

When Was Jesus Born?

First, we need to read the story of the Annunciation and the events surrounding Jesus' birth:

Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 1:18-25

During this season the focus in our society is on the birth of Christ,

The best scholarship, however, places the birth of Christ in the fall, around the time of the Jewish feast of Rosh Hashanah. That would mean his conception by the Holy Spirit would have taken place around the time of Hanukkah. The Jews celebrate Hanukkah on the 25th of the month Chislev or Kislev, near the winter solstice, which falls on Dec. 21.

Jesus' date of birth is not explicitly stated in scripture. But it can be determined by clues given in the story of the birth of John the Baptist, who we know was six months older than Jesus.

John the Baptist's father Zacharias served as a priest in the Temple.

Out of the 24 courses of priests, Zacharias was "of the division of Abijah" (**Luke 1:5**). While Zachariah was performing his priestly duty "before God in the order of his course" the angel appeared to him to announcing John's coming. This is significant. We read in **1 Chronicles 24:10** that Abijah's division was the 8th in order of service.

The different courses of priests are described in the Talmud. We know from Josephus that the first division, the division of Jehoiarib, was on duty when Jerusalem was besieged during the first week of April, AD 70 (Nisan 1-8).

Each one of the 24 courses of priests was to serve in the Temple for one week at a time. The Bible says each course was to "come in on the Sabbath" and "go out on the Sabbath" (**2 Chronicles 23:8; 2 Kings 11:50**). Over the period of less than one year (48 weeks) each priestly course would serve twice in the Temple, according to the rotation. Each session would be separated by 6 months. (All would serve during the three major pilgrimage feasts).

Zachariah's course (the 8th) would have occurred after Pentecost during the 4th week of Sivan (mid-June). Assuming John was conceived within the week after Zechariah returned from his temple service, that would yield a date for the conception of Jesus six months later in mid-December, with his birth in the fall, around mid-September.

So How Did Christmas Become Jesus' Birthday?

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/how-december-25-became-christmas/>

There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers like Irenaeus (c. 130–200) or Tertullian (c. 160–225). Origen of Alexandria (c. 165–264) goes so far as to mock Roman celebrations of birth anniversaries, dismissing them as “pagan” practices—a strong indication that Jesus’ birth was not marked with similar festivities at that place and time. As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.

Around 200 A.D. some Christians began speculating about the date. By the 4th century two dates were settled on, December 25 in the western church and Jan. 6 in the East. Some liked the parallel of seeing the day of the death of a major figure as corresponding to the day of their conception. So they linked Jesus’ death at Passover in late March to his birth in late December.

Saturnalia

The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times.

Though Saturnalia started as a farmer’s festival to mark the end of the autumn planting season in honor of the god Saturn (*satus* means sowing, and Saturn was an agricultural deity whose worship brought prosperity), the celebration kept getting more and more elaborate and lasting longer over time.

The holiday was celebrated with a sacrifice at the Temple of Saturn, in the Roman Forum, and a public banquet, followed by private gift-giving, continual partying, and a carnival atmosphere that overturned Roman social norms: gambling was permitted, and masters provided table service for their slaves as it was seen as a time of liberty for both slaves and freedmen alike. Some saw it as representing a restoration of the ancient Golden Age, when the world was ruled by Saturn, no one was a slave, there was universal plenty, and people held all things in common.

One custom was the election of a "King of the Saturnalia" who presided over the merrymaking and whose commands, such as "Sing naked!" or "Throw him into cold water!" had to be obeyed by the other guests. (The idea was that the winter solstice was a precarious time, and by honoring slaves and putting a “fool” in charge, any unlucky or evil spell would fall on them rather than the normal ruling class).

Eventually, Saturnalia was extended from Dec. 17 to Dec. 20 and beyond. The Roman author Macrobius gave the festival a more philosophical interpretation, saying Saturnalia was a festival of light leading to the winter solstice, with the abundant presence of candles symbolizing the quest for knowledge and truth. But for most Romans it meant partying and self-indulgence.

Christmas during the Middle Ages was a time of raucous drinking, gambling, and overeating, and a boy would be elected "bishop for a day," much like during Saturnalia. The Puritans tried to outlaw Christmas in New England because it was so chaotic.

