

ENDTIME ISSUES NEWSLETTER No. 161:

“The Date and Meaning of Christmas”

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“Another Look at the Date of Christ’s Birth”

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This newsletter offer you a special deal, “Two for the price of one.” Actually it is even a better deal, because you receive two essays dealing with the date of Christ’s birth completely free.

I decided to rush these two essays because many pastors will be preaching on “The Birth of Jesus” during the coming two Sabbaths. The time and resources of pastors are very limited. Often they end up recycling old notes because they do not have access to the latest research. These two fresh essays should provide a valuable sermon resource to the thousand of pastors who subscribe to this newsletter. If your pastor does not receive this newsletter, do him a favor by printing and it passing it on to him.

The first essay, “Another Look at the Date of Christ’s Birth,” is by Noel Goh, Pastor and Professor at the Methodist Seminary in Singapore. The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination in Singapore with the largest Christian seminary in that country. I first met Prof. Goh about four years ago during my first speaking engagement in Singapore. He attended the meetings and became interested in our Adventist message, especially the Sabbath message. He invited me for lunch in order to have a private conversation.

During the course of the conversation he expressed the desire to come to Andrews University for a few days to become better acquainted with our Adventist history and beliefs. Eventually he came and spent almost a month on our campus. He eagerly attended all the seminary classes that he could fit into his schedule and spent long hours in the library reading and viewing videos related to our Adventist history.

When he returned home to Singapore, he helped organize a meeting for the local clergy where I delivered two lectures, one on the Biblical wholistic view of human nature and the other on the change from Sabbath to Sunday in early Christianity.

Prof. Goh is not an Adventist yet, though he appreciates most of our fundamental beliefs and lifestyle. At this point I could describe him as a sabbatarian Methodist. He is a bright and gracious man, who shares his beliefs with his students and members in a friendly, confessional, non-confrontational manner.

You will enjoy reading his essay "Another Look at the Date of Christ's Birth." By examining the few time references found in Luke's Gospel about Mary, Elizabeth, and Zachariah's time of service at the Temple, he reaches the compelling conclusion that most likely Christ was born in September/October at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. You will find his essay simple but very enlightening.

Surprisingly I reached the same conclusion regarding the approximate date of Christ's birth, by considering especially the messianic themes of the Feast of Tabernacles. As you know, the major events of Christ's life and ministry are linked in the NT to the ancient Feast of Israel. In a way, the two essays complement each other. They are designed to help you discuss with your friends the date and meaning of Christ's birth from a biblical perspective

The Celebration of Christmas in Some Adventist Churches

What inspired me to hastily post this newsletter is the questions I have received from several fellow believers about the celebration of Christmas in some Adventist churches. It is not uncommon for our larger Adventist churches to have a Christmas eve religious service. Somebody asked me the question: "Could you explain to me why some Adventist churches have special Christmas' eve services while others do not?"

Frankly, I do not understand why some Adventist churches today are adopting the popular practice of a church service on Christmas eve. Incidentally, the term "Christmas" is not used in the Latin languages like Italian, French, and Spanish. The terms used in these languages are "Natale, Noel, Navidad," all of them simply mean "Birth." By contrast,

“Christmas” is a compound of two words “Christ + Mass,” and derives from the special Mass the Catholic Church celebrates on Christmas eve.

Adventist churches that conduct a special evening service on Christmas eve may not be aware that they are imitating the Catholic “Christ—Mass” celebrated at midnight of December 24. They may also ignore the pagan origin of the date of Christ’s birth, which will be discussed later. Most likely, for these churches it may be just a matter of cultural conformity, namely, the desire to imitate the impressive Christmas eve services held in Catholic and Protestant churches.

The religious celebration of Christmas in Adventist churches is a recent development. I grew up in Rome, Italy, where we never had a Christmas tree in our home or church. My father worked regularly on Christmas day. Our family regarded Christmas as a Catholic festival, similar to the weekly Sunday, Easter Sunday, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on March 25, the Feast of Mary’s Assumption of August 15, All Saints Day on November 1, etc.

When I first came to the USA in 1960 as a seminary student at Andrews University, Christmas was primarily the Winter break. I do not recall much Christmas decorations and celebrations in the churches I visited during the four years I spent at the seminary from 1960 to 1964.

Gradually things have changed during the past 50 years. This is evident by the profusely illuminated and decorated front-end area of many Adventist churches at Christmas time. Some churches seem to compete with the rich decorations usually found in Greek Orthodox churches.

Frankly, I am not inspired by the elaborate Christmas decorations and celebration, because as a church historian I am aware of their pagan origin. Jesus was born in a humble manger. There were no fanciful decorations to celebrate His birth. It would be more in keeping with the setting of His birth, to keep the decorations simple, designed to help people catch the real spirit of Christ’s humble birth.

It was the celebration of the birth of the Sun-god in ancient Rome that was accompanied by a profusion of lights and torches and the deco-

ration of trees. To facilitate the acceptance of the Christian faith by the pagan masses, the Church of Rome found it expedient to make not only the *Day of the Sun* the weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection, but also the *Birth Day of the Invincible Sun-God* on December 25, the annual celebration of Christ's birth. This point will be expanded later.

