

CHRISTMAS, or PAGAN-MASS?

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Introduction:

Each year in December, Messianic Jewish congregations must deal with the question of whether it is right or wrong for members to celebrate the "traditional" holiday of "Christmas." This paper seeks to explore the origins, traditions, and applications of this "holiday" in the life of believers, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

Man-made

Is it acceptable for a man-made "religious" holiday to be celebrated? In Judaism, both traditional and Messianic, we celebrate both *Chanukah* and *Purim*, which are holidays which were instituted by people. The fact that they were each created to celebrate a miracle of G-d (*Chanukah* the miracle of the rededication of the Holy Temple, and *Purim* the miracle of the redemption of the Jewish people from death in Persia) and that they were both celebrated during Bible times helps to give them legitimacy as religious events. But where does one draw the line between what *YHVH* has ordained and commanded (like *YHVH's* own festivals commanded in Leviticus 23) and ones created by mankind to celebrate His goodness?

There is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating the coming of the Messiah to earth (if one knew when that was). In fact, through the prophetic cycle of Biblical festivals, the coming of Messiah to earth and his ultimate plan of sacrifice for the sins on mankind is repeatedly celebrated in the Messianic community. A "right" reason for creating a holiday would be to remember what our Heavenly Father did in the past for us. But what about a holiday created for "wrong" reasons?

Origins

Very few realize that not very much has changed in the way Christmas is celebrated from the way pagans observed the day (under a different name) centuries before the birth of *Yeshua*! Obviously they didn't call it "Christmas." They called this mid-winter festival by its original heathen or pagan name -- the Saturnalia.

The Scriptures do not mention the celebration of *Yeshua's* birth, and therefore it was not celebrated by *Yeshua's* early followers. So where did millions of modern-day "Christians" get the idea to celebrate it? In ancient times the winter solstice was celebrated in Babylon as the birth day of *Tammuz* (*Dumuzi*), the god of vegetation. This was the shortest day of the year, in the latter part of December (today it actually falls on December 21). According to the pagans, the god Nimrod would visit the evergreen tree and leave gifts upon it. This festival became known as the Saturnalia, and friends and family would exchange gifts.

Nativity of the Sun

Interestingly, the winter solstice was also celebrated by the followers of Mithra as the "nativity" or "birth" of the sun. Mithra was the Persian sun-god, and his worship was widespread throughout the Roman Empire in the days of the early believers. When the feast was celebrated in Rome, it was called the festival of Saturn and lasted for five days. In both ancient Rome and more ancient Babylon, this festival was characterized by bouts of drunkenness, wild merrymaking, and lascivious orgies which would begin with an "innocent kiss" underneath the mistletoe and would then lead to justification of all sorts of sexual excesses, perversions and abominations.

Alexander Hislop writes in *The Two Babylons*:

And first, as to the festival in honour of the birth of Christ, or Christmas. How comes it that that festival was connected with the 25th of December? There is not a word in the Scriptures about the precise day of His birth, or the time of the year when He was born. What is recorded there, implies that at what time soever His birth took place, it could not have been on the 25th of December. At the time that the angel announced His birth to the shepherds of Bethlehem, they were feeding their flocks by night in the open fields. Now, no doubt, the climate of Palestine is not so severe as the climate of this country; but even there, though the heat of the day be considerable, the cold of the night, from December to February, is very piercing, and it was not the custom for the shepherds of Judea to watch their flocks in the open fields later than about the end of October. It is in the last degree incredible, then, that the birth of Christ could have taken place at the end of December. There is great unanimity among commentators on this point (pp. 91-92).

Hislop continues:

Indeed, it is admitted by the most learned and candid writers of all parties that the day of our Lord's birth cannot be determined, and that within the Christian Church no such festival as Christmas was ever heard of until the third century, and that not till the fourth century was far advanced did it gain much observance (pp. 92-93).

