

# Taking Back Christmas

*Gary Davison*

Within the Christadelphian community you may find those who fully embrace Christmas as a religious festival, but there are others who barely acknowledge its existence at all.

One word comes up more than any other as a reaction to Christmas being mentioned, even by those who are happy to “do Christmas”. That word is *Pagan*. This isn’t merely a Christadelphian idea, either. It seems to be accepted by a lot of people within both the Christian and secular worlds. The mainstream narrative these days is to say that Christians co-opted the 25th of December date (along with its customs) from other Pagan religious festivals as a pragmatic way of bringing entire nations to the Gospel message.

This is certainly what I accepted until fairly recently, simply because it sounds like such a compelling and legitimate story. But I’m going to try to persuade you that this simply isn’t the case at all. In fact, we can have a good degree of confidence that early on in the history of Christianity, believers decided on a date for Christ’s birth. And then, later on, this was celebrated for absolutely the right reasons, without influence from any Pagan source.

What I first of all want to do is present to you the real truth behind the origins of Christmas. Then we’ll have a look at a few of the different suggestions you might hear for Pagan festivals from which Christmas is supposed to have originated.

## The 25th of December

So what do we know about the origins of Christmas? The Bible, of course, presents different aspects of the birth of Jesus in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but from there we don’t get any clear indication of what time of year it happened, and we therefore definitely don’t get a specific day, month, or year. Many have said quite categorically that the description of shepherds being out tending their flocks rules out it being during the winter time at all, although that’s not universally agreed.

In reality, we simply can't say for sure when it was, but it's unlikely to have been the 25th of December. That in itself is probably enough for many to dismiss Christmas. After all, if it's not mentioned in the Bible, then it's not really that important from a faith point of view to know the date. But, seeing as one was decided on, how did they come to decide that date?

The earliest evidence we have that the 25th of December was used to mark Christ's birth is from around 210 AD, after it was calculated by leaders of the church at that time, such as Hippolytus. There is said to have been a Jewish tradition saying that prominent prophets died on exactly the same day as they were conceived, and this is described as being the Integral age. Whether this is anything more than myth (as there isn't much evidence of Jews actually holding to it) doesn't really matter. It seems to have been used as part of the calculations anyhow! It is widely believed that the church started celebrating the *conception* of Jesus by the Holy Spirit *before* Christmas was ever a thing at all. The date for conception, known as the feast of Annunciation, was set as the 25th of March.

It seemed logical, therefore, that when believers wanted to mark the date of his birth, they would just go forward nine months, taking them to the 25th of December. Whilst we can have a fair amount of certainty that Jesus died pretty close to Passover in the spring, there is almost *zero certainty* about the date of his conception and birth. But actually, the accuracy of the dates wasn't really the important thing; it was more that believers wanted a date in the calendar *to mark these events*.

It is perhaps easy for Christadelphians to miss the point of this, seeing as we don't have a tradition in our community of marking certain dates as festivals. The whole thing can feel quite alien, but clearly the Jews had festivals and this tradition transferred into early Christianity.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul urges believers to be fully convinced of their own position about whether to observe festivals or not, whilst also respecting fellow believers' right to do the opposite if they so wished.<sup>1</sup> It's an important principle which we would do well to hold to today.

As you can see, the 25th of December was set as a date to mark Jesus' birth as a result of the *church* calculating it, *not* (as many would have us believe) as a way of co-opting a date already established by another religion. The first recorded observance of Christmas Day as a religious festival took place in Rome in 336 AD, over a century later than when the date was decided on.

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:5-6

But how did we get from *there* to a time when there was a serious amount of doubt about these origins?

Well, it's probably not a surprise that a lot of it stems from the Protestant Reformation, when a lot of strongly held dogma and tradition of the Catholic church was all suddenly up for debate. Our community wouldn't be here today without the Reformation. It was very important that everything was – and still is – examined, of course.

But could it be that the baby's birthday was thrown out with the bathwater?!

## Allegations of Paganism

It was in the 17th Century that we first hear about the origins of Christmas being questioned in any kind of a serious way. William Tighe in his article 'Calculating Christmas' refers to Paul Ernst Jablonski, a German Protestant, who wished to show that the celebration of Christ's birth on the 25th of December was one of the many "paganizations" of Christianity that the Church of the fourth century embraced. It was also questioned by a few Catholics too, as well as by Puritanical movements that were more concerned about the levels of drinking, partying, and gambling which took place.

