

Is Christmas a Pagan Holiday?

No, it isn't ... er, yes it is

by Larry and June Acheson

December of the Gregorian calendar is without a doubt a very frustrating month for those who mingle within the current culture of these United States of America, but do *not* celebrate Christmas. December is filled with a cacophony of “Merry Christmases” and “Happy Holidays,” not to mention the unending stream of merry melodies and gift-giving attempts by some very well-meaning, yet woefully uninformed, people. To many who celebrate Christmas, it is truly a joyous time of year and there is often an overwhelming desire to wish fellow men a Merry Christmas. If you work alongside such individuals, it can be difficult to get through the season without also being compelled to accept a small token of their Christmas spirit, often in the form of candy. To those who understand its origin and its relation to Scripture, Christmas is irritating, annoying, bothersome and several other similar adjectives as well. Simply put, it’s a pain. Sadly, the people I work with are not willing to look any further than their own upbringing to find where this popular holiday came from and learn why it cannot have the approval of the Creator, Who is revealed to us in the Bible. It is also disconcerting that most of today’s society is in the same proverbial boat – content to continue observing a “holy day” without taking the time to see “who” deemed it “holy.”

One of the challenges faced by those of us who know the true origin of Christmas is that of how to get along with a society that doesn’t know – and doesn’t *want* to know. It’s not easy because we are left to balance our understanding with such Biblical admonitions as the one found in Romans 12:18:

¹⁸If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

We should always do our best to get along with others, bearing with the various idiosyncrasies that we all have, and it is inevitable that we’re going to have a few religious differences with others during our journey through life. In the early days of our non-Christmas observance, we would actually try to politely answer the Merry Christmas wishes with an explanation that we don’t celebrate Christmas, hoping to come across an occasional free-thinker who was interested in research and willing to change for the sake of truth. Some folks would actually nod in faux understanding before changing the subject; others would vigorously defend its honor with their best summary of the account of the infant Messiah and the gifts brought by the wise men. To the best of my knowledge, no one’s minds were ever changed as a result of such discussions. Nowadays, I generally answer the Merry Christmas greeting with, “Merry EVERY DAY to you!” It’s a means of accepting the well-wishes without communicating approval of the observance. Other believers we know have their own general responses and so long as we’re respectful without necessarily agreeing, we can succeed in at least gently opening the door for further discussion.

Not all believers are respectful with their reactions to the “Merry Christmas” greeting. We recently read of a man who was escorted off a jetliner because, upon enduring a second “Merry Christmas” from the airline staff (first from a cheerful gate agent, then later from a flight attendant), he flipped out and began lecturing the crew, including the pilot, on the fact that they need to modify their greeting to suit his standard because not everyone celebrates Christmas. Not surprisingly, the passengers erupted in cheers and applause as he was being removed from the plane. What would have been surprising would have

been anyone's mind having been changed about Christmas celebrations or greetings as a result of the would-be passenger's verbal assault.¹

While rare, occasionally June and I are given the opportunity to (respectfully) let others know that we do not celebrate Christmas. Even more rarely are we given the opportunity to share *why* we don't. For those who would prefer to read about our reasoning, we decided to compose this study.

Although virtually every encyclopedia and reference work points out the pagan origin of Christmas, it recently occurred to me that very few believers are able or willing to put two and two together to realize that this celebration does *not* have our Heavenly Father's blessing.² After all, earlier in the year, a co-worker asked me why I don't celebrate Valentine's Day. The quick and accurate answer is, "Because it's pagan," but you really need to lay a foundation with your listening audience before you summarize things this way and with that answer I ended up offending her to the point that she was no longer willing to pursue a discussion. She remains convinced that Valentine's Day has a very noble origin.

As Christmas drew nearer in 2014, it occurred to me that this same co-worker or maybe someone with a probing mind might ask why I don't celebrate it. Of course, I knew the odds of the original co-worker risking yet another offense were minimal (and sure enough, she didn't ask); nevertheless, I was curious as to what sort of defense a challenger might come up with, so I decided to conduct an online search to see what "pro-Christmas" arguments are out there. My very first "hit" proved very interesting indeed. I read a blog composed by an author who passionately argues that Christmas is *not* a pagan holiday. The article contains some very plausible reasoning, but alas, it has enough errors and half-truths that I could only shake my head in disbelief. Of course, I don't expect you to take my word for it; read it for yourself:

<http://catholicknight.blogspot.com/2012/12/is-christmas-pagan.html>

The author of "Is Christmas Pagan?" concludes, "So in answer to the above question. No, Christmas is not Pagan. Far from it really, but it seems that some people are hell bent on finding something Pagan about it, regardless if it is true or historically accurate. So have a Happy Advent and a Merry Christmas everyone!" Prior to stating his conclusion, the anonymous author offered in detail what he considered the best and most accurate explanations about the true origin of Christmas. Because his arguments are outside the scope of the usual ones we've seen, I decided to address them, just in case someone would like a "point-counterpoint."