A Witnessing Opportunity

The recognition of the pagan origin of Christmas, with all its lights, decoration, partying, and celebration, does not mean that it is wrong to take time to remember the birth of Jesus at this time of the year. After all it would be well for us to remember every day how Jesus was willing to leave His glorious heavenly position in order to be born into the human family as a helpless baby to become our Savior.

No other story grips the human heart as the story of the divine love manifested in Christ's willingness to enter into the limitation, suffering, agony and death of human flesh to become "Emmanuel," God with us. Reflecting on the mystery of the incarnation is a worthy daily spiritual exercise, that can be done also at Christmas time, known in the Christian world as the "Advent Season," that is, the season celebrating the First Advent of the Lord.

In a way the *Advent Season* offers a unique opportunity to Adventists to help Christians understand the ultimate meaning of Christmas, which is to be found in the fact that Jesus who came the first time as the helpless baby of Bethlehem, will come back the second time as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. What this means is that the humble birth of Jesus in the human family, is the prelude to His glorious return to dwell with His people throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. The ultimate celebration of the Advent Season awaits us at the glorious Second Coming of the Lord.

UPDATE ON THE FALSE ALLEGATIONS

During the past few days I have been working on my official response to the false allegations made against me by officers of the Pontifical Gregorian University. Much of the material I have presented in the

last two newsletters, will be repackaged in a formal document. An Adventist lawyer will read carefully the document and offer me constructive criticism.

God willing, by the end of this month the document will be mailed to both the Pontifical Gregorian University and to Bishop James Murray of Kalamazoo. I will keep you informed on any significant development. It is my fervent hope and prayer that responsible officials of the Gregorian University, will retract their false allegation against me and offer an apology. My desire is to see a speedy and amicable resolution to unpleasant controversy. Thank you for your prayers.

ALL THE ANNOUNCEMENTS OF WEEKEND SEMINARS AND THE SPECIAL HOLIDAY OFFERS ARE PLACED AT THE END OF THIS NEWSLETTER

“Another Look at the Date of Christ's Birth”

**Noel Goh, Pastor and Professor
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Christmas is a church tradition that celebrates and commemorates on December 25 the miraculous event of birth of the Son of God from a virgin's womb to save the world from sin. It is a festivity that continues to have a major impact on the commercial world as well as family gatherings and gifts giving. Many look forward to this year-end Christmas break even if the significance of the birth of the Christ child is not fully appreciated or embraced. The result is a much treasured and much loved holiday.

Objective of this Study

Recognizing the huge popular sentiment associated both in ecclesiastical as well as secular circles, this review of whether December 25 is truly the date of Christ's birth, seeks fresh insights from the written account available in the Bible for a possible re-dating of Christ's actual birth.

Given the weight of tradition and sentiment resting on December 25, it would not be unreasonable to encounter the axiom – “don't confuse

me with the facts; my mind is already made up.” Notwithstanding that, allow me to respectfully invite you to an open review of the question: Was Jesus born on December 25 or at another time?

Many people acknowledge that Christ was not born on December 25. Even Sunday school children participating in nativity plays, especially as shepherds, realize that it would be much too cold for shepherds to be outdoors watching their flocks by night in the bleak mid-winter, even if it is only a milder winter in Israel. Furthermore, many more are aware of how the origin of Christmas on 25 December derives from the celebration of the return of the Sun god on the day of the winter solstice—a day which is now corrected to December 21. History records how the Catholic church stepped in and redeemed an otherwise festival of great wanton orgy in Roman times and transforming it into a festival commemorating the birth of the Son of God.

The Focus of Our Study

As we take a fresh look at the Gospels' account of the nativity, our concern is to determine, not the year of Christ's birth, but the approximate *time of the year* when it occurred. Simply stated: “Do the scriptural records offer clues to ascertain a more likely season in the calendar year when the birth of Jesus would have taken place instead of December 25?”

In reviewing the infancy narratives in the four gospels, one quickly realizes the limited information on dates that are available. However, the account by Luke has more details than the other three which should not surprise us since Luke was a doctor concerned with accuracy. In fact, the Gospel opens expressing the intent to provide an orderly account of carefully investigated facts: “Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4).

A likely year could be established from Luke 1:5 “in the time of” but as mentioned earlier, this is not our primary concern. Suffice to say that Luke sets the narrative in time and history and introduces the key player for our consideration.

The Key Person

His name is Zechariah. We remember him as the father of John the Baptist, an uncle of Jesus. He became dumb from the time the birth of his son was announced by the angel in Luke 1:20, until his son was named on his 8th day nine months later. On returning home after duty, most likely he did not take time to get his "act" together given the gravity of this revelation. The cooperation of his wife Elizabeth was obviously needed, but there was the added difficulty of convincing her without the use of speech, given that they were also both well along in years and had no children before. But soon enough, pregnancy occurred and Luke 1:24 gives the first of four time indications.

Four Time Indications

"After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion" (Luke 1:24). This seclusion may be because of age or perhaps out of embarrassment at her conception finally happening and only as it seems when her husband has lost his power of speech.

A month later, Doctor Luke records another major theophany (appearance of the angel of God into time, space and history). "In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary" (Luke 1:26-27).

This is the second time indication occurring in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy and it happened in a home instead of the Temple, to a young woman betrothed and awaiting marriage instead of an elderly priest.