If *YHVH* wanted us to observe *Yeshua's* birthday, don't you think He would have told us the exact day in Scripture? Since *Yeshua* and His disciples lived a thoroughly Jewish lifestyle, it would have been reckoned by the Jewish calendar! Why would He have deliberately hidden the exact day from us? Maybe because *Yeshua's* birth date is not important - not something for us to dwell upon or focus on or obsess about. It is *Yeshua's* ministry and His death and resurrection that embodies the Good News of Messiah, not his time as a helpless baby.

Why December 25?

Why did the Roman Church fix upon December 25 as the day to honor the Messiah's birthday? There are many opinions on this. One which seems to be valid is that the early Church, in moving all of its celebrations away from Judaism without denying its

followers the holidays they had come to enjoy, took the date of *Hanukkah*, the Feast of Dedication, and "Romanized" it. *Hanukkah* occurs on the **25th day** of the Hebrew month of *Kislev*, which occurs approximately in **December**.

Hislop also has an opinion:

Long before the fourth century, and long before the Christian era itself, a festival was celebrated among the heathen, at that precise time of the year, in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven; and it may fairly be presumed that, in order to conciliate the heathen, and to swell the number of the nominal adherents of Christianity, the same festival was adopted by the Roman Church, giving it only the name of Christ. This tendency on the part of Christians to meet Paganism halfway was very early developed; and we find Tertullian, even in his day, about the year 230, bitterly lamenting the inconsistency of the disciples of Christ in this respect, and contrasting it with the strict fidelity of the Pagans to their own superstition (ibid., p. 93).

Frazier, in *The Golden Bough*, states without hesitation: "The largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds was the pagan sun worship -- Mithraism." He adds, "This winter festival was called 'the Nativity' -- the 'nativity of the sun' " (p. 471).

Mithra was not the only pagan deity said to be born at this time of year. Osiris, Horus, Hercules, Bacchus, Adonis, Jupiter, Tammuz and other sun-gods were supposedly born at the time of the winter solstice!

Alexander Hislop confirms this, adding:

That Christmas was originally a Pagan festival, is beyond all doubt. The time of the year, and the ceremonies with which it is still celebrated, prove its origin. In Egypt, the son of Isis, the Egyptian title for the queen of heaven, was born at this very time, 'about the time of the winter solstice.' The very name by which Christmas is popularly known among ourselves -- Yule-day -- proves at once its pagan and Babylonian origin. 'Yule' is the Chaldee name for an 'infant' or 'little child'; and as the 25th of December was called by our Pagan Anglo-Saxon ancestors, 'Yule-day,' or the 'Child's-day,' and the night that preceded it, 'Mother-night,' long before they came in contact with Christianity, that sufficiently proves its real character. Far and wide, in the realms of Paganism, was this birthday observed ("The Two Babylons", PP. 93-94).

The festival at Rome, called the feast of "Saturn," lasted five days, and loose reins were given to drunkenness and revelry. This was precisely the way in which the Babylonian midwinter, or December, festival was celebrated. Berosus tells us it also lasted "five days."

Declares Hislop:

The Wassailing bowl of Christmas had its precise counterpart in the 'Drunken festival' of Babylon; and many of the other observances still kept up among ourselves at Christmas came from the very same quarter. The candles, in some parts of England, lighted on Christmas eve, and used so long as the festive season lasts, were equally lighted by the Pagans on the eve of the festival of the Babylonian god, to do honour to him: for it was one of the distinguishing peculiarities of his worship to have lighted wax-candles on his altars (pp. 96-97).

The Pagan Tree

What about that old favorite, the Christmas tree? Surely it wasn't pagan, too, was it? The astonishing answer: "The Christmas tree, now so common among us, was equally common in Pagan Rome and Pagan Egypt. In Egypt that tree was the palm-tree; in Rome it was the fir; the palm tree denoting the Pagan messiah, as *Baal-Tamar*, the fir referring to him as *Baal-Berith*. The mother of Adonis, the sun-god and great mediatorial divinity, was mystically said to have been changed into a tree, and when in that state to have brought forth her divine son. If the mother was a tree, the son must have been recognized as the 'Man the branch.' And this entirely accounts for the putting of the Yule Log into the fire on Christmas Eve, and the appearance of the Christmas tree the next morning" (Hislop, p. 97).