¹ C.f., *New York Post*, article "Passenger Tossed After Flipping Out Over Staff's 'Merry Christmas,'" by Michael Liss, Daniel Prendergast and Philip Messing, December 25, 2014. <http://nypost.com/2014/12/25/plane-passenger-tossed-after-angry-reaction-to-merry-christmas>.

² For example, the encyclopedia that I had access to as a child plainly states, "The Christmas story comes from the Bible," and it goes on to justify the giving of presents as being done "... in memory of the gifts that the shepherds and the wise men brought to the Christ Child." It is only through more careful reading that we find such questionable features as the origin of the Christmas tree: "There are several stories about the origin of the Christmas tree. People in Scandinavia once worshiped trees. When they became Christians, they made their sacred evergreen trees part of Christian festivals." About Santa Claus coming down the chimney with a sack full of toys: "For example, the belief that Santa Claus enters the house through the chimney developed from an old Norse legend. The Norse believed that the goddess Hertha appeared in the fireplace and brought good luck to the home." From *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, Chicago, IL, 1961, pp. 408, 415. *The New Book of Knowledge*, Vol. 3, Grolier, Incorporated, New York, NY, 1972, p. 289, is more forthright: "In early times this day was not one of the feasts of the Christian Church. In fact, the church fathers frowned upon the celebration of birthdays and thought them a heathen custom."

The first thing we should look for when attempting to decide whether or not a certain celebration is pagan is what is known as “approved Scriptural example.” After all, if the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament authors to celebrate Christmas, we would expect them to not only endorse this holiday, but they would also describe at least one observance and mention the day on which this special day was annually celebrated. Not surprisingly, the author of “Is Christmas Pagan?” didn’t list a single approved Scriptural example. Of course, that’s because there is none for him to offer. We understand that many believers, out of an obviously earnest attempt to justify gift-giving at Christmas, cite the story of the wise men who brought gifts to the infant Yeshua. They overlook the fact that this event is not accompanied by an explanation or suggestion that it thus became customary to exchange gifts in celebration of His birth. Moreover, very few believers are aware of the fact that the wise men who presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh didn’t enter a stable to visit Him; rather, the Messiah was by then dwelling in a house (Matt 2:11). In a way, I can see how someone might use that verse as a pretext for gift-giving, but when you consider the fact that these were gifts for a child whom the wise men knew was born “King of the Jews,” it becomes clear that Matthew recorded a one-time gift offered to royalty instead of a precedent for all future generations of believers to follow.

We have established, then, that Christmas is not a Scriptural observance because it is neither mentioned by name in Scripture nor is its method of observance described. June and I agreed that if we had been raised in an isolated environment that was removed from the concept of Christmas celebrations, neither of us could have or would have come away from an in-depth study of the Bible with an understanding that we need to celebrate Christmas. Clearly, Christmas is an unscriptural holiday. However, we still need to explore whether or not it is “pagan.”

Before we investigate whether or not Christmas is pagan, we should first define what “pagan” means. I know in my own writings, I often use the words “pagan” and “heathen” interchangeably. To me, they’re synonymous. The Hebrew word commonly translated “heathen” is the word *goy* (גוֹי), which *Strong’s Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary* defines as “a foreign nation; hence, a Gentile.” *The New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* defines heathen as “A member of a people which does not acknowledge the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic God; a pagan or idolater; an irreligious or unenlightened person.”³ This same dictionary defines “pagan” as “One who worships false gods or subscribes to a polytheistic religion; one who is neither a Christian, a Jew, nor a Mohammedan; a heathen; an idolater; a person with no religion.”⁴

I think it’s safe to say that most folks in our society would read the above definitions and promptly conclude that Christmas cannot be a pagan observance. After all, it is celebrated by those who acknowledge the Almighty of the Bible. That alone, in their estimation, qualifies Christmas as a “non-pagan” holiday. However, apart from the fact that there is no Scriptural record of believers celebrating Christmas, there are other aspects of this holiday that signal pagan overtures. One aspect that is so widely accepted that everyone *assumes* its noble origin is that of celebrating the birthday of the Messiah. However, once again, there is no record in Scripture of any believers celebrating His birthday; in fact, there is no record of *any* believers celebrating birthdays at all. The only recorded birthday observances are heathen events and in each instance an execution was carried out.⁵ The typical believer objects to our

³ From *The New Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, item “heathen,” the Delair Publishing Company, Inc., Melrose Park, IL, 1981.