The indication of the sixth month of Elizabeth's conception should not be confused with the sixth month of the calendar year, especially as referring to the month of June in the Gregorian calendar that we are so

familiar with. Unlike the Gregorian calendar, the Lunar Calendar used by the Jews as well as the Moslems and the Chinese is based on the sighting of a new moon.

In this theophany, the angel announced to Mary her pregnancy commencing in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's. "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month" (Luke 1:36)

This is the third time indication supporting the reference to a time duration rather than a specified calendar month. The final time indication is after a further three months. "Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home" (Luke 1:56).

Mary's visit to Elizabeth was to see for herself and in all probability stayed on the remaining three months till the full term of Elizabeth's pregnancy, before returning to prepare for her own delivery. She may have assisted her cousin in the birth of John the Baptist and may even be present for the eighth day circumcision when the happy father miraculously recovered his speech on confirming the child's name in writing.

These four biblical references (Luke 1:24, 26, 36 and 56) are the only explicit references available in the gospel accounts associated with the timing of Jesus' birth and they leave the dating rather inconclusive to say the least.

But since Mary's conception is related to Elizabeth's, is there some indication when Elizabeth's conception took place six months before giving a total of (6+9) 15 months later as the date of Jesus' birth? The answer is yes albeit not explicitly stated. There appears to be a time indication in Elizabeth's conception locked in a key word that requires the help of an Old Testament passage to unlock.

The Key Word

For this we need to return again to Zechariah, to whom the angel announced his impending fatherhood in the Temple. The key that unlocks a plausible time indication is in a single word innocuously located in Luke 1:5 – "Abijah": "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah."

This is a particular division of the priestly orders which rosters duties in the Temple and has a time sequence within a calendar year. What is apparent to Doctor Luke and his readers during his time may not be apparent to us two millennia away and in a setting where our appreciation of the culture in the Bible needs to also return to our roots in the Old Testament.

For an understanding of a specific time indication of Zechariah's time of duty in the annual priestly roster in the Temple, we need to turn 1 Chronicles 24. This chapter lists the divisions of the priests on duty in the Temple. The earlier chapter of 1 Chronicles 23 recounts how it was reserved only for the sons and descendents of the high priest, Aaron. Aaron had four sons but two died in the incident of offering strange fires before the Lord and did not have any descendents (v. 2). The remaining two had, sixteen sons from Eleazar and eight sons from Ithamar, making a total of twenty-four (v. 4).

The Annual Roster of the Priestly Families Serving at the Temple

In preparing his son, Solomon, to build the Temple, King David not only arranged for the building materials but also organized these twenty-four heads of households, the remaining descendents of Aaron into an annual roster for their priestly duties in the Temple. Assisted by Zadok and Abimelech (both direct descendents from the two remaining sons of Aaron), David rostered these twenty-four into divisions according to "... their appointed duties in their service" (1 Chron 24:3, 18). This order was made by drawing lots impartially as to who would go first and who follows in a chronological sequence (1 Chron 24:5). In the drawing of their appointed order, Abijah fell on the eighth slot (1 Chron 24:10).

When twenty-four divisions were rostered annually in this way, each month would have two divisions on duty and Abijah as the eighth would fall in the second half of the fourth month. I believe we now have a time indication herein. One question still remains. Do we know when these priestly duties commence in the calendar year? Was it in January when we traditionally begin the new year of the Gregorian calendar?

To refer to January would be altogether strange and unknown to King David and all the priests so rostered at that time and later on until

the time of Jesus in the New Testament. The Jews as we intimated earlier, follow the lunar calendar consisting of twelve lunar months, in which there are two new years: the religious New Year that began in their month of Nissan and the civil New Year that began in their month of Tishre, seven months from Nissan. As you may recall, it was on the 14th day of Nissan that the Feast of Passover was and is celebrated. Since this is a priestly order, it is likely the priests began their roster with this month of Nissan. Thus, Abijah would be scheduled to serve in the second half of the fourth month.

Tabulating the chronology and correlating the Jewish calendar with our Gregorian calendar, we can summarize as follows:

		Jewish Calendar		Gregorian Calendar
1	Zechariah on duty (v.5) Angel appears (vv. 8-11)	4th month	Tammaz	June -July
2	After duty, Zechariah returns home (v. 23) Elizabeth conceives (v. 24)	5th month	Abraham	July - August
3	6 months later Mary conceives (v.26)	10th month	Tebeth	December January
4	3 months later is birth of John the Baptist	13th, that is, 1st month of following year	Nissan	March - April
5	6 months later is the birth of Jesus	19th, that is, 7th month of following year	Tishre	September October

The Month of Tishre

It appears the birth of Jesus is more likely to be in the fall season of the year, some time in the months of September and October in our Gregorian calendar. That it falls in the month of Tishre for the Jewish calendar is even more significant.

The month of Tishre as the seventh month in the Jewish/Hebrew calendar is a very special month in autumn. This is the only month that begins with one of the seven feasts of the Lord (Lev 23:24) called the Feast of Trumpets. Ten days after this new moon sighting (considered as ten days of holy awe) the most holy day in the whole calendar year is

observed, called *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). Five days later, begins the final of the seven Feasts of the Lord, called the Feast of Tabernacles. This is the most joyous of all of the feast with a distinct command attached to it to rejoice. It begins on the fifteenth and lasts eight days. The Feast of Tabernacles marks the final ingathering of the harvest. And so the whole seventh month has a special significance, not unlike the significance of the seventh day (Sabbath) or the seventh weeks from the Passover to Pentecost.

