is More Likely?

I even believe that between the two dates of December 25 and Tishri 15 (the first day of Sukkot, put forth by man in the Messianic-Hebrew Roots Communities), December 25 is more likely. I talk about my rejection of the Tabernacles date in a sermon I titled "Giving Up Christmas, and a video presentation of a class I taught showing where the course of Abijah (mentioned in Luke 1) is not sufficient evidence to prove a Sukkot birth. I believe Luke 2:1-5 conclusively shows Yeshua's birth did not take place on any pilgrim-feast in Israel. A December 25th date is *away* from the appointed pilgrim-festivals, making it more plausible. *This doesn't prove the December 25th date*, it's just more likely than the other, but the dates posited in Clement of Alexandria (late April or late May) are possibilities as well.

¹⁶ The document *On the solstices and equinoxes of the conception and birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and John the Baptist* is discussed throughout many of the references I mention in the footnotes, but specifically see *Some notes on "De solstitiis et aequinoctis (CPL 2277)* by Roger Pearse.

What May Have Happened

The earliest evidence for a *festival* commemorating Christ's birth comes from an early Calendar (Philocalian) dated to mid 4 century, between 336 to 354 A.D. The festival wasn't called Christmas, but it marked the Nativity of Christ. It is possible that the first Christians who celebrated this Feast did so quite simply: reading the birth narratives, singing hymns, a festive meal, and being thankful the King was born. As time progressed, and Christianity moved away from persecution, the pagan activities of the Romans (and other cultures) gradually mixed with this birth-festival. The end result is Christmas, a combination of Scriptural truth with ancient pagan or later, modern customs.¹⁷ If we knew when the Messiah was born, and we chose to hold a feast in honor of his birth by gathering together, feasting/rejoicing, singing songs about his birth, reading the birth narratives, and if we did not use this as a substitute for the commanded feasts, it would be no different than Hanukkah as recorded in 1 Maccabees. Many Christians today who celebrate Christmas mix pagan vestiges or other-worldly customs with Scriptural practice, as well as dismiss the commanded Feast-days. I believe traditional Christianity has taken it too far in the one direction.

Many in the Torah Community have taken it too far in the opposite direction. There is nothing wrong with reading the birth narratives of the Messiah at this time of the year, and there is nothing wrong with singing songs about the Messiah's birth, no more than singing songs about his life, death, or resurrection. But if you mention Messiah's birth, or sing a traditional Advent hymn they get all triggered. Even mentioning the December 25th date as a logical possibility in this essay is going to make the claws of the "Torah-Terrorists" come out. A more balanced view is the best route. There's nothing wrong with getting together to

¹⁷ In an article at BiblicalArchaeology.org titled *How December 25 Became Christmas* (2002; 2021) Andrew McGowan writes, "More recent studies have shown that many of the holiday's modern trappings do reflect pagan customs borrowed much later, as Christianity expanded into northern and western Europe. The Christmas tree, for example, has been linked with late medieval druidic practices. This has only encouraged modern audiences to assume that the date, too, must be pagan. There are problems with this popular theory, however, as many scholars recognize. Most significantly, the first mention of a date for Christmas (c. 200) and the earliest celebrations that we know about (c. 250-300) come in a period when Christians were not borrowing heavily from pagan traditions of such an obvious character. ...in the first few centuries C.E., the persecuted Christian minority was greatly concerned with distancing itself from the larger, public pagan religious observances, such as sacrifices, games and holidays. this was still true as late as the violent persecutions of the Christians conducted by the Roman emperor Diocletian between 303 and 312 C.E. This would change only after Constantine converted to Christianity. From mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan festivals. ...At this late point, Christmas may well have acquired some pagan trappings. But we don't have evidence of Christians adopting pagan festivals in the third century, at which point dates for Christmas were established. Thus it seems unlikely that the date was simply selected to correspond with pagan solar festivals."

celebrate the fact that Yeshua of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem. Even putting up a Nativity Scene can be a righteous, heart-warming thing. At the same time, the "Christmas tree," wreaths, Santa Clause, reindeer, Mariah Carey songs, and a host of other things having nothing to do with our Lord's birth.