⁴ Ibid, item “pagan.”

⁵ Cf., Genesis 40:20-22, where the Pharaoh, on his birthday, had the chief baker hanged and Matthew 14:6-10, where John the Baptist was beheaded on King Herod’s birthday.

presenting this fact because the Scriptural omission of birthday celebrations by righteous believers doesn't necessarily mean they didn't celebrate birthdays. Conversely, however, it doesn't mean they *did*, either, so we need to be careful about presuming too much, especially when we consider the fact that Judaism agrees that, historically-speaking, it was *not* their custom to celebrate birthdays. The following admission comes from *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*:

BIRTHDAY: No observances or celebrations are traditionally connected in Jewish custom with the anniversary of a person's birth, the sole such occasion mentioned in the Bible being Pharaoh's b. (Gen. 40:20).⁶

For those who might need a little help assimilating all this information, what we have just learned is that the Messiah, who was very Jewish, did not ever celebrate His own birthday. Consider for a moment the irony of this situation: The biggest, grandest, religious celebration of the year centers around the birth of a man who never celebrated His own birthday. At its very core, the celebration of Christmas belies the example set by the man Whom its celebrants claim to follow. In Torah, we are instructed to observe to do as Yahweh our Almighty has commanded us, being careful to not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.⁷ When we adopt the non-Jewish custom of celebrating birthdays, a custom that from old times has been popular among heathens, we are in essence "turning aside."

If I were to decide to celebrate my own birthday, I would be inclined to wonder why birthdays are well-attested, both in Scripture and elsewhere, as having been so popular among heathens, yet absent from the lives of the righteous. I would wonder why there is no evidence that the Messiah ever observed His own birthday. I would wonder why there is no record of believers observing it during the decades that followed his death, burial and resurrection. Finally, I would wonder why it took over 300 years for the Holy Spirit to inspire believers to begin its celebration. The average believer doesn't wonder these things; he or she is simply content to follow the traditions as handed down. I'm not an average believer and I don't think any of us should be content with "average."

We are told in Scripture to not learn the ways of the heathen,⁸ but from what I can see, when we follow the tradition of celebrating birthdays, we are following a heathen custom. It's certainly not one that was initiated by Jews. When we choose to participate in the celebration of Christmas, we are ourselves adopting the custom of birthday celebrations and conferring it upon the Man whom we claim to follow, even though He Himself did not celebrate His own birthday. This act, in and of itself, makes Christmas a pagan observance. I might add that some pretty revered ancient scholars agree; in fact, try consulting the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, where we read that Origen (185-232 CE) wrote that in the Scriptures sinners alone, not saints, celebrate their birthday.⁹ That is testimony from a very ancient source, but of course, today's modern-minded Catholics give very little credence to the notion that birthday celebrations are foreign to the Word (and the Man) they claim to follow.

⁶ From *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, edited by Dr. R.J. Zevi Werblowsky and Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., Chicago, IL, 1965, p. 71.

⁷ Cf., Deuteronomy 5:32.

⁸ Cf., Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Jeremiah 10:2.

⁹ You can access the *Catholic Encyclopedia* online. The "Christmas" article is at the following link: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>.

Speaking of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, I'm wondering if the anonymous Catholic author took the time to examine this encyclopedia's "Christmas" article. We will spare you from the details this reference supplies of the pagan origin of nearly all Christmas customs, but here is a summary:

- As previously mentioned, it took well over 300 years for the Holy Spirit to lead anyone to celebrate Christmas, presuming of course, that the Almighty does indeed recognize its observance. For example, we read the following development in the year 386 CE: "In view of a reaction to certain Jewish rites and feasts, Chrysostom tries to unite Antioch in celebrating Christ's birth on 25 December, part of the community having already kept it on that day for at least ten years. In the West, he says, the feast was thus kept, *another*; its introduction into Antioch he had always sought, conservatives always resisted." Question: If conservatives resisted the observance of Christmas, does this mean the liberals won? Is Yahweh a liberal?
- Surely you can't associate the giving of Christmas presents with paganism, can you? Yet notice the following admission from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

Cards and presents

Pagan customs centering round the January calends gravitated to Christmas. Thiele (*Yule and Christmas*, London, 1899) has collected many interesting examples. The *strenæ* (*acute*; *trennes*) of the Roman 1 January (bitterly condemned by Tertullian, *de Idol.*, xiv and x, and by Maximus of Turin, *Hom. ciii*, *de Kal. gentil.*, in P.L., LVII, 492, etc.) survive as Christmas presents, cards, boxes.