The word “tabernacle” has a corroborating significance in the Gospel of John. In John 1:14, the apostle declares that the “word,” referring to Jesus, became flesh and made his dwelling among us. In speaking of the incarnation (God became flesh), the word “dwelling” is sometimes also translated “tabernacle” as Jesus “tabernacled” in our midst. Could it be that Jesus’ birth occurred on the Feast of Tabernacle, the fifteenth of Tishre and His circumcision took place eight days later when Jesus is taken to the Temple?

The Conclusion

The Tabernacle given to Moses to build in the wilderness was expressly intended for God to dwell in the midst of the people for the centrality of worship in their newly constituted theocratic nationhood (Ex 25:8,9). And so when He whose name is Emmanuel – God with us (Matt 1:23) was born, He dwelt with us so that we may as John puts it in verse 14, “behold His glory, the glory of the One and only begotten of the father, full of grace and truth.”

Therefore could the idea of “tabernacling” albeit an archaic word, also offers us a clue as to the more likely time of the calendar year for Jesus coming in His First Advent as well as in His Second Advent? Perhaps the relevance of this review is not just one of historical accuracy but also of eschatological alignment, by proposing not only a review but also a renewal.

Editorial Comment

Prof. Goh's proposal deserves serious consideration, especially since it shows a possible link between the time of Christ's birth in September/October and the Feast of Tabernacle, which had a clear messianic typology. The latter point is developed in my essay that you about to read.

"The Date and Meaning of Christmas"**Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,****Retired Professor of Church History and Theology,
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The term "Christmas" is not found in the Bible. It derives from "Christ + Mass," that is, from the Mass Catholics celebrate in honor of Christ's birth on the night of December 24. Surprisingly, there is no mention in the New Testament of any the celebration of the anniversary of the birth of Christ. The Gospels' accounts of Jesus' birth are very brief, consisting only of few verses. By contrast, the accounts of what is known as "The Passion Week," are lengthier, taking several chapters.

According to some estimates about one third of each Gospel is devoted to the Passion Week. It is evident that from the perspective of the Gospel writers, Christ's death is more important for our salvation than His birth. The reason is that through His atoning death Christ secured our eternal salvation. Yet, Christians today tend to celebrate more the birth of Christ than His death. Perhaps the reason is that the birth of a Child Deliverer captures the imagination more than the death of a Savior. Society celebrates births, not deaths.

The Early Christians commemorated annually Christ's death and resurrection at Passover, but we have no clear indications of an annual celebration of Christ's birth. A major controversy erupted in the latter part of the second century over the Passover date, but the date of Christ's birth did not become an issue until sometimes in the fourth century. At that time the dispute centered primarily over two dates for Christ's birth: December 25 promoted by the Church of Rome and January 6, known as the Epiphany, observed by the Eastern churches. "Both these days," as

Oscar Cullmann points out, “were pagan festivals whose meaning provided a starting point for the specifically Christian conception of Christmas.”¹

The Date of Christ's Birth

It is a recognized fact that the adoption of the date of December 25th by the Western Church to commemorate Christ's birth was influenced by the pagan celebration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice. More will be said later about the factors which influenced the adoption of this date. At this juncture it is important to note that the date of December 25 is totally devoid of Biblical meaning and is grossly inaccurate as far as the actual time of Christ's birth.

If, as it is generally agreed, Christ's ministry began when He was about thirty years of age (Luke 3:23) and lasted three and one-half years until His death at Passover (March/April), then by backtracking we arrive at the months of September/October, rather than to December 25.² Indirect support for a September/October dating of Christ's birth is provided also by the fact that from November to February shepherds did not watch their flocks at night in the fields. They brought them into a protective corral called a “sheepfold.” Hence, December 25 is a most unlikely date for the birth of Christ.³

The most likely date of Christ's birth is in the latter part of September or the beginning of October. This date corresponds to the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, known also as the Feast of Booths. This feast was the last and most important pilgrimage of the year for the Jews. The overcrowded conditions at the time of Christ's birth (“there was no place for them in the inn”—Luke 2:7) could be related not only to the census taken by the Romans at that time, but also to the many pilgrims that overrun the area especially during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Bethlehem is only four miles from Jerusalem. “The Romans,” notes Barney Kasdan, “were known to take their censuses according to the prevailing custom of the occupied territories. Hence, in the case of Israel, they would opt to have the people report to their provinces at a time that would be convenient for them. There is no apparent logic to calling

the census in the middle of winter. The more logical time of taxation would be after the harvest, in the fall,"²⁴ when people had in their hands the revenue of their harvest.

Christ's Birth at the Time of the Feast of Tabernacles

Support for the belief that Christ was born at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurs in late September or early October, is provided not only by chronological considerations of Christ's life and Zachariah's time of service at the Temple discussed by Prof. Goh, but also by Messianic themes of the Feast of Tabernacles. Being the Feast that celebrated in one sense God's past tabernacling or dwelling among His people with the cloud by day and the flaming fire by night, it served to foreshadow the day when the Son of God would become flesh and tabernacle among us (John 1:14).

