

A Brief History of Christmas

Part One: Roman Origins and Christian Responses

What Month?

- Take a look at Matthew 1:18-25. When did the Holy Spirit come to Mary? When did the dream come to Joseph? When was Jesus born?
- Take a look at Luke 1:26-38 and 2:1-7. Are there any temporal markers here?
- On what day was Julius Caesar assassinated? On what day did Israel finish rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem? (See Ezra 6:15.) The point here is that calendars were available to the gospel writers, but for reasons that they do not state, they decline to name dates for Jesus' birth. (They also don't say the name of the innkeeper.)

Io Saturnalia!

- Linked to the Winter Solstice, the Romans began to celebrate Saturn, the overthrown father of the gods, around the eighth century BC in the last week and a half of December.
- During this festival, everyone (including slaves) was allowed to gamble, and nobody was allowed to beat a slave for verbal insolence.
- Traditions of gift-giving and family festivals always accompanied this holiday.

Sol Invictus

- In an attempt to curb the immorality that grew up around the Saturn festival and to express devotion to his own favorite deity, the sun (and, according to some historians, to curb the growth of the Christ-Mass), the Roman emperor Elagabalus instituted a day to celebrate the unconquered sun, who from December 25 forward (they had the winter solstice calculated slightly inaccurately) would become more and more of a presence in each day's hours. The emperor Aurelian in 274 AD declared it an empire-wide holiday.
- As Emperor-Worship become more and more prevalent in Rome, December 25 became the "official" birthday of all emperors.

The Feast of the Assumption

- Some historians argue that the Christian holiday derives not from the Sol Invictus festival but by calculating nine months forward from the Festival of the Annunciation, which is traditionally March 25 and celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to Mary. Others argue that the Feast of the Annunciation first rose by calculating backwards nine months from Christmas. Chicken, Egg.

The Christ-Mass

- The early church had mixed feelings about birthdays in general: some early theologians (notably Origen of Alexandria) held that only egomaniacs like Pharaoh and Caesar were concerned with people's celebrating their birthdays. Those who did celebrated Jesus' nativity in January, March, and other months.
- By the fifth century AD almost every Christian calendar listed December 25, and by the sixth century AD Christmas had become the second most important Christian festival of the year, Easter being the only day more important on the Christian calendar.
- Because Bishop Nicholas of Anatolia's reputation as defender of the doctrine that Jesus was God incarnate and because of legends about his generosity and gift-giving, Saint Nick actually becomes historically certain about the same time as Christmas does