

# The Date And Meaning Of Christmas

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### Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Newsletter:

During the past few weeks several people have asked me what I think about the religious celebration of Christmas in some Adventist churches. For example, a subscriber to our newsletter emailed me this message: "A puzzling question has been nagging me for a long time about the Christmas celebration in some Adventist churches. Could you explain to me why some Adventist churches celebrate Christmas while others do not? What is the full story behind this celebration? Can you enlighten us? I would appreciate if you could give me some insightful explanations about Christmas. It is such a beautiful and exciting holiday!"

An Adventist sister from the West coast just called me this morning to ask me how she could explain the Christmas celebrations going on in her own Adventist church to a family who were former members of the Church of God Seventh-day. This family has been attending the Adventist church regularly for several months and have received the complete series of Bible studies. They are almost ready to join the church through baptism, but now they are distressed over the Christmas decorations and celebration inside the Adventist church they are attending. They feel that the Adventist church is inconsistent by rejecting Sunday observance because of its origin as the pagan Day of the Sun, and yet accepting Christmas which began also as the pagan celebration of the birth of the Sun God.

"What can I say to this family?" the Adventist sister asked me. "We have studied with them for several months and they are ready to join our church. We hate to lose this lovely family over the question of Christmas." What would be your advice to this gracious and caring Adventist sister? I told her to put this family at ease by reassuring them that Christmas observance is not an Adventist fundamental belief. Most Adventist churches around the world do not decorate their sanctuary with Christmas trees and lights, nor do they have a special religious service on Christmas day.

Where I grew up in Rome, Italy, 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 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.

Things have changed gradually during the past 40 years. This became evident to me last Sabbath, December 16, when I entered Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University after being away on the Sabbath for several months. When I entered the sanctuary I was surprised to see the whole front-end profusely illuminated and decorated. It reminded me of the rich decorations usually found in Greek Orthodox churches.

Frankly, I am not inspired by the elaborate Christmas decorations and celebration, because as a historian I am reminded 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 spirit of Christ's 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 decoration 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 15, the annual celebration of Christ's birth. This point will be expanded below.

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 in order to become our Savior. No other story can grip the human heart as the story of the divine love manifested in being willing 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 a helpless baby, will come back the second time as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. What this means is 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.

This important truth will be brought out in this Bible study where we shall see that the birth of Jesus was typologically represented in the ancient Feasts of Israel by the Feast of Booth, known also as the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast celebrated in ancient Israel not only the unsettled conditions of the wilderness sojourning when the people lived in booths or temporary shelters, but also the shelter or protection given by God to His people in the desert by dwelling among them through the cloud and fire.

The cloud and fire of God's presence that accompanied the Israelites day and night, functioned as a protecting booth over the people. This unique experience is seen in the New Testament as representing both the First Advent when Christ became flesh and tabernacled with us (John 1:14) and the Second Advent when the Lord Himself "will erect a booth over them with his presence" (Rev 7:15) and "will tabernacle with them" (Rev 21:3) throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. The first Advent of Jesus in *human flesh* to dwell among us for few years, point to the Second Advent in *divine glory* to dwell with the redeemed for eternity. We will explore this theme more fully shortly.

The many questions I have received about the celebration of Christmas, have caused me to change the topic of this newsletter. In the last newsletter (no. 58) I promised to continue our study of creeping compromise (political correctness) in Christianity by offering a brief historical survey of dress and adornments in some Christian denominations. I do have this study ready and I plan to use in a future newsletter. In view of the Christmas season and of the interest shown by many for a deeper understanding of the origin and meaning of Christmas, I decided to devote this newsletter to a fresh analysis of the date and meaning of Christmas. I warn you that you are in for some pleasant surprises. So, as the flight attendants put it, "seat down, relax, and enjoy our flight" into the date and meaning of Christmas

Before proceeding with our historical and theological investigation of Christmas, let me make a couple of announcements regarding forthcoming seminars and a special offer on the Sabbath issue of *RESTORE* magazine.

## **UPCOMING WEEKEND SEMINARS**

As a service to our subscribers, I am listing the date and the location of the seminars for the month of January and February 2001. Feel free to contact me at (616) 471-2915 for a special seminar in your area during the coming year. I am in the process of finalizing my 2001 calendar of speaking engagements for and I still have few open weekends.

