

The History of Christmas

In the centuries prior to Yeshua's time, the European people celebrated the winter solstice, the time of year when the days go from shorter to longer. Many observed this day as the sun's birthday. It occurred on December 21, according to our Gregorian calendar, or December 25, on the old Julian calendar.

In the Norse country, this day was known as Yule. Each year on Yule, men would cut a log as large as they could carry, drag it home, then set it on fire. This custom of lighting the Yule log is still practiced today. In ancient times, each spark was said to represent a pig or calf to be born in the spring. In addition to the Yule log, the ancient Norsemen also brought an evergreen tree inside the home. This was the one plant that could withstand a Norse winter. Evergreens proved life could survive even the dark of winter. Hence, Yule was a type of fertility celebration.

During the twelve days the Yule log burned, the community feasted and celebrated. To the revelers, inside where the log burned was a place of safety, while the cold outside was believed to be a place of demons.

The Germans named this holiday after their pagan god, Odin. They believed that Odin decreed who would prosper and who would die in the coming year.

The Romans called the day Saturnalia. They began celebrating the Saturnalia one week prior to the winter solstice. It lasted an entire month, constituting an orgy of food and drink. During this time, the Roman upper classes worshipped Mythra, the god of the unconquerable sun. In their view, the winter solstice was the holiest day of the year, since it was Mythra's birthday.

By the fourth century, the Gentile Church declared the winter solstice the feast day of the nativity. Many scholars believe this day was chosen to accommodate the pagans celebrating the birth of Mythra. To evolve the feast day of the risen sun to the feast day of the risen Son became a natural step for post-Nicene Christianity.

Because of the Gentile Church's policy of compromising with pagan culture, it adopted its holidays, rather than denouncing them. After adopting the evergreen tree, they soon began decorating it with apples, to symbolize the Garden of Eden. In time, Christmas tree ornaments replaced these apples.

In 1645, the Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, overthrew the king of England. They vowed to rid England of all ungodliness. In 1652, they outlawed Christmas. Until that time, most people celebrated Christmas in much the same way as modern-day Mardi Gras. It was not a family holiday, as is celebrated today. To the Catholics, Christmas was a time for going to church for Christ's Mass.

In 1656, the king of England returned to power under Charles II. Some historians cite the desire of the people to celebrate the winter solstice as one of the reasons the Puritans were ousted from power.

When the Puritans came to North America, they brought their beliefs with them. In 1659, they outlawed Christmas in Boston. The Puritans held enormous influence over the New World culture in its first two centuries. In its inaugural year of 1789, the U.S. Congress sat in session on Christmas day, and for most of the next 67 years.

By 1820, Christmas had become a time of rioting in New York City. A year earlier, the best-selling novelist Washington Irving wrote *Bracebridge Hall*. This book was a collection of short stories about Christmas at an English manor house. In his ideal world, the various social classes joined each other at this time of year. The rich remembered the poor by inviting them into their homes and treating them with food and drink. His book began having an impact on American society, where the rich had plenty, while the poor went without.

In 1822, Episcopal minister Clement Clark Moore wrote a poem for his children about a good-natured saint who came down the chimney on Christmas Eve. Entitled *A "Visit from Saint Nicholas"*, he began the modern myth of Santa Claus. He based his character on a Turkish bishop of the Middle Ages, known for giving gifts to children on December 6. His name was Saint Nicholas. In Holland, he became known as *Sinterklaas*, and is the source for the American name of the man in the red suit. Within 20 years, retail merchants began capitalizing on the opportunity to turn Christmas into a gift-giving day to children, most of whom were expecting Santa Claus to bring them presents. This American tradition soon expanded into the tradition of exchanging gifts on Christmas day.

In 1843, Charles Dickens wrote his famous short story, *A Christmas Carol*, a bestseller in both the U.S. and England. It was an attempt to redefine Christmas as a time for the rich to remember the poor by being kind and generous to them.

In 1848, Prince Albert, the cousin and husband of Queen Victoria of England, introduced his native German tradition of erecting an evergreen tree for the winter solstice. The *London Illustrated News* published a drawing of the royal family in Windsor Palace, standing around the first Christmas tree most Englishmen had ever seen. Within three years, nearly every English home had a Christmas tree. This new "tradition" soon became popular in the United States.

By 1860, Protestant churches began holding services on Christmas, a result of the growing popularity of the holiday. Until now, the day was celebrated everywhere in society except in Protestant churches. The irony is that modern people feel we need to put "Christ" back in Christmas. The problem with such thinking is that Christmas, as we know it, was never intended to be a Christ-centered occasion.

In 1863, Thomas Nast, a cartoonist for Harper's Weekly, gave the world a face for Santa Claus. Seventy-five years later in 1939, Robert May, a copywriter for Montgomery Ward, created a sidekick for him when he wrote Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

By now, Christmas had become a national holiday in the U.S. - cleansed of the pagan ritual of centuries past, and transformed into a family day. In addition, America's reinvention of the holiday spread to other nations around the world. Nevertheless, Christmas has its roots in pagan fertility rites.

Should we stop celebrating Christmas? That decision must be left to the individual. However harmless Christmas may seem on the surface today, the spirit of the pagan Christmas is one of enmity toward God. At the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., all Biblical holy days were outlawed. The Gentile Church developed an anti-Biblical stand on keeping God's commandments. It considered itself the New Israel, usurping the position of the authentic Chosen People of God. Christmas was initiated as a result of the new course the Gentile Church plotted for itself.

In a similar fashion, the 10 northern tribes, constituting the kingdom of Israel, broke from their brothers in the southern kingdom of Judah. In their rebellion, they too outlawed the Biblical holy days, and replaced them with their own holy days. We learn from 1 Kings that God was not pleased with their actions. Perhaps the Gentile Church today can learn from ancient Israel's actions.

*"He has shown you, O man, what is good;
And what the LORD requires of you is to do justice,
To love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." — Micah 6:8*

Adapted almost entirely from the television special, *"Christmas Unwrapped — The History of Christmas"* produced by the History Channel, 1997.