It is important to remember that the seven annual Feasts of ancient Israel were designed to illustrate important events of salvation history. Those who are interested to study in greater depth how the Feasts of Israel reveal the unfolding of the Plan of Salvation, are encouraged to read my two volumes *God's Festivals in Scripture and History*. The first volume on *The Spring Festivals* shows how Passover, Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost, point to the redemptive accomplishment of the first Advent, namely, Christ's Atoning death, His resurrection, ascension, inauguration of His heavenly ministry, and sending of the Holy Spirit.

The second volume on *The Fall Festivals* explain how the Fall feasts of Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles point to the consummation of redemption, namely, the judgment, the final disposition of sin, and the Second Advent when Christ will come to gather his people and dwell with them in a restored world.

Christ's First Coming to dwell among us in human flesh, serves as a prelude and guarantee of His Second Coming to dwell among the redeemed in divine glory. Both events, as we shall see, are typified by the Feast of Tabernacles. Adventist eschatology is largely based on the typology of the Day of Atonement. *The Fall Festivals* broadens the typological basis of Adventist eschatology by showing the contribution of the other two Fall Feasts of Trumpets and Tabernacles to the unfolding of the consummation of redemption.

Incidentally, our Adventist doctrine of the pre-Advent judgement is based solely on the typology of the Day of Atonement. The problem is that we tend to squeeze too much into the Day of Atonement: the beginning of the judgement, the process of the judgement, the completion of the judgement, and the Return of Jesus. A careful study of the Fall Festivals show that the judgement process began with the Feast of the Trumpet, which announced the beginning of the judgement with the blasting of the Shofar throughout the land. The judgement terminated 10 days later with the cleansing of the people from sin on the Day of Atonement. Five days later began the Feast of Tabernacles, a time to rejoice for the redemptive accomplishments of the First and Second Advent. You will find an extensive discussion of this subject in *The Fall Festivals*.

It is noteworthy that important events of the plan of salvation are consistently fulfilled on the Holy Days that prefigured them. Christ died on the Cross at the time when the Passover lamb was sacrificed (John 19:14). Christ arose at the time of the waving of the sheaf of barley as the first fruits of the coming harvest (1 Cor 15:23). The outpouring of the first fruits of God's Holy Spirit took place "when the day of Pentecost was fully come" (Acts 2:1, KJV). By the same token, Christ could well have been born at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, since the feast typifies God's First Coming to dwell among us through the incarnation of His Son and His Second Coming to dwell with His people (Rev 21:3) throughout eternity.

Growth in Meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles

The Feast of Tabernacles in the Old and New Testament grows in its meaning and function during the course of redemptive history. It began in the Old Testament as the Fall Feast of the Harvest Ingathering to express thanksgiving to God for the bounties of the fruit harvest. It became the Feast of Booths to commemorate the way God sheltered the Israelites with the "booth" of His presence during their sojourning in the wilderness.

The celebration of the material blessings of the harvest and of the spiritual blessings of the divine sheltering during the exodus experience, served to foreshadow the blessings of the Messianic age when "there shall be neither cold nor frost . . . continuous day . . . living water, and

. . . security (Zech 14:6, 7, 11). A highlight of the Messianic age would be the annual gathering of all the surviving nations “to keep the feast of booths” (Zech 14:16) in order to celebrate the establishment of God’s universal Kingdom.

The rich typology of the Feast of Tabernacles finds in the New Testament both a Christological and an eschatological fulfillment. Christologically, the feast serves to reveal the Incarnation and mission of Christ. Jesus is God’s ultimate tabernacle for in Him God tabernacled among men (John 1:14). He is the living water (John 7:37-38) typified by the water ceremony of the Feast of Tabernacles. He is also the Light of the World (John 8:12) typified by the night illumination of the Temple during the Feast. Indeed, through Christ the blessings typified by the Feast of Tabernacles have become a reality for every believer.

Eschatologically, the Feast of Tabernacles serves to represent God’s protection of His people through the trials and tribulation of this present life until they reach the heavenly Promised Land. There God will shelter the redeemed with the booth of His protective presence (Rev 7:15) and dwell with them for all eternity (Rev 21:3). As the ancient Israelites “rejoiced before the Lord” (Lev 23:40) at the Feast of Tabernacles by waving palm branches, singing, playing instruments, and feasting, so the countless multitude of the redeemed will rejoice before the throne of God, by waving palm branches (Rev 7:9), singing anthems of praise (Rev 7:10; 14:3; 15:2-4; 19:1-3), playing harps (Rev 14:2), and participating in the great marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Ideal Time for the Birth of Jesus

The Feast of Tabernacles was the ideal time for the birth of Jesus because it was called “the season of our joy.” The emphasis on the joyfulness of the feast is found in the instructions given in Deuteronomy 16:13-14: “You shall keep the feast of booths seven days, when you make your ingathering from your threshing floor and your wine press. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your manservant and your maidservant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns.”

