

Christ's Birth in December

There is historical proof as well as scriptural proof

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In recent years, the skepticism concerning the accuracy of the December birth of Christ has increased. More and more we hear that December is arbitrary or that it was instituted by the church without any real proof. After all, some say, where does it say this in the Bible?

There is ample proof, according to both historical record as well as Tradition.

Note: At the time of Christ's birth, time in the Roman Empire was reckoned according to the Julian Calendar. The date of Christmas, December 25th, falls on Jan. 7th when calculated using the Julian calendar due to the 13 day difference. A discussion concerning the Julian calendar and so-called Revised Julian calendar is beyond the scope of this article.

UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITION

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, provenance concerning the time of Christ's birth can be traced to the fourth century, though there is record of one of the early Fathers, Saint Clement of Alexandria, (c. 150-215) stating in his famous work the **Stromata**:

"And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day;"

Perhaps the first of the Eastern Fathers to support the December birth date was Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), the Archbishop of Constantinople. He may be characterized as a humble and caring man, a prolific author whose writings on the Bible and the Christian faith are still widely read. He was such an eloquent preacher in Constantinople that he earned the surname of "Chrysostom" - meaning quite literally "the Golden Mouth". His sermons became a stronger attraction for people than the shows of the amphitheater. Through his ministry many souls came to Christ from among heretics, pagans, and Jews.

Saint John Chrysostom claimed the December 25th date was supported by the actual census/tax records of the Holy Family when they registered in Bethlehem. We have no

way to prove if those records were still in existence, or were authentic, but Saint John Chrysostom was not the only one who referred to them. That others refer to the similar source gives evidence that the records were in existence at that time. This is significant as it ties the date to a historic record and the record of the census would have been available in Rome at that time. The institution of the Feast was a new custom in the East and during the Saint's time of service he defended it as something providential and God-pleasing. To paraphrase Saint John, this feast was no novelty; "from Thrace to Cadiz this feast was observed rightly, since its miraculously rapid diffusion proved its genuineness". It was not long after when Saint Gregory championed the great feast in Constantinople.

There are others offering additional evidence of this date of the Nativity of our Lord. Saint Justin Martyr (100-165), lends further testimony to the existence of historical data in his noted Apology (a detailed explanation of the Christian faith addressed to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius), which stated that Jesus was born at Bethlehem "as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing" (Apol. I, 34). Another writer of the early Christian era was Tertullian (160-250), who spoke of "the census of Augustus: that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome" (Against Marcion, Bk. 4, 7). In the dawn of the Third Century (circa 204-211) Hippolytus of Rome offers December 25th as the date, not on his own but as something he received. Saint Hippolytus is worth of additional consideration as he asserts this date is Apostolic and not arbitrary. This information is gleaned from the fourth book of commentary of Hippolytus on the Prophet Daniel.

DETERMINING THE DATE FROM THE MINISTRY OF ZACHARIAS

Saint John Chrysostom introduces another piece of evidence from Holy Scripture itself. He taught that it was on the day of Atonement that Zacharias received the angelic announcement that he would have a son. It is to be understood here that the priestly ministry of entering the Holy of Holies was limited to twice yearly. With the assumption that Zacharias made his offering on the day of Atonement, the numbers match for a December birth of Christ as follows: the conception of John occurred in late September, and so the conception of Christ (which was six months later) in March, leading to a December birth!

According to rabbinical tradition, when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the priestly course of Jehoiarib was serving. If the order of priestly service was unbroken through all those 70 years, it has been calculated that the course of Abijah, to which Zacharias belonged, would have been serving during the first week of October. This would be only slightly later than Chrysostom's position, but one which would still allow for Christ's conception to have been in March and his birth in December.

It should be carefully noted however, that numerous arguments have been based on when Zacharias served. None are conclusive since questions remain: Did the priestly courses start at the beginning of each year, or did they function as a

continuous week by week cycle? Was this cycle interrupted during the annual feasts? Did all priests serve then, with the order of courses continuing thereafter? When the Jews added a month, every three years or so (to bring their lunar calendar into alignment with the solar year), how did this affect the timing of the courses? Did they always follow a totally uniform and unchanging policy from generation to generation, or were there variables?

It is easy for one to get hung-up on any of these points. The important thing to consider is that the theory concerning the priestly service provides enough circumstantial evidence to support a December birth.

While historical records and provenance are influential in this discussion, there is another bit of evidence which should not go unmentioned – divine revelation. A miraculous confirmation in support of the December date is the blossoming of the Glastonbury Thorn on Christmas – January 7th (December 25th according to the Julian calendar). Other types of thorn, such as the Hawthorne variety, blossom in Spring. Tradition holds that it was the Apostle to the British Isles, Saint Joseph of Arimathea, who planted his staff in the soil on this hill.

CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY

There was a sect, the Gnostics, who believed Jesus of Nazareth became the "Christ" at his baptism, that this was when God was "manifested" in the flesh. Eventually, through the influence of Valentinus, January 6 was set aside to honor this event, called "Epiphany" or "Theophany" (from the Greek epiphaneia, meaning manifestation; and Theophany, meaning God's manifestation).

There were others who began to observe Epiphany on this date also, but they believed (as confirmed correctly by the Church) that Jesus was the Christ from his birth. However, since Jesus' baptism occurred on or near the anniversary of his birth (Lk. 3:23), it seemed more fitting for them to observe January 6th in honor of his birth. This may have even served to counter the false teaching of the Gnostics, emphasizing by this observance, that he had an actual birth as the Christ. If so, setting aside a day to honor his birth did not stem from some ulterior motive.

A separation of the Nativity from the Theophany as two distinct feasts is providential, as the first feast honors the incarnation of the God-man, Jesus Christ; and the latter feast honors the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Was there a feasible basis for January 6th as the date of Christ's birth, and subsequent baptism 30 years later on this date? Was this based on some then-extant records? We can only offer this point to conjecture.

THE WINTER BIRTH

It is important to consider the winter birth tradition as this has come under question in recent times. Would winter be a feasible time for the birth Jesus Christ? Let us return once again to the Baptism of our Lord, as it is held that it also occurred in the winter months.

To the understanding of someone in the colder climates, the notion of winter suggests bitter cold and snow. The climate of the Bethlehem area is vastly different. The very low elevation of the Jordan where Jesus was baptized-near the Dead Sea, which is the lowest spot on earth-enjoys a very mild winter climate. We may also infer the weather was not a deterrent to conducting baptisms from the Gospel testimonies, which write of Saint John the Baptist performing a great many Baptisms. It is perfectly reasonable to accept that John had been baptizing for a period of time before Christ's baptism. Further proof of this is that Saint John had disciples, from which two became Apostles of the Lord.

What about travel for Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem in winter? It is very possible they would have chosen the route through the Jordan Valley. If so, a large percentage of the trip would have been below sea level, thus providing protection from cold weather, even in December. (The Jordan Valley runs between the Sea of Galilee at 689 feet below sea level, to the Dead Sea at 1,306 feet below sea level.)

Would winter have been the time for people like Joseph and Mary to be taxed? It seems likely that would occur in winter, for only then was field labor suspended! And what of the argument against the Shepherds in the field at winter. In another effort to rule-out December as the time of Christ's birth, it has been often stated that shepherds in that part of the world did not abide in the field during the middle of winter, rather by October 15th they would have brought their flocks home. But this is far from conclusive. There may have been exceptions. That some shepherds did face cold weather may be seen in Jacob's complaint to Laban, that he had suffered from frost by night (Gen. 31:40).

In his highly regarded and scholarly volumes, **The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah**, Alfred Edersheim says about December 25th:

"There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date. The objections generally made rest on grounds, which seem to me historically untenable."

Though various writers have charged that flocks would not lie out during the winter months, this was not true of all flocks. He cites ancient Jewish sources to the effect that there are flocks that "remain in the open alike in the hottest days and in the rainy season i.e. all the year round" (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Bk.2, p.186),

Tradition holds that Saint Luke the Evangelist was a Physician by trade. In this Gospel, the style suggests an emphasis on facts and details as we read from the first chapter:

"Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:1-3).

When Luke mentioned shepherds abiding in the field, did he seek to convey what time of year it was? We cannot be certain. Blessed were those shepherds, deemed worthy to behold the heavenly host. Clearly the Shepherds presence in the fields was of great import as they were first to hear the good news of the Incarnation, for they bore witness to the heavenly choir praising God and ushering the wishes for "peace on Earth, goodwill among men". It is very possible they were poor, living in the fields with the flock. If so, there is a beautiful contrast between the poverty of the shepherds and the splendor of the wise men. Both groups came to worship Jesus while he was an infant, a lovely example of how the message of Christ is for all people, rich or poor.

THE ROMAN / PAGAN CONNECTION

Some contemporary scholars have argued that December 25th was initially set forth as a pagan holiday, which was dedicated in 274 by the Roman emperor Aurelian to celebrate the Sun god, Sol Invictus. They further claim that the Church sought to "Christianize" this pagan celebration. Looking at previous practice among the pagan Emperors, we may infer with reason that it may have been quite the contrary. A prime example may be seen in the early 2nd century AD when the Emperor Hadrian ordered the construction of a temple to Venus over the site of Golgotha. The early Christian author Eusebius claims, in his Life of Constantine, that the site of the Church had originally been a Christian place of veneration, but that Hadrian had deliberately covered these Christian sites with earth, and built his own temple on top, due to his hatred for Christianity.

To restate from above, Hippolytus of Rome's assertion of a December 25th date predate the pagan celebration by approximately 60 years.

It is perfectly reasonable to accept the possibility that a pagan holiday could have been instituted to cover over a feast of the Lord.

Note:

Pachon – an Egyptian date that roughly corresponds to March-April.