The encyclopedia article mentions a book authored by Thiele, *Yule and Christmas*, stating that it has many interesting examples of pagan customs centering around the January calends that gravitated to the celebration of Christmas.¹⁰ To that end, we decided to browse through Thiele's book and, indeed, he brings out the fact that pagan customs associated with the Saturnalia festival and the calends of January were incorporated into what are now recognized as *Christmas* customs. Here's an excerpt from the book:

Since even Professor Weinhold admits that the Roman calendar was one of the three forces which shaped the medieval German calendar, it will be worth while to see what kind the Roman customs were which could be transferred to Germany along with the institution of the Calends of January and the neighbouring festivals. There was first of all the custom of New-Year's gifts or *Strenæ*.¹¹

In imperial Rome the people and the Senate were expected to present New-Year's gifts to the emperors,¹² it being related that Augustus had had a nocturnal vision requiring that people should annually, on a certain day, present money to him, which he received with a hollow hand. During his reign they were given on the Capitol; but Caligula was so lost to a sense of shame, as to publish an edict expressly requiring such gifts, and to stand in the porch of the palace, on the

¹⁰ The actual name of the author referenced by the encyclopedia is Alexander Tille, not Thiele.

¹¹ Alexander Tille's footnote: The habit of New-Year's presents *boni ominis causa* is first mentioned by Plautus (+ 184 B.C.) in his *Stichus*, iii., 2, 6; v. 2, 24. Their purpose is explained by Ovid, *Fasti*, i. 187. Cakes and fruits were the principal gifts (Martialis, viii. 33; xiii. 37; Seneca, *Epistulae*, lxxxvii.). It seems to have been under Augustus that money took the place of these eatables. The custom still prevailed about A.D. 400 under the emperors Arcadius and Honorius.

¹² Alexander Tille's footnote: Suetonius, in *Augustus*, chap. lvii; in *Tiberius*, chap. xxxiv.; in *Caligula*, chap. xlii. Compare Preller, *Römische Mythologie*, p. 161.

Calends of January, in order to receive those which people of all descriptions brought to him.¹³ It was reckoned a handsome enough way of receiving gifts, when the bosom-fold of the cloak was expanded; but when they were received with both hands hollow, or in "goupins," to use the Scotch word, it was accounted objectionable. Hence rapine was proverbially expressed in that manner.

But the celebration of the Calends of January was by no means the only festivity of that time of the year in ancient Rome; there was a whole series of festivals, so that Seneca (+A.D. 39) could write to his friend Lucilius: "It is now the month of December, when the greatest part of the city is in bustle. Loose reins are given to public dissipation; everywhere you may hear the sound of great preparations, as if there were some real difference between the days dedicated to Saturn and those for transacting business. Thus, I am disposed to think, that he was not far from the truth who said that anciently it was the month of December, but now the year. Were you here, I would willingly confer with you as to the plan of our conduct; whether we should live in our usual way, or, to avoid singularity, both take a better supper and throw off the toga. For what was not wont to be done, except in a tumult or during some public calamity in the city, is now done for the sake of pleasure, and from regard to the festival. Men change their dress. It were certainly far better to be thrifty and sober amidst a drunken crowd, disgorging what they had recently swallowed."¹⁴

These festivals were the *Saturnalia*, with their equality between rich and poor, freemen and slaves, and their presents of all descriptions, lasting from December 17 to December 19; or seven days, from December 17 to December 23. All labour rested, and, under the call *Io Saturnalia! Io Saturnalia!* people gave themselves to a wild joy. Then followed the *Brumalia*, fixed by Caesar erroneously on December 25, the alleged shortest day of the year, called since that time occasionally *Dies Invicti Solis*, day of the unconquered sun. The character of *Saturnalia*, *Brumalia*, and *Kalendae Januariae* was very wild and lascivious, so wild that, together with the *Matronalia* of the first of March (and sometimes with the *Septimontium*, the feast of incorporation of the seven hills with the city of Rome, also celebrated in December), they were, by the fathers of the Christian Church, regarded as a perfect essence of heathendom, which was by no means meant to be a compliment. So Tertullian (+ A.D. 220) could say: "By us who are strangers to sabbaths and new moons, once acceptable to God, the *Saturnalia*, and the feasts of January, and *Brumalia*, and *Matonalia*, are frequented; gifts are sent hither and thither; there is the noise of the *Strenae*, and of games and feasting. O! better faith of the nations in their own religions, which adopts no solemnity of the Christians."¹⁵

With the introduction of the Julian calendar all kinds of southern Calends rights found entrance to the Germanics: the making of processions through the streets and singing of songs, the lighting of candles and lamps, the adorning of their houses with laurel and green trees, the giving of presents, men dressing up in

¹³ Alexander Tille's footnote: Suetonius, in *Caligula*, chap. xlii.

¹⁴ Alexander Tille's footnote: Seneca, *Epistulae*, xviii; Jamieson, *Etym. Dict. of Scot. Lang.*, "Yule," IV.