In contrast to the Feasts of Trumpets and Atonement which were a time of introspection and repentance, the Feast of Booths was a time of rejoicing. The festive atmosphere reflected the Israelites' thankfulness for both material and spiritual blessings. The explicit reason for rejoicing is given in Deuteronomy 16:15: "because the Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful." It is not surprising that the rabbis called the feast "The Season of our Joy" (*Zeman Simhatenu*).

Ellen White notes that the reason for rejoicing was more than just the bounties of the harvest. She writes: "The feast was to be preeminently an occasion for rejoicing. It occurred just after the great Day of Atonement, when the assurance had been given that their iniquity should be remembered no more. At peace with God, they now came before Him to acknowledge His goodness and praise Him for His mercy. The labor of harvest being ended, and the toils of the new year not yet begun, the people were free from care, and could give themselves up to the sacred, joyous influences of the hour."⁵

The reason for the rejoicing was not only because of the material blessings of the harvest gathered in, but also because of the spiritual blessing of God's protection and abiding presence. The foliage of the booths during which the Israelites lived for seven days during the Feast, reminded them that God will protect the faithful remnant during the time of trouble by sheltering them with the cloud by day and the flaming fire by night: "It will be for a shade [*sakkath*] by day from the heat, and for a refuge and shelter from the storm and the rain" (Is 4:6). In this context, the cloud and fire of God's presence function as a protecting booth over His people.

Being the season of rejoicing for the blessings of the harvest and of God's protective presence, the Feast of Tabernacles provided the ideal setting for the birth of Jesus—the One who came to dwell among the people in person. The themes of rejoicing relate perfectly to the terminology used by the angel to announce Christ's birth: "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people" (Luke 2:10). As "the season of our joy," the Feast of Tabernacles provided the ideal settings for breaking "the good news of a great joy" for all the people, since the feast was also a celebration for all the nations (Zech 14:16).

A final interesting sideline supporting the possibility that Christ was born at the very time of the Feast of Tabernacles, is the reference to the wise men that came from the East to visit Christ (Matt 2:1). The land of the East is most likely Babylon, where many Jews still lived at the time of Christ's birth. Only a remnant of the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile to Palestine during the Persian period. The wise men, most likely, were rabbis known in Hebrew as *chakamin*, which means wise men.

We are told that the wise men made their journey from the East to Bethlehem because they had seen "the star in the East" (Matt 2:1). Watching the stars was associated especially with the Feast of Tabernacles. In fact, the roof of the booth was built with leafy branches carefully spaced so that they would screen out the sunlight without blocking the visibility of the stars. The people watched for the stars at night during the feast because of the prophecy "a star shall come out of Jacob" (Num 24:17). It is possible that it was during the Feast of Tabernacles, the special season of star watching, that the wise men saw the Messianic star and "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Matt 2:10).

In the light of the foregoing considerations, most likely Christ's birth coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles. Being the feast of thanksgiving for God's willingness to protect His people with the tabernacle of His presence during the wilderness sojourning, it could serve fittingly to celebrate Christ's willingness to become a human being and pitch His tent among us in order to become our Savior.

The implications of this conclusion are self-evident. The Feast of Tabernacles in late September/October provides Christians today with much more accurate Biblical timing and typology for celebrating Christ's birth, than the pagan dating of December 25th. The latter date not only is removed from the actual time of Christ's birth, but is also derived from the pagan celebration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice. Why celebrate the birth of Jesus at the wrong time of December 25th,—a date derived from pagan sun-worship—when the Bible provides us with a more appropriate timing and typology for commemorating such an important event?

Ellen White encourages the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. She writes: “Well would it be for the people of God at the present time to have a Feast of Tabernacles—a joyous commemoration of the blessings of God to them. As the children of Israel celebrated the deliverance that God had wrought for their fathers, and His miraculous preservation of them during their journeying from Egypt, so should gratefully call to mind the various ways He has devised for bringing us out of the world, and from the darkness of error, into the precious light of His grace and truth.”⁶

Some Historical Support for Christ's Birth at the Feast of Tabernacles

The connection between Christ's birth and the Feast of Tabernacles proposed above, may at first appear astonishing, but it has been proposed not only by modern authors⁷ but also by early Christian Fathers. In his classic study *The Bible and Liturgy*, Jean Daniélou discusses the connection between the Feast of Tabernacles and that of the Nativity in the writings of some Church Fathers.⁸ He notes, for example, that in his *Sermon on the Nativity*, Gregory of Nazianzus (A. D. 329-389) connects the Feast of the Nativity of December 25th with the Feast of Tabernacle: “The subject of today's feast (25th December) is the true Feast of Tabernacles. Indeed, in this feast, the human tabernacle was built up by Him who put on human nature because of us. Our tabernacles, which were struck down by death, are raised up again by Him Who built our dwelling from the beginning. Therefore, harmonizing our voices with that of David, let us also sing the Psalm: ‘Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord’ [Ps 118:26. This verse was sung during the procession of the Feast of Tabernacles].”⁹

For Gregory the Feast of Tabernacles finds its fulfillment in the Incarnation. Commenting on this text, Daniélou writes: “The coming of Christ, His birth, thus is seen to be the inauguration of the true Feast of Tabernacles. Here appears a new harmony: the *scenai* [Greek for ‘the tent’], the human dwelling at the beginning, have been struck by sin. . . . Christ comes to raise them up, to restore human nature, to inaugurate the true Feast of Tabernacles prefigured in Jewish liturgy. And the beginning of this Scenopegia [Feast of Tabernacles] is the Incarnation itself

in which, according to St. John, Christ built the tabernacles of His own Body (John 1:14). It does indeed seem as if it were this term of St. John which makes the connection between the feast of the *scenai* [Tabernacles] and the feast of the Birth of Christ.”¹⁰

