

Why the 25th of December?

For centuries prior to Jesus' birth, people all over the world had celebrated around the time of the winter solstice. The Norse people in Northern Europe called their roughly twelve-day celebration of light and birth, yule. One of the yule traditions was to bring evergreens into the home, symbolizing life amid the darkness and cold of winter. Prefiguring Santa Claus, the god, Odin, was believed to ride the night skies, deciding who would prosper or perish in the new year.

Throughout the Roman Empire, the month-long celebration of the winter solstice by the lower classes was called Saturnalia, a time of feasting and revelry. But among the upper classes, the holiest day of the year was December 25, the birthday of Mithras, the sun god. This god of light was believed to have been born from the earth, paralleling Jesus' birth as "true man". Shepherds were said to have come to worship the young Mithras, after being told of his birth by angels.

Mithras was called the Mediator, because he was also the god of contracts and mutual obligation, again paralleling the Christian concept of Jesus as the mediator and new covenant between God and man. In addition, treaties were sanctioned by a common meal; so a common meal of bread and wine became a part of Mithraic worship services, very much like the remembrance supper. As a further parallel, at the end of his time on the earth, Mithras rode a chariot into heaven. In the Bible, Jesus' ascension is also depicted as a bodily ascent into the sky.

Early Christians did not celebrate Jesus' birth, only his resurrection; their focus was more on the Son of God, than the Son of Man. By the 4th century, many Christians believed that Jesus had been solely a spirit being; so the Church decided to begin celebrating Jesus' birth, to reinforce his humanity. However, by then, no one remembered the date of his birth. Since the birthday of Mithras was already a widely observed holy day, the Church simply declared December 25 to be the "Feast Day of the Nativity"; the feast day of the *s u n* became the feast day of the *S o n*. The Church also adopted and transformed many of the old winter solstice holiday traditions. For instance, to symbolize the temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the indoor evergreen trees were decorated with apples, which became the Christmas tree balls of today. Decorations of holly became symbols of Jesus' crown of thorns.

Over the centuries, the celebration of Christmas has fallen in and out of favor with both the church and the state, its mixture of the sacred and the secular in constant contention with each other. Protestant churches in the United States did not begin to celebrate Christmas until the middle of the 19th century. History has shown that the need for celebration during the darkness of winter is deeply rooted in the human consciousness. Every generation gives birth to a new expression of the holiday. December 25 does not express the *fact* of Jesus' birth, but the spirit of rebirth that is the heart and history of Christmas certainly embodies the *truth* of the birth of an incarnate Son of the living God.

(prepared by Chris M. Halvorson, as a Christmastime reflection)