¹⁵ Alexander Tille's footnote: Tertullian, *De Idolatria*, chap. xiv. These sweetmeats, called by the name of *Strenae*, were therefore prohibited by the early church (V. Rosin, *Antiquitates*, p. 29). The *Strenae* are traced as far back as to King Tadius, who at this season used to receive branches of a happy or fortunate tree from the grove of *Streniae* as favourable omens with respect to the new year. In another passage (*De Idolatria*, chap. x.) Tertullian says: "Saturnalia, strenae captandae, et septimontium, et brumae, et carae cogtionis honoraria exigenda omnia." Compare also Tertullian's *De Fuga in Persecutione*, chap. xiii.

women's garments, masquerades in the hides of animals, and the erection of a table of fortune for the good luck of the new year.¹⁶

From our perspective, those who read the above information, yet do not see the connection between Christmas, *Saturnalia*, *Brumalia* and the *Calends* are those who are determined to solemnize the observance of Christmas no matter what. Let's face it: Some folks simply will not accept the cold facts of an unpleasant reality. Nineteenth century author Alexander Tille saw the connection, as did the "Church fathers" whom he quoted. Moreover, early 20th century author Clement A. Miles recorded the observations of a fourth-century sophist named Libanius, who offered the following description of the *Kalends* celebration:

"The festival of the Kalends," he says, "is celebrated everywhere as far as the limits of the Roman Empire extend.... Everywhere may be seen carousals and well-laden tables; luxurious abundance is found in the houses of the rich, but also in the houses of the poor better food than usual is put upon the table. The impulse to spend seizes everyone. He who the whole year through has taken pleasure in saving and piling up his pence, becomes suddenly extravagant. He who erstwhile was accustomed and preferred to live poorly, now at this feast enjoys himself as much as his means will allow.... People are not only generous towards themselves, but also towards their fellow-men. A stream of presents pours itself out on all sides.... The highroads and footpaths are covered with whole processions of laden men and beasts.... As the thousand flowers which burst forth everywhere are the adornment of Spring, so are the thousand presents poured out on all sides, the decoration of the Kalends feast. It may justly be said that it is the fairest time of the year.... The Kalends festival banishes all that is connected with toil, and allows men to give themselves up to undisturbed enjoyment. From the minds of young people it removes two kinds of dread: the dread of the schoolmaster and the dread of the stern pedagogue. The slave also it allows, so far as possible, to breathe the air of freedom.... Another great quality of the festival is that it teaches men not to hold too fast to their money, but to part with it and let it pass into other hands."¹⁷

Author Clement Miles, upon supplying the above citation, wrote, "The resemblances here to modern Christmas customs are very striking." Miles further writes:

We find then many pagan practices concealed beneath a superficial Christianity—often under the mantle of some saint—but side by side with these are many usages never Christianized even in appearance, and obviously identical with heathen customs against which the Church thundered in the days of her youth. Grown old and tolerant—except of novelties—she has long since ceased to attack them, and they have themselves mostly lost all definite religious meaning. As the old pagan faith decayed, they tended to become in a literal sense "superstition," something standing over, like shells from which the living occupant has gone. They are now often mere "survivals" in the technical folk-lore sense, pieces of custom separated from the beliefs that once gave them meaning, performed only because in a vague

¹⁶ From *Yule and Christmas: Their Place in the Germanic Year*, by Alexander Tille, PH.D, David Nutt, Publisher, London, 1899, pp. 84-87. This book is currently available online at the following link: <https://archive.org/stream/yulechristmasthe00tillrich#page/84/mode/2up>.

¹⁷ From *Christmas In Ritual and Tradition*, by Clement A. Miles, published by T. Fisher Unwin, 1912, p. 168.

sort of way they are supposed to bring good luck. In many cases those who practise them would be quite unable to explain how or why they work for good.¹⁸

If the above author's summary, written over 100 years ago, consisted of his own personal observations, I could see why someone might question his findings. However, he cites fourth-century observers, which adds quite a bit of credibility to his own conclusion.

