

The Christmas Controversy

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CHRISTMAS CAN BE an emotionally charged time for believers, some because they are so moved by the cosmic significance of Messiah's birth, others because they are so offended by seemingly pagan elements in traditional celebrations.

Among the first things Christians learn to cherish when discovering the Jewish roots of their faith are the divinely appointed biblical Feasts. Correspondingly, among the first things they begin to view with suspicion are the traditional holidays of Christmas and Easter.

Why they wonder did the Church forsake the "appointed times of the Lord," so spiritually rich and full of messianic implications, and institute instead two holidays that seem to connect historically to the dissolute Roman winter-solstice festival of Saturnalia and to pagan fertility rites of spring? What do bedecked trees and bunny rabbits have to do with Messiah's birth and his resurrection?

Feelings on both sides of this issue can be heated, even hostile. A common charge is that Christmas trees partake of the idolatry spoken of in Jeremiah 10:1-4. One critic even claims that when we sing the traditional carol "Noel" we actually are declaring that there is "no God" (no *Elohim*). And that "Santa" is really just a disguised form of "Satan" (with the letters transposed)!

On the other side are the traditionalists who treasure the Christmas holiday — and all that it means for their family, their community, and their relationship to God — who get highly defensive about such criticisms. They feel that to reject Christmas is tantamount to rejecting Jesus and diminishing if not outright denying his incarnation.

Actually the issues are far more complex than usually

acknowledged in polemical exchanges. So the first step in sorting out the Christmas controversy is to become better informed about the facts and the varying interpretations thereof. One resource is a lecture I gave on the subject, considered both historically and spiritually, available at jcstudies.com: [*Christmas—“Halleluyah!” Praise or “Bah Humbug!” Paganism?*](#)

HERE ARE some factors to consider.

The birth date of Jesus of Nazareth is not mentioned in the Bible and remains unknown. The one thing scholars agree on is that it was *not* on 25 December at the beginning of the present era. (More likely is a date between 6 and 4 BC.) Ancient Jewish tradition did not commemorate birthdays, considering it a pagan custom. Indeed the only birthdays mentioned in the Bible are those of Pharaoh (Gen 40:20) and Herod (Mat 14:6).

It was nearly 400 hundred years after his birth that the celebration of Christ's nativity on 25 December became widespread in the Western (Roman) Church. The Church in Jerusalem remained one of the last holdouts, until the mid-sixth century.

The Church Fathers' emphasis upon the Festival of the Nativity in the fourth century was not unrelated to their efforts: 1) to counter the pervasive and popular paganism of the Roman Saturnalia festivities, and 2) to reinforce in the public's mind the significance of the Incarnation of the Son of God, contra the widely held Arian heresy.

Drawing attention to the Nativity of the Messiah is biblical (both Matthew and Luke do so). The *festival* of the Nativity is post-biblical (coming centuries after Christ's birth) and from the

beginning has had its detractors (e.g., the Puritans).

“Post-biblical” does not automatically mean “anti-biblical.”

Hanukkah is a rabbinic, post-Old Testament festival based on an historic event in Jewish history, yet one which Jesus himself honored (John 10:22-23).

The Bible is opposed to idolatry but not to the use of images. A Passover *seder* for example is replete with memorable and spiritually meaningful images. Symbols are important and powerful but they are not magical. We need not fear them. Their meaning and influence are related to the circumstances and the intentionality of the individual or community using them, and therefore can change over time.

•By all means, Christians should rejoice over Messiah’s birth. And when it comes to the Festival of the Nativity (Christmas), be respectful of differing viewpoints, and creative and cautious in how you celebrate. Don’t let a materialistic culture dictate how you honor a holy and altogether joyous occasion: *“For unto you is born this day... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!”*



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