### **January 12-13: St. Croix, US Virgin Islands**

#### **Location: Central SDA Church**

For information call Pastor Desmond James at (340) 778-8054

### **January 19-20: St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands**

#### **Location: Philadelphia SDA Church**

For information call Pastor Ammaran Williams at (340) 775-1388

### **February 2-3 Sacramento Central SDA Church**

Location: 6045 Camellia Avenue, Sacramento, CA 95819

For information call the church office at (916) 457-6511

### **February 9-10: Pendleton SDA Church**

Location: 1401 SW Goodwin Place, Pendleton, OR 97801

For information call the church office at (541) 276-0882

### **February 16-17: Coeur d'Alene SDA Church**

Location: 111 Locust Avenue, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814

For information call Pastor Lloyd Perrin at (509) 276-7386

### **March 2-3: Walla Walla City SDA Church**

Location: 2133 Howard Street, Walla Walla, WA 99362

For information call church office at (509)525-9540

The date and seminars' location for the following months, will be posted in subsequent newsletters.

## **SPECIAL SABBATH ISSUE OF *RESTORE* MAGAZINE**

Recently we offered to our subscribers the special issue of *RESTORE*, which contains seven enlightening articles on the Sabbath written by scholars of different persuasions. The response was great. We mailed out the 200 copies at hand in few days and several people have contacted us for additional copies. We have been able to secure another supply of this timely magazine for those who did not get copies before. Feel free to contact us to receive your copy.

*RESTORE* is a colorful (non-SDA) 44 pages magazine (8 1/2 by 11 inches) devoted to restore "the biblical Hebrew heritage to the Christian believer." The contributors to this magazine are all scholars of differing religious persuasions who share the common concern to recover the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. The Spring 2000 issue of *RESTORE* is devoted, as stated on the cover, to "restoring Shabbat: Time for God and the family." Three of the seven Sabbath articles are by Adventist scholars. My own article on "The Good News of the Sabbath" examines the three fundamental glad tidings which the Sabbath contains and proclaims, namely: perfect creation, complete redemption, and final restoration. This special Sabbath issue of *RESTORE* will enrich your understanding and experience of the Sabbath.

*RESTORE* regularly retails for \$8.00 per copy, but I am able to mail you two copies of this SPECIAL SABBATH ISSUE for only \$10.00, postage paid. To order your two copies for \$10.00, postpaid, you can call us at (616) 471-2915 or email us the order form found at the end of this newsletter with your credit card information.

## A SPECIAL "THANK YOU NOTE" TO ALL OUR SUBSCRIBERS

Most likely this is the last newsletter for the year 2000. This is a good time to pause for a moment to thank God for His providential leading in this project and to express my wholehearted gratitude to all of you who during this past year have supported my ministry through your messages, prayers and purchasing of my books.

When I started what I call "our cyberspace Bible Class," I would have never anticipated that over 12,000 people would subscribe to this ENDTIME ISSUES newsletter during this past year. The subscription list continues to grow at the rate of 20 to 30 new subscribers every day. Much of the credit goes to those of you who have shared these newsletters with your friends and invited them to subscribe. Words fail to express my appreciation for promoting this newsletter. Your efforts make it possible for me to share my ministry of research into biblical truths with a larger audience around the world. I would have never dreamed few years ago that the Lord would make it possible for me to share my research from the basement of my home in Berrien Springs, Michigan, with fellow believers and Christian friends around the world. Thank God for the miracle of instant communications.

My ministry of biblical research on vital endtime truths, is largely a venture of faith. I took an early retirement from Andrews University on July 1, 2000 at the age of 62, after 36 years of teaching (the last 26 years at Andrews), in order to devote myself more fully to research, writing, and lecturing. This means that for the next three years I will not receive any retirement benefits. Those of you who purchase my books make it possible for my ministry to continue. Thank you for your encouragement and support.

Few have complained that I promote my books in conjunction with this newsletter. Frankly, I would rather avoid the promotional aspect of this ministry. In fact, if a wealthy benefactor offers to adopt me as a scholar and to sponsor my research by paying my salary, I will immediately stop promoting my research and let other people do it for me. So far no benefactor has adopted me, but this could happen in the future. Solid biblical research is very expensive to produce because it is time consuming. Sponsors of such research are few and far between. My new research project on POPULAR HERESIES will cost me over \$40,000.00 of forfeited salary alone, without counting the editorial and printing costs.

Unfortunately our publishing houses cannot afford to pay for expensive research projects. For example, I offered my manuscript on **IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION?** to the REVIEW & HERALD. They were interested in this study, but they could not afford to refund me for the investment I made to produce it—which was over one year of forfeited salary. I am thankful for the willingness of the REVIEW & HERALD to buy 2000 copies as soon as the book came off the press. They bought the same quantity of each of my two latest books, **THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE** and **THE CHRISTIAN AND ROCK MUSIC**. These quantity purchases help me to meet my financial obligations toward the printer.