This was quite a digression from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on Christmas, but I think it demonstrated that the evidence reveals that Christmas observance was adopted as a result of syncretizing the already-existing customs from *Saturnalia*, *Brumalia* and the *Kalends*, then formulating a separate "birthday celebration" for the Messiah, even though no Jewish believers were ever known to have celebrated their own birthdays and even though such authorities as Origen plainly recognized birthday celebrations as unscriptural for believers (but not for sinners). The *Catholic Encyclopedia* continues identifying additional Christmas customs with paganism:

The yule log

The calend fires were a scandal even to Rome, and St. Boniface obtained from Pope Zachary their abolition. But probably the Yule-log in its many forms was originally lit only in view of the cold season. Only in 1577 did it become a public ceremony in England; its popularity, however, grew immense, especially in Provence; in Tuscany, Christmas is simply called *ceppo* (block, log — Bonaccorsi, op. cit., p. 145, n. 2). Besides, it became connected with other usages; in England, a tenant had the right to feed at his lord's expense as long as a wheel, i.e. a round, of wood, given by him, would burn, the landlord gave to a tenant a load of wood on the birth of a child; *Kindsfuss* was a present given to children on the birth of a brother or sister, and even to the farm animals on that of Christ, the universal little brother (Tiele, op. cit., p. 95 sqq.).

Not only does the *Catholic Encyclopedia* expose the pagan origin of such customs as birthday celebrations, gift-giving at year's end (the *Strenae*) and the yule log, but it also forthrightly addresses the same pagan origins of Santa Claus and displays of greenery (including Christmas trees). In summary, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* recognizes the pagan customs associated, not only with current Christmas celebrations, but also the connection of these same customs with the very inception of this observance. This reference goes so far as to admit that their early "Church fathers" condemned most, if not all, the practices that are embraced today.

This brings us to the anonymous author of the "Is Christmas Pagan?" online article. The main reason I supplied the above Catholic admissions about the pagan origin of Christmas is because the author of "Is Christmas Pagan?" is himself a proud Catholic, who is nevertheless determined to validate the sanctity of observing Christmas. I could expound on several concerns that I have about this man's article. First, he doesn't identify himself. Is he so uncertain of his research that he is afraid of identifying himself as the

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 162.

author? Anonymity is often excused as modest humility, but that reasoning suggests that including one's name equates to publicity-seeking, when nothing could be further from the truth. Not identifying yourself as the author of an article is actually an unwritten means of stating, "I don't really want to accept responsibility for what I wrote, so I'm leaving out my name." It's also a mark of poor journalism. From my perspective, it's also a red flag announcing a poorly researched article. Since the author didn't supply any supportive references to validate anything that he wrote, my concern about poor journalism was validated.

It doesn't take long for the author to expose his poor research skills. In his over-confident "history lesson," he frankly states that the idea that the celebration of Christmas originated from pagan origin comes from two 18th century scholars. We have already debunked his history lesson, showing that third-century theologian Origen denounced the celebration of birthdays long before the first records of Christmas celebrations ever took place. The additional information from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and other sources affirms that the customs from which Christmas celebrations developed were considered pagan long before the 18th century.

The anonymous author of "Is Christmas Pagan?" proceeds to give yet another unsubstantiated history lesson, attributing the origin of Christmas celebrations, not to infusing customs from the *Saturnalia*, *Brumalia* and *Kalends* into a new observance in honor of the Messiah's birth, but rather from the Jewish festival *Hanukkah*:

Let's begin with the ancient Christian community in Rome, which had a fairly sizable Jewish convert population for some time. These Jewish converts to the Christian faith were accustomed to celebrating the Jewish Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah), which early Gentile Christians certainly would not have had any problem celebrating with them, since the Scriptures record that Jesus himself kept this feast (John 10:22-23). However, in the years following the forced separation of Christianity from Judaism and the fall of the Second Temple (AD 70), Jewish Christians would have found themselves increasingly isolated and alienated from the larger Jewish community, and many of these Jewish Christians were "put out of the synagogues" anyway. Jews used a complicated lunar calendar in which the months never coincided with the civil calendar commonly used in the Roman Empire during that time. So Jewish Christians living outside of the Holy Land, would have found themselves alienated from all Jewish times and seasons once they were "put out of the synagogues" (Jewish excommunication). Thus early Jewish Christians found themselves completely immersed in a civil culture that had no connection to the Jewish calendar whatsoever, and any attempt to calculate the times and seasons among themselves would have resulted in endless debates and disputes between them. So they did what any Jew would do in a similar situation. They assimilated into the prevailing culture, but kept their distinctively Jewish identity and customs. Because they were believers in Jesus Christ however, they did so in a Christian context.

Jews always marked the 25th day of the winter month of *Kislev* as the start of the eight-day Feast of Hanukkah. Because they no longer had access to the Jewish lunar calendar, having been "put out of the synagogue," they simply observed the 25th day of the month that most closely aligned with the winter month of *Kislev*. That month on the Roman (Julian) calendar is December. So for Christians of Jewish ancestry in ancient Rome, December 25th became of significant importance as the beginning of the Festival of Dedication, in which Jews remember the light that came into the Second Temple after the Maccabean

Revolution in BC 167 - 160. From a Jewish Christian perspective, this would have taken on even more significance, marking the coming of The Light of God (Jesus Christ) into the Temple as well (John 10:22-23). However, the Jewish Christians were about to get a surprise from the Gentile Christians that would make their celebration even more significant.

