

CHAG HAMOLAD

Festival of 'The Birth'

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Is December 25th really the Messiah's birth date?

In Israel, the festival which celebrates the birth of Jesus (Yeshua) is not called Christmas, but rather **Chag Hamolad – the festival of the birth**. Is, however, December 25th truly the Messiah's birth date as is commonly believed?

Although Christmas is a well established Christian tradition, some Biblical scholars suggest that December 25th is not the true date of Yeshua's birth. There are several reasons why most scholars now doubt the validity of December 25th as the actual date of the Messiah's birth:



1. Winter in Israel is generally too cold at night to be out shepherding flocks; and yet at the time of Yeshua's birth, the shepherds were in the fields watching over their flocks at night (Luke 2:8).
2. Winter in Israel is not the logical time to take a census; and yet at the time of Yeshua's birth, Joseph and Miriam (Mary), had gone to Beit- Lechem (Bethlehem) to register for a census (Luke 2:1-5).
3. Jerusalem would only have been so crowded at the time of one of the three pilgrimage feasts: Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost) or Sukkot (Tabernacles/Booths). For Yeshua's birth, Jerusalem was so crowded that there was no room at the inn (Luke 2:7).

Likely, Yeshua was born at the end of the harvest, at the time of Sukkot, fulfilling the Scripture that one day the Lord would 'tabernacle' with His people. "Look! God's dwelling (Sukkah) is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Revelation 21:3)

We need to keep in mind that Yeshua was born into a completely Jewish, Hebraic culture where it is the date of death that is remembered and observed rather than the

date of one's birth. This could explain why we are certain of the date of his death (Passover) but not so clear on his birth date.

How, then, did December 25th come to be celebrated as the day of Jesus' birth and what is the origin of the festival of Christmas?

It was certainly not included in the early celebrations of the Christian church. The Catholic Encyclopedia says, "Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts."

Later, when churches at various places did begin celebrating the birthday of Jesus, there existed differences of opinion as to the correct date. It was not until the latter part of the fourth century before the Roman Church began observing December 25th. Yet, by the fifth century, it was ordered that the birth of Jesus be forever observed on this date, even though this was the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, one of the names of the sun-god.

A large, pagan, religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25th as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds was the pagan sun worship—Mithraism.

This winter festival was called, 'the Nativity'— the 'Nativity of the sun'. Semiramus, the Queen of Babylon, (also called the Queen of Heaven or Eashtar) contaminated the Israelites' worship of God with Baal worship. (Jeremiah 7:18, 44:17).

She ordered the ancient world to celebrate the birth of her son, Tammuz, who was apparently believed to be the sun god reincarnated. She set December 25th for the date of Baal's birth on the advice of her astrologers, since the sun is at its farthest point from the earth during the winter solstice.

The sun god, over time, was worshipped all over the ancient world on this date of December 25th. It was a time of sexual orgies, drunkenness, and the sacrificing of infants to Baal, a false god.

Because this feast was so popular amongst the heathen population of Greek and pagan Rome, the date was simply adopted as the time of the birth of Jesus by the Roman church.

Many customs associated with the season— the giving of gifts, the general rejoicing and festivity is due to this winter festival of Saturnalia — a remnant of paganism that has remained attached to the Christian Church.

In 1687, the Reverend Increase Mather of Boston observed that *"the early Christians who first observed the Nativity on December 25 did not do so thinking that Christ was born in that Month, but because the Heathens' Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those Pagan Holidays metamorphosed into*

Christian ones.” Increase Mather, *A Testimony against Several Prophane and Superstitious Customs, Now Practiced by Some in New England* (London, 1687), p. 35. See also Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Cultural History of America’s Most Cherished Holiday*, New York: Vintage Books, 1997, p. 4.

Due to its known pagan origin, the Puritans banned Christmas altogether. In Massachusetts, its observance was illegal between 1659 and 1681. The fact is, however, that despite its association with paganism, Christmas was and still is celebrated by most Christians.

Jewish anti-missionaries often use this information as an opportunity to discredit Christianity as an idolatrous religion that worships a false god.