During the coming year it may become necessary for me to post this newsletter once a month, instead of every two weeks. This change may be necessary for two reasons. First, because I have accepted several overseas invitations which will take me away from my home computer and internet service for several weeks at a time. Second, preparing a newsletter takes me an average of two to three days of research and writings. The newsletter deadline, in addition to the incoming correspondence and travelling, leaves me with little time for researching and writing my new book on POPULAR HERESIES. To give priority to this major research project, I need to curtail some activities. By posting this newsletter only once a month, I will have more free time to devote to my new book.

What I have appreciated most during this past year is the many email messages received from all over the world from readers of the newsletters and books. Many of you have told me how the studies you have read have enriched your understanding and

experience of biblical truths. I want you to know that your messages of appreciation have meant a lot to me. They motivate me to continue and expand this ministry.

I would like to thank especially those of you who have bought quantities of *THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE* to donate to libraries and ministers of other faiths. As a result of your outreach efforts, many ministers have accepted the Sabbath. Some of them, like Pastor Allen Stanfield of the First Baptist Church (Southern Baptist) in Lucerne Valley, California, have moved their church services from Sunday to Saturday.

Even this afternoon a pastor of an independent community church in Virginia, called me to express his appreciation for the help received from reading some of my books given him by an Adventist. He kept me on the phone for half an hour and then emailed me a message requesting more books. It is gratifying to see how the Lord can use the printed page to bring conviction to the hearts of sincere truth seekers. Thank you for sharing these timely studies with the thought-leaders of your community. Please accept this simple note of thanks as a sincere expression of my gratitude for your support to my ministry of biblical research. May the Lord richly bless you with His wisdom and grace during this coming New Year.

While writing the above paragraph I received a phone call from Jerry Hall, a researcher and script writer for PAX TELEVISION network of 120 stations. They are responsible for such programs as "Touched by an Angel." During the hour long conversation, he told me that he had just finished reading some of my research on "Israel in Prophecy," and wants to interview me for their forthcoming TV series called "Encounters with the Unexplained." I accepted the invitation and a TV filming crew will come to our home for an on site filming. I refer to this incident simply to illustrate the power of the printed page.

## WILLOW CREEK BAPTIZES BY SPRINKLING

Few days ago my daughter Loretta went with a visiting friend to visit the WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH, which one of the largest churches, located in a suburb of Chicago. Both of them were surprised to see 200 persons baptized by sprinkling few drops of water over their heads. Later, during the Lord's Supper, people were offered slices of normal, fermented bread, instead of unleavened bread.

The explanation that was given is that it is more convenient to sprinkle and to offer regular bread, than to immerse people in a baptistery and to produce unleavened bread. Nobody will dispute the accuracy of their reasoning. The problem is that their reasoning betrays their philosophy which is to make Christianity a religion of convenience.

I am reporting this incident because several Adventist pastors have become so enamored with the successful WC church growth strategy, that they have resented my past negative remarks about WC. For them WC has become the role model of church growth for Adventist to follow.

Eventually I plan to post an in-depth analysis of WC after examining their publications and attending their programs. I feel that this investigation is urgently needed to evaluate the biblical basis of their church growth strategy, which is being adopted by an increasing number of Adventist pastors. Undoubtedly there are positive elements in the WC church growth strategy, but we must be sure to reject what would weaken our Adventist identity and mission.

An SDA pastor who attended the WC seminars, defended on SDANET the baptism by sprinkling done in December on the ground that the same people can be rebaptized by immersion in June in the lake on the premises of the church when the weather is warmer. He wrote: "the New Testament model for people that accept Christ is to get baptized right away. And I'd love to see our believers do the same to boldly, courageously step forward to be baptized as soon as possible after they have crossed the line of faith."

It amazes me to what extent some people will go to justify what WC does, even if their practice is a blatant violation of a biblical directive. With all the million of dollars WC has spent to build their auditorium, why have they not planned for a suitable baptistery? Why do people have to wait until June to be baptized or rebaptized by immersion? If WC exists to lead people to Christ by accepting Him through baptism, then a convenient baptistery should have been a priority in the design of their sanctuary. After all the lay out of the sanctuary reveal the theology of the worshippers.

The communion table, the pulpit, and the baptistery are three major components of a biblically oriented church, since they represent respectively the Lord's Supper, the preaching of the Word, and baptism—three important elements of our Christian worship.

It is disheartening for me to see how some people are so captivated by the numerical growth of Willow Creek, that they are willing to justify their unbiblical practices. My appeal to everyone is simple: Be like the Bereans by "examining the scriptures daily to see if the things were so" (Acts 17:11).

## **A LOOK AT THE DATE AND MEANING OF CHRISTMAS**

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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 25. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

### **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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

The most likely date of Christ’s birth 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,”<sup>4</sup> 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 mentioned above, 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 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** is designed to broaden 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.

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 Passover 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."<sup>5</sup>

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 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?