The proposal that Christmas actually stems from *Hanukkah* is an interesting one and we are persuaded that there is at least a kernel of truth to the above author's rendition of history. Let's consider the fact that *Hanukkah* has always been dubbed "the festival of lights" – long before the origin of Christmas celebrations. Yet, we all know that Christmas celebrations are punctuated with elaborate light displays. Could this custom have been borrowed from *Hanukkah* in Christianity's determination to compete with the Jewish observance? Nevertheless, any further connections between Christmas and Hanukkah are based on speculative conjecture. The author's notion that Jews who were "put out of the synagogue" were no longer able to observe Hanukkah is fundamentally preposterous. This would be like saying Christians who are "put out of the Church" are no longer able to celebrate Christmas. June and I have observed Hanukkah since 1991, yet no Jewish synagogue would ever welcome us because (a) we recognize Yeshua as the promised Messiah and the son of Yahweh and (b) we reject Judaism's *ineffable name doctrine*, which holds that the Creator's name is too holy to speak. The above author also depicts the Hebrew calendar as being "complicated." While there are some modern-day disputes over when the new year begins with the Hebrew calendar, there is no evidence to suggest such a controversy existed during the first century. If we can assume that all of first-century Judaism knew when to begin the new year, there is nothing "complicated" about it at all. Each month began with the observance of the new moon crescent, a heavenly beacon that all can see, but even if it's not visible on the 29th day at sunset due to clouds or other conditions, the month will never be more than 30 days in length. On the other hand, with the Gregorian calendar if one isn't careful to keep track of the days, he could easily forget or lose sight of which month is in progress!

We will not dispute the possibility that some uneducated Gentile converts to the Messiah may have gotten confused about *Hanukkah* observance on the 25th of the Hebrew month *Kislev* (or *Caslev*). However, there is no record of any such thing having occurred, nor did the anonymous author offer any examples, so for him to assume that this is what happened *en masse* is more than a little presumptuous on his part. He goes on to write, "In time the Jewish population of the early Church faded away, and with them the Jewish origins of Christmas fell into obscurity. Hints and clues of this have remained with us to this day, but they are veiled by a general lack of historical knowledge." I would surmise that if the author of "Is Christmas Pagan?" has the historical knowledge that June and I lack, one way to remedy our ignorance would be to supply evidence supporting his claim. He does not deliver.

The anonymous author proceeds to supply some half-truths that will probably suffice to persuade those who are more into surface reading than actual research. For example, we will not deny that Christians were persecuted during the first three centuries of the common era, but the way he presents things, the Jews were a protected people while Christians were constantly tortured and fed to lions:

Essentially, the early Christians were rejected by the larger Jewish population and told they no longer had any connection to the Jewish faith and religion whatsoever. They were all "put out of the synagogue" so to speak, many of which having never been granted admission in the first place, in what amounted to a full scale mass excommunication from Judaism and all things Jewish. It was this ejection from Judaism that led to the Roman persecution of Christians in the first place. So long as Christianity was considered a Jewish sect, Christians were under

an accommodation made between the Jewish leaders and the Roman Empire that exempted them from having to participate in emperor worship. (Jewish leaders had for centuries agreed to make sacrifices to the Jewish God Yahweh on behalf of Caesar, and pray for Yahweh to bless his rule, rather than actually worship Caesar as everyone else was required to. Because such action guaranteed Jewish allegiance to Rome, there was no need to force the emperor worship cult on the Jews.) However, as Christians were ejected from all things Jewish, the Pharisees made arguments before Roman authorities that Christians could no longer enjoy the exemptions afforded to Jews. Thus, when Rome finally agreed that Christians were no longer Jewish (AD 67), the Christians were then required to worship Caesar. When they refused, they were tortured and put to death in the circuses of Rome. This Roman persecution of Christians continued from the late 1st century, until the Edict of Milan in AD 312.

When we read the above commentary, we are expected to believe that Judaism enjoyed the favor of Rome and could worship according to their laws, whereas Christians were required to bow to emperor worship or die. We will not deny that Christians were persecuted, nor will we deny that there was a time when Judaism was permitted to practice their laws in their own way (so long as they paid their taxes); nevertheless, but the picture was not nearly as bleak for Christianity as the one he paints for his readers. For example, here is a summary found in the *Wikipedia* article “Anti-Christian policies in the Roman Empire”:

Although provincial governors in the Roman Empire had a great deal of personal discretion and power to do what they felt was needed in their jurisdiction, and there were local and sporadic incidents of persecution and mob violence against Christians, for most of the first three hundred years of Christian history Christians were able to live in peace, practice professions, and rise to positions of responsibility. Only for approximately ten out of the first three hundred years of the church's history were Christians executed due to orders from a Roman emperor.¹⁹