Daniélou finds that traces of the patristic connection between the Feast of Tabernacles and that of the Nativity still survive in the current use of the Messianic verses 23, 28, 29 of Psalm 118 during “the Gradual of the Second Mass of Christmas” celebrated in Catholic Churches. He concludes: “It is indeed at Christmas that the eschatological tabernacle was built for the first time, when the Word ‘established His dwelling amongst us’ and the unity of men and angels was restored when the angels visited the shepherds.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the connection between Christ’s birth and the Feast of Tabernacles was gradually lost as the pagan symbology of the sun displaced the Biblical typology of the Feast of Tabernacles. The attempt of the Fathers to connect the Feast of Tabernacles with Christmas was not successful because the two feasts differ in origin, meaning, and authority. By adopting the date of December 25th, which was the pagan feast of the birthday of the Invincible Sun (*dies natalis Solis Invicti*),¹² the Christological meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles was gradually lost—as indicated by the fact that today nobody thinks of Christmas as being the antitypical fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles, when Christ became flesh and tabernacled with us, in order to accomplish His redemptive plan to tabernacle with us throughout eternity in the world to come.

The Pagan Origin of Date of Christmas

The adoption of the 25th of December for the celebration of Christmas is perhaps the most explicit example of Sun-worship’s influence on the Christian liturgical calendar. It is a known fact that the pagan feast of the *dies natalis Solis Invicti*—the birthday of the Invincible Sun, was held on that date.¹³ Do Christian sources openly admit the borrowing of the date of such a pagan festivity? Generally not. To admit borrowing a pagan festival, even after due reinterpretation of its meaning, would be tantamount to an open betrayal of the faith. This the Fathers were anxious to avoid.

An exception is the comment of an unknown Syrian writer who wrote in the margin of the *Expositio in Evangelia of Barsalibaeus* as follows: "It was a solemn rite among the pagans to celebrate the festival of the rising of the sun on this very day, December 25th. Furthermore, to augment the solemnity of the day, they were accustomed to kindle fires, to which rites they were accustomed to invite and admit even Christian people. When therefore the Teachers observed that Christians were inclined to this custom, they contrived a council and established on this day the festival of the true Rising"¹⁴

The commemoration of the birth of the Sun-god was not easily forgotten by Christians. Augustine and Leo the Great strongly reprimanded those Christians who at Christmas worshipped the Sun rather than the birth of Christ.¹⁵ Therefore, it is well to keep in mind that in the investigation of the influence of the Sun-cults on the Christian liturgy, the most we can hope to find are not direct but indirect indications. This warning applies not only for the date of Christmas but for that of Sunday as well.

In his dissertation *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, Gaston H. Halsberghe similarly concludes: "The authors whom we consulted on this point are unanimous in admitting the influence of the pagan celebration held in honor of *Deus Sol Invictus* on the 25th of December, the *Natalis Invicti*, on the Christian celebration of Christmas. This influence is held to be responsible for the shifting to the 25th of December of the birth of Christ, which had until then been held on the day of the Epiphany, the 6th of January. The celebration of the birth of the Sun god, which was accompanied by a profusion of light and torches and the decoration of branches and small trees, had captivated the followers of the cult to such a degree that even after they had been converted to Christianity they continued to celebrate the feast of the birth of the Sun god."¹⁶

Rome and the Origin of Sunday, Easter Sunday and Christmas

Let us note that the Church of Rome pioneered not only the observance of Sunday and Easter-Sunday, but also the new date of December 25 for the celebration of Christ's birth. In fact the first explicit indication that on the 25th of December Christians celebrated Christ's birthday, is

found in a Roman document known as Chronograph of 354 (a calendar attributed to Fuzious Dionysius Philocalus), where it says: “*VIII Kal. Jan. natus Christus in Betleem Judaeae*—On the eighth calends of January [i.e., December 25th] Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea.”¹⁷

That the Church of Rome introduced and championed this new date, is accepted by most scholars. For instance, Mario Righetti, a renowned Catholic liturgist who is the author of the standard four volumes set on *Storia Liturgica—A History of Liturgy*, writes: “After the peace the Church of Rome, to facilitate the acceptance of the faith by the pagan masses, found it convenient to institute the 25th of December as the feast of the temporal birth of Christ, to divert them from the pagan feast, celebrated on the same day in honor of the “Invincible Sun” Mithras, the conqueror of darkness.”¹⁸

In the Orient, however, the birth and the baptism of Jesus were celebrated respectively on January 5 and 6. B. Botte, a Belgian Benedictine scholar, in a significant study concludes that this date also evolved from an originally pagan feast, namely Epiphany, which commemorated the birth and growth of light.¹⁹ It was not an easy task for the Church of Rome to get the Eastern churches to accept the new date of December 25th, since many of them “firmly adhered to the practice of observing the festival of Christ’s birth in its old form as an Epiphany festival on January 5th-6th.”²⁰

It would take us beyond our immediate scope to trace the process of adoption by the various Christian communities of the Roman Christmas date of December 25. It will be sufficient to notice that the adoption of the date of December 25th for the celebration of Christ’s birth shows not only of the influence of the Sun-cult, but also of the primacy exerted by the Church of Rome in promoting the adoption of the pagan holidays of *Dies Solis* (the Day of the Sun) and *Natalis Solis Invicti* (the birthday of the Invincible Sun) held on December 25. The fact that both Christmas (Christ + Mass) and Sunday (*Dies Solis*) were pagan holy days adopted and promoted by the Catholic church, should cause Adventists to ponder on the legitimacy of their observance.