### **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 authors<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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]. How does He come? Not in a boat or in a chariot. But He comes into human existence by the immaculate Virgin. It is He, Our Lord, who has appeared to make the solemn feast day in thick branches of foliage up to the horns of the altar."<sup>8</sup>

In the last sentence, Gregory alludes to the ancient Jewish custom of erecting a canopy over the altar during the Feast of Tabernacles by tying branches to the four horns of the altar. For Gregory, this ceremony 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."<sup>9</sup>

What contributed to make the connection between the birth of Jesus and the Feast of Tabernacles, was not only John's representation of the Incarnation as Christ pitching His tent among us, but also the Messianic understanding of Psalm 118:26-27, a psalm that was sung by the Jews during the processions of the Feast of Tabernacles and that was used by the Fathers to link the two feasts. The Psalm announces "He who comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118:26)—a clear allusion to the coming of the Messiah—in the context of the Feast of Tabernacles: "The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!" (Ps 118:27).

Church Fathers saw in these passages a representation of the coming of the Messiah through the typology of the Feast of Tabernacles. Gregory of Nissa (about A. D. 330-395) remarks that "The prophet David tells us that the God of the universe, the Lord of the world has appeared to us to constitute the solemn Feast in the thick branches of foliage."<sup>10</sup> "The thick branches of foliage" refer to the Feast of Tabernacles which was celebrated in booths made of leafy branches. The booths are seen as foreshadowing the Incarnation which made it possible for Christ to dwell among us.

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."<sup>11</sup>

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*),<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 Bar-salibaeus 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"<sup>15</sup>

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 worshiped the Sun rather than the birth of Christ.<sup>15</sup> 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.

### **Astronomical/Allegorical Speculations**

Few scholars maintain that the date of the 25th of December was derived from astronomical-allegorical observations. It was the opinion of some Fathers that both the conception and passion of Christ occurred at the time of the vernal equinox on the 25th of March.<sup>16</sup> Reckoning from that date the nine months of pregnancy of Mary, the date of the birth of Christ was computed to be the 25th of December.

Oscar Cullmann rightly observes that these computations “can scarcely have given the initiative.”<sup>17</sup> They seem to represent rather an *a posteriori* rationale advanced to justify an already existing date and practice. To the majority of scholars, as stated by J. A. Jungmann, “It has become progressively clear that the real reason for the choice of the 25th of December was the pagan feast of the *dies natalis Solis Invicti* which was celebrated in those days with great splendor.”<sup>18</sup>

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.”<sup>19</sup>

Let us note that the Church of Rome (as in the case of Easter-Sunday so in the question of the celebration of Christmas) pioneered and promoted the adoption of the new date. 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.”<sup>20</sup>

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 a 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.”<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup>

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.

## **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. Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and Liturgy* (South Bend, IN, 1956), pp. 343-347.
8. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Sermon on the Nativity*, *Patrologia Graeca* 46, 1129 B-C, translated by Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 345.
9. Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 345.
10. Gregory of Nissa, *Pychnazomena*, Psalm 118:27, translated by Jean Daniélou (note 7), p. 344.
11. Jean Daniélou (note 7), 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 Creator; 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. L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution*, 1919, pp. 260f., presents this hypothesis as a possibility. M. Righetti, *Manuale di Storia Liturgica*, 1955, II, pp. 68-69, explains that the date of March 25th "though historically unfounded, was based on astronomical-allegorical considerations, namely that on the day of the vernal equinox the world was created." According to this theory, on the same date of March 25 creation began and Christ, as Augustine says, was "conceived and crucified" (*De trinitate* 4, 5, PL 42, 894); cf. Hippolytus, *In Daniele commentarius* 4, 23, for a similar view.
17. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, 1956, p. 29.
18. Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, 1962, p. 147; L. Duchesne (fn. 74), p. 26, also recognizes this as a more plausible explanation: "A better explanation is that based on the festival of *Natalis Invicti*, which appears in the pagan calendar of the Philocalian collection under the 25th of December. . . . One is inclined to believe that the Roman Catholic Church made the choice of the 25th of December in order to enter into rivalry with Mithraism"; John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire*, 1970, p. 239, defends the same view; cf. Franz Cumont (Franz

Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among Greeks and Romans*, 1960), p. 89: "It appears certain that the commemoration of the nativity was placed on December 25, because on the winter solstice was celebrated the rebirth of the invincible god. By adopting this date ... the ecclesiastical authorities purified somehow some pagan customs which they could not suppress."

19. Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, 1972, p. 174.
20. 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.
21. Mario Righetti, *Manuale di Storia Liturgica*, 1955, II, p. 67.
22. B. Botte, "Les Denominations du dimanche dans la tradition chrétienne," *Le Dimanche*, *Lex Orandi* 39, 1965, pp. 14ff.
23. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, 1956, p.32.

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