When an author presents half-truths in biased fashion, it becomes difficult to sort out truth from fiction and that is precisely what the author of “Is Christmas Pagan?” forces us to do. We are not interested in comparing persecution reports to see whether it was Jews or Christians who suffered the most during the first three centuries of the common era because certainly both sides experienced casualties and even one casualty is one too many. Nevertheless, the author of “Is Christmas Pagan?” *completely ignores* the persecutions endured by Judaism during this same time period. Need we look any further than the somber results of the Bar Kochba Revolt (132–136 CE)? Here is a summary of that time period as found in the *Wikipedia* article “Bar Kokhba Revolt”:

Hadrian's proclamations sought to root out the nationalistic features within Judea's Jewish communities, which he saw as the cause of continuous rebellions. He prohibited the Torah law and the Hebrew calendar, and executed Judaic scholars. The sacred scroll was ceremonially burned on the Temple Mount. At the former Temple sanctuary, he installed two statues, one of Jupiter, another of himself. In an attempt to erase any memory of Judea or Ancient Israel, he wiped the name off the map and replaced it with Syria Palaestina. By destroying the association of

¹⁹ *Wikipedia*, “Anti-Christian policies in the Roman Empire,” Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Christian_policies_in_the_Roman_Empire, last updated on 12/26/2014.

Jews to Judea and forbidding the practice of Jewish faith, Hadrian aimed to root out a nation that inflicted heavy casualties on the Roman Empire. Similarly, he re-established Jerusalem, but now as the Roman pagan polis of Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were forbidden from entering it, except on the day of Tisha B'Av.²⁰

We also read the following in the same article:

According to Cassius Dio, who might have exaggerated, 580,000 Jews were killed in the overall operations, and 50 fortified towns and 985 villages were razed to the ground, with many more Jews dying of famine and disease.²¹

Again, we do not deny that there were Jewish and Christian casualties during various persecutions that took place during the first three centuries of the common era, but for the author of "Is Christmas Pagan?" to only focus his attention on the demise of Christians while ignoring the many Jewish fatalities sends a clear message about his heavily-biased approach that, sadly, will go unnoticed to the average reader. We hope that you are not an average reader!

The remainder of the article in question is little more than the justification that the author sees in the Church having settled on December 25th as the day on which to celebrate the "Feast of the Nativity." In so doing, he offers his express consent to the Church's traditional date of March 25th as the "accepted date of Christ's conception." He writes:

To this day, March 25th remains the commonly accepted date of Christ's conception, if for no other reason than tradition's sake, and that is why we celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th. Just count exactly nine months from the traditional date observed as Christ's conception (March 25th) and you land on the 25th day of December, which from the fourth century (AD 300s) onward was marked as the traditional date observed as Christ's birth -- the Feast of the Nativity.

The above is simply more speculation on the author's part. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* records the internal debates that took place over which precise date to select as the Messiah's birthday, noting that Christians in Jerusalem were most certainly *not* observing December 25th in the year 385 CE. The argument that the Messiah was conceived in March is equally spurious; in fact, we have read some very persuasive articles that place His birth in late September. For example, a Christian organization known as Koinonia Institute, based in Coeur D'Alene, Idaho, publishes an article titled "When Was Jesus Born?" demonstrating why they are persuaded that the Messiah was most likely born on September 29th, even though they celebrate Christmas on December 25th with the rest of the world.²² Although we disagree with their decision to celebrate the Messiah's birthday (though we're certainly thankful He was born!), we find the author's logic for selecting September 29th to be far more reasonable than the traditional December 25th.

In summary, we are amazed that the Catholic scholars who compiled the "Christmas" article in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* acknowledge that their ancient Church fathers opposed the celebration of birthdays

²⁰ *Wikipedia*, "Bar Kokhba Revolt," Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_Kokhba_revolt, last updated on 12/19/2014.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cf., "When Was Jesus Born?" Koinonia House, Inc., Coeur D'Alene, ID, from the December 18, 2007 eNews issue, available for reading online at the following link: www.khouse.org/enews_article/2005/1008/

and even more vehemently condemned the incorporation of pagan customs into their faith. We are even more amazed that those Catholic scholars, in spite of their acknowledgement, offer no protest that their organization accepts the pagan customs comprising the celebration of Christmas. Our amazement peaks when we read the anonymous Catholic's article "Is Christmas Pagan?" because not only does he go along with Catholicism's syncretism of the story of the Messiah's birth with pagan customs, but he snubs and rejects evidence to the contrary as presented by Catholicism's best scholarship.

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