According to David I. Kertzer, in his book, *The Popes Against the Jews: The Vatican’s Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, p. 74., Jewish rabbis of the ghetto in Rome were forced to wear clownish outfits and march through the city streets to the jeers of the crowd, pelted by a variety of missiles as part of the Saturnalia carnival throughout the 18th and 19th centuries CE.

In 1836, the Jewish community of Rome sent a petition to Pope Gregory XVI pleading with him to stop the annual Saturnalia abuse of the Jewish community, to which the Pope responded, “*It is not opportune to make any innovation.*”

Other more violent acts of anti-Semitism occurred on Christmas Day. On December 25, 1881, riots broke out across Poland when Christian leaders incited the Polish masses into an anti-Semitic frenzy.

On this Christmas Day, twelve Jews were brutally murdered in Warsaw, several others injured, and many Jewish women raped. In addition to the personal violence, two million rubles worth of Jewish property was destroyed.

The Origins of Christmas Customs

The Christmas Tree

The custom of decorating a Christmas tree dates back only a few centuries, however the principle behind it- about sacred trees - is ancient. Pagans had a custom of worshipping trees in the forest, or bringing them into their homes and decorating them, and this observance was adopted by the Christian Church.

Holy trees, symbols of the life force, were also associated with Canaanite cults.



Glade jul by Viggo Johansen (1891)

Cylinder seals dating from the Late Bronze Age often show a worshipper standing in front of a tree. Other seals dating from the 8th - 10th centuries BC, which depict a tree flanked by worshippers, have been found at T. Hlif, Lchish, Beth-shemesh, Gibeon, Samaria, and Megiddo.

A 'tree of life' with lily flowers being eaten by two ibex was found drawn on a large pithos at the religious center of Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Gold pendants of the Late Bronze Age from T. el-'Ajjul (near Gaza) and from Ugarit show stylized trees growing out of the navel of the pudenda of a formalized goddess according to James B. Pritchard, Editor, 'The Harper Atlas of the Bible', pgs.101-102 (Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1987)

Sexual intercourse under these 'holy trees' was thought to transmit the potency and vitality of the goddess (Hosea 4:13-14). These female deities could well have been the Asherah or Astarte who are often mentioned in the Old Testament as the consort of the weather god Baal (Judg. 3:7)



In at least ten Biblical references, the green tree is associated with idolatry and false worship. (1 Kings 14:23) The colorful, shining balls symbolize the sun and sun worship.

The use of holly and mistletoe comes from the Druid ceremonies. According to Miles Clement, in his book, *Christmas Customs and Traditions: Their History and Significance*, New York: Dover Publications, 1976, Druids used mistletoe to poison their human sacrificial victim. Christians adopted the custom of 'kissing under the mistletoe' as a synthesis of Druid sacrificial rituals with Saturnalia sexual immorality.

Places of worship with sacred *Christmas* trees are frequently mentioned in the Bible (Josh. 24:26) and the prophet Jeremiah condemned their use:

“Do not learn the ways of the nations... For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.” (Jeremiah 10:1-4)



Father and son collecting a tree in the forest, painting by Franz Krüger (1797–1857)

In light of all this information, some Messianic Jews and Gentiles choose not to celebrate Christmas whatsoever, while others continue to celebrate December 25th as Jesus' birthday.

More importantly than condemning those who do or don't choose to celebrate Christmas, however, is to use the season to help spread the good news that Yeshua came as the Light of the Word, not to condemn the world, but to save us.

Although this day may have pagan origins, it can be redeemed by doing special mitzvot (good deeds) to help those who are feeling lost or alone while others are celebrating with friends and family.

Christmas can be a difficult time for single mothers and families who have fallen upon hard times. We can be a 'light' by bringing cheer, comfort, hope and support into the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves.

For whether December 25th is actually the date of the Messiah's birth or not, the truth is that God so loved the world that He gave His only son so that whoever would believe on Him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

God is love and so He gives His very best; and we can choose to share the love of God at this time by giving of ourselves as well so that others can also come to know His salvation (Yeshua).

Will you pray at this time for the Jewish people to come to know their Messiah, Yeshua?