Rashi commented on Saturnalia: "Eight days before the solstice -- their festival was for all eight days," which slightly overstates the Saturnalia's eventual six-day length, possibly to associate and contrast the holiday with Hanukkah.

The Jews in Jesus' day related Esau and Edom to Rome, which was then the current supreme world power. The rabbis said the name Saturnalia stems from *śin'â ṭəmûnâ* or "hidden hatred," and refers to the hatred Esau harbored toward Jacob.

The Talmud traces the origins of Saturnalia back to Adam:

"When the First Man saw that the day was continuously shortening, he said, 'Woe is me! Because I have sinned, the world darkens around me, and returns to formlessness and void. This is the death to which Heaven has sentenced me!' He decided to spend eight days in fasting and prayer. When he saw the winter solstice, and he saw that the day was continuously lengthening, he said, 'It is the order of the world!' He went and feasted for eight days. The following year, he feasted for both. He established them in Heaven's name, but they established them in the name of idolatry" (Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah).

Birth of Sol Invictus

To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of a Syrian deity, Sol Invictus (the "Unconquered Sun"), on Dec. 25. From Aurelian to Constantine I, Sol was of supreme importance, until Constantine abandoned Sol in favor of Christianity. But the birth of Sol Invictus continued to be celebrated in the Empire.

Christians often built churches on the same spot previously occupied by pagan temples. Pope Gregory the Great, in a letter written in 601 A.D. to a Christian missionary in Britain, recommended that local pagan temples not be destroyed but be converted into churches, and that pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs. They did the same with the dates of celebrations, co-opting pagan holidays. The church father Ambrose (c. 339–397), for example, described Christ as the true sun who outshone the fallen gods of the old order. rather than the still popular "Sol Invictus."

Similarly, many of our Christmas traditions are pagan customs that have been co-opted by the church -

- Christmas trees are evergreens, which the Romans (as well as Germans and other barbarian tribes) used to decorate their temples during Saturnalia, along with holly and ivy and mistletoe. These all represent life and fertility, remaining green when everything else has died.

- Yule is the modern version of Old Norse *Jól* and *Jólnir*, one of the names for Odin. Yule Logs were first burned by Anglo-Saxon pagans to encourage the return of the sun at the winter solstice. The winter solstice was marked by smearing sacrificial blood on one's body and drinking lots of ale. The Christian King Haakon I of Norway who ruled

from 934 to 961 rescheduled Yule to coincide with the Christian celebration of the birth of Christ. Eventually the Yule celebrations were incorporated into “Yuletide” or the “12 days of Christmas” lasting from Christmas to Epiphany. A Yule boar was eaten, which has morphed into the traditional Christmas ham.

But... *Santa* can't be real, can he?

Santa is not a scrambled acrostic for “Satan.” Santa Claus developed from an actual Christian monk and bishop, St. Nicholas in Turkey. He anonymously delivered bags of food and coins to poor families and children. Nicholas was born in Patara in A.D. 270 and served as Bishop of Myra, both seaport towns off Turkey’s southern coast where he lived all his life (and died in 345). He spent seven years tortured and imprisoned for his faith in Christ under the Diocletian persecution. Much later his Dutch name “Sinterklaas” was brought to America with immigrants to New Amsterdam (Manhattan) and was corrupted to “Santa Claus” by English speakers. Candy canes derive from the crozier, the bishop’s staff of St. Nicholas.

In summary, we don’t get any “points” for celebrating Jesus’ birth on Rosh Hashanah, since there is no instruction for Christians to mark His birthday at all. Denouncing Christmas trees and pagan practices just makes Christians sound like Scrooge or the Grinch.

Instead we need to see Christmas as an opportunity. Christmas is actually the perfect time to talk about Jesus with friends and family and people within our orbit. There is indeed a “reason for the season,” although it’s a more complicated story than is generally known.

By explaining how Hanukkah was the setting for the Annunciation to Mary and the conception of Jesus, we can again transform the holiday into something of value to God.

Like the enemy nations “subdued” by King David in **2 Samuel 8**, which then sent gifts and tribute to be used in the Temple, these pagan traditions can in fact be transformed to further His kingdom.