Conclusion

The birth of Jesus is of incomparable importance to the Christian faith. Without the birth of Christ there would be no baptism, death, resurrection, ascension, outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Christ's intercession in the heavenly sanctuary, and Second Advent.

The date of Christ's birth most likely coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles that falls late in September or early in October. Being the feast of thanksgiving for God's willingness to protect His people with the tabernacle of His presence during the wilderness sojourning, it could serve fittingly to celebrate Christ's willingness to become a human being and pitch His tent among us in order to become our Savior.

The time of the Feast of Tabernacles provides Christians today with a more accurate Biblical timing and typology for celebrating Christ's birth, than the pagan dating of December 25th. The latter date not only is removed from the actual time of Christ's birth, but is also derived from the pagan celebration of the birth of the Sun-god. Why celebrate Christ's birth at the wrong time of the year because of a pagan tradition, when we can observe it at the right season on the basis of sound biblical reasons?

From a biblical perspective the birth of Jesus is connected with three major themes: (1) adoration and worship (Luke 2:8-12); (2) the giving of gifts to God (Matt 2:1-11); and proclamation of peace and goodwill (Luke 2:13-14). May our celebration of Christ's birth, at any time of the year, incorporate these essential elements: worship, giving, and praise.

ENDNOTES

1. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church* (1956), p. 35.
2. See A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (New York, 1992), p. 267.
3. See, Adam Clark, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (New York, 1956), vol. 5, p. 370.
4. Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), p. 97.

5. Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 540.

6. See, for example, Edward Chumney, *The Seven Festivals of the Messiah* (Shippensburg, PA, 1994), pp. 178-184; Barney Kasdan, *God's Appointed Times* (Baltimore, MD, 1993), pp. 95-99.

7. Ellen White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 540-541.

8. Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and Liturgy* (South Bend, IN, 1956), pp. 343-347.

9. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Nativity*, *Patrologia Graeca* 46, 1129 B-C, translated by Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 345.

10. Jean Daniélou (note 8), p. 345.

11. Jean Daniélou (note 8), p. 347.

12. For a study of the influence of sun-worship on the Christian adoption of December 25 for the celebration of Christ's birth, see my dissertation, *From Sabbath to Sunday. A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Rome, Italy, 1977), pp. 256-261.

13. In the Philocalian calendar (A.D. 354) the 25th of December is designated as "N[atalis] *Invicti*—The birthday of the invincible one" (*CIL* I, part 2, p. 236); Julian the Apostate, a nephew of Constantine and a devotee of Mithra, says regarding this pagan festival: "Before the beginning of the year, at the end of the month which is called after Saturn [December], we celebrate in honor of Helios [the Sun] the most splendid games, and we dedicate the festival to the Invincible Sun. That festival may the ruling gods grant me to praise and to celebrate with sacrifice! And above all the others may Helios [the Sun] himself, the king of all, grant me this" (Julian, *The Orations of Julian, Hymn to King Helios* 155, LCL p. 429); Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among Greeks and Romans*, 1960, p. 89: "A very general observance required that on the 25th of December the birth of the 'new Sun' should be celebrated, when after the winter solstice the days began to lengthen and the 'invincible' star triumphed again over darkness"; for texts on the Mithraic celebration of Dec. 25th see *CIL* I, p. 140; Gordon J. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion*, 1931, pp. 58-65, argues persuasively that many of the customs of the ancient Roman Saturnalia (Dec. 17-23) were transferred to the Christmas season.

14. J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca orientalis* 2, 164, trans. by P. Cotton, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, 1933, pp. 144-145.

15. Augustine, *Sermo in Nativitate Domini* 7, PL 38, 1007 and 1032, enjoins Christians to worship at Christmas not the sun but its Cre-

ator; Leo the Great rebukes those Christians who at Christmas celebrated the birth of the sun rather than that of Christ (Sermon 27, In Nativitate Domini, PL 54, 218).

16. Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 1972, p. 174.

17. T. Mommsen, *Chronography of Philocalus of the Year 354*, 1850, p. 631; L. Duchesne, *Bulletin critique*, 1890, p. 41, has established that the calendar goes back to 336, because the *Depositio martyrum* is preceded in the Philocalian by the *Depositum episcoporum of Rome*, which lists Sylvester (d. A.D. 335) as the last pope.

18. Mario Righetti, *Manuale di Storia Liturgica*, 1955, II, p. 67.

19. B. Botte, "Les Denominations du dimanche dans la tradition chrétienne," *Le Dimanche*, *Lex Orandi* 39, 1965, pp. 14ff.

20. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, 1956, p.32.

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