The symbolism of the Christmas tree and the Yule log is made plain by Alexander Hislop. He writes:

Therefore, the 25th of December, the day that was observed at Rome as the day when the victorious god reappeared on earth, was held at the *Natalis invicti solis*, 'The birthday of the unconquered Sun.' Now the Yule Log is the dead stock of Nimrod, deified as the sun-god, but cut down by his enemies; the Christmas-tree is Nimrod redivivus -- the slain god come to life again (p. 98).

The Scriptures foretell of this paganism:

Jeremiah 10:1 Hear what *YHVH* says to you, O house of Yisrael. 2 This is what *YHVH* says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations (*goyim*) or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. 3 For the customs of the peoples are worthless; **they cut a tree out of the forest**, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. 4 They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. 5 Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good."

Jeremiah, chapter 10, seems to be clearly referring to the ancient pagan Christmas tree, used during the pagan celebrations of the heathen sun-god at the winter solstice. This is shown in verse 2, where G-d connects this tree worship with the signs of the heavens. This is what the Lord says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky (the winter solstice), though the nations are terrified by them..." -- that is, they

carry important meaning to the pagans, telling them when to hold their festival, and representing the death and birth of the sun-god.

Satan Claus

Even "Santa Claus," the most popular symbol of Christmas in the United States, has a pagan origin. Says the *World Book Encyclopedia*: "Some of Santa Claus's characteristics date back many centuries. For example, the belief that Santa enters the house through the chimney developed from an old Norse legend. The Norse believed that the goddess Hertha appeared in the fireplace and brought good luck to the home."

But the most significant symbolism in this myth is that children are taught through it that he has many of the characteristics that only *YHVH* actually has: omniscience (knowing all - "he knows when you've been bad or good"); omnipresence, being able to cover the world with gift-giving in one night, etc. Satan always wanted to take *YHVH*'s place, to be like Him. "Satan Claus" (as I call this myth,) is a substitute for *YHVH* and for the supposed "reason for the season."

Santa Claus stands identified as none other than that original arch apostate Nimrod! His attributes hark back to ancient pagan worship. When children are asked, "What did Santa Claus bring you this year?" it is merely a modern twist to an old Satanic counterfeit pagan religion! All the merry Christmas songs harken back to pagan times, relics of a pagan past.

Summary

You may be shocked to hear me say that a holiday's similarities to a pagan holiday does not automatically mean that we should not celebrate it. There are many prophetic truths which the Lord has revealed to all sorts of groups of people so as to help them later accept Messiah. So I repeat that it is not necessarily wrong to celebrate the Birth of Messiah because pagans celebrated the birth of their god. But there is a difference between *HaShem* hinting truths to ancient peoples and the acceptance of these festivals by those who supposedly already belong to *YHVH*!

The pertinent question is, "What good does it do for the Kingdom of *YHVH* to celebrate such a holiday?" Does it provide a good witness to modern day pagans? No, the holiday is one based on materialism and pagan concepts. What about the celebration of a truly religious, pious holiday season? Does that help? Maybe, but it is overshadowed to such an extent by the pagan Christmas that I doubt if it shows through at all. So what is the answer? Should we "throw the baby out with the bath water" and dump the holiday altogether?

I believe that all followers of *Yeshua* should eliminate the celebration of Christmas from their year, and be a witness to the pagans by following *YHVH*'s word on celebrations that have been ordained by Him. Jewish believers have no business accepting Christmas as a

holiday at all, and Gentile believers need to examine this issue closely. Messianic Jewish congregations should completely ignore this pagan festival.

I believe that only by returning to the celebrations, feasts and festivals of the Scriptures, those ordained by *YHVH* and followed by *Yeshua* and His disciples, can believers ever be a good witness to this perverse generation of pseudo-Christians and secular heathens that *YHVH* exists, He is in control of the universe, and we are his followers - not when it is convenient, and not only when there is something in it for us.

Isaiah 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and *YHVH* has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

2 Corinthians 6:17 "Therefore come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. "Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

YHVH's word speaks for itself.