You may have heard of a book called *The Two Babylons*, written in the mid-19th Century by the Reverend Alexander Hislop of the Presbyterian Free Church of Scotland. He deals with a lot more than just Christmas. He attempts to show that an awful lot of the feasts and peculiar beliefs of the Catholic church are all from Pagan origins. On a very superficial level, it feels like he had joined up the dots. It's written in a sensationalist and very often compelling way. But actually, since I've started looking at critical reviews of the book, I would say it reads like nothing less than a conspiracy theory!

The book is, however, a firm favourite for many Christadelphians, and to a certain extent it forms the basis for much of the anti-Catholic sentiment in certain Christadelphian publications, particularly in relation to prophecy. We will be dealing shortly with one small part of what this book says about Christmas's supposed links with the Tammuz (an ancient Mesopotamian deity), but for now I will say that if you want to investigate further, there are many rabbit holes to jump into at your leisure.

The word Pagan is really just a catch-all term for older religions, those which aren't in any way mainstream. You might think about the religions of the people of the Ancient Near East

which were around at the time that the Jewish nation was in formation. These include the religions and gods of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, through to the ones we might know a little bit better within the Greek and Roman empires. As well as those, there are far more mysterious and less well-known religions which would have been practised by the people of Europe before Christianity became established.

We know from reading the Old Testament that false religions were constantly a problem for the Jewish people, right from the start of their existence, so much so that God had to dedicate the first two of the Ten Commandments to remind them to only worship the God of Israel.

We know there was a frequent temptation to make their own idols to bow down and worship throughout Israel's history as a nation. They would constantly be attracted to the way the surrounding nations worshipped their gods. If you combine that knowledge with the fact that a lot of the culture and practices done nowadays when celebrating Christmas aren't found within the pages of the Bible, it's easy to make assumptions that *pure* worship had become *tainted* by the way other people worshipped their gods, particularly with regard to festivities.

We will now look at some of the suggestions for Pagan origins of Christmas. You will most likely have heard of a few of these, either from Christadelphians or from secular sources. The thing they all have in common is the suggestion that the date of the 25th of December was already in use by them, before being co-opted into a Christian festival.

## Winter Solstice and Sol Invictus

We will start with the Winter Solstice and Sol Invictus. The Winter Solstice is, of course, the longest night and shortest day of the year, something which feels hugely significant for those of us in more northern latitudes, having less than 7 hours of daylight here in Scotland! According to the Julian calendar, which started being used in 45 BC, the Winter Solstice was marked on the 25th of December, rather than some time between the 20th and 22nd as we know today with our more accurate calendar systems. So you might think that is the best evidence we have. Surely the 25th of December is the smoking gun?!

As well as that, the Winter Solstice is significant in what you might term modern-day Paganism too, thinking about, just for example, gatherings of people at Stonehenge in England celebrating sunrise at midsummer and midwinter. The 25th of December was also used for the Roman festival of the god Sol Invictus, meaning the unconquered sun.

So, why don't I therefore think that the original date of the Winter Solstice, as well as the date when the sun was worshipped as a god, aren't hugely significant when we can see that it was shared with Christmas Day?

Well, according to several sources stated on the Wikipedia Christmas article, it appears that when the 25th of December was chosen by the Christian church, celebrations of Sol Invictus were actually done in *August* and *October*, not in December at all.<sup>2</sup> As well as that, the Winter Solstice date of the 25th of December was *insignificant* in terms of religious festivities during the time of Jesus. The only evidence for Sol Invictus using the 25th of December comes many years *after* we know that Christmas was already an established Christian festival. So rather than seeing Christianity co-opting a Pagan festival date, it may actually have been the other way around. The Pagans saw this growing new religion having a festival on 25th December and so they decided to use the same date.

What you'll see with all of these suggestions of Pagan origins for Christmas is a complete lack of evidence for the 25th of December being used *prior* to Christmas Day already being established. Historian Ronald Hutton tells us (in his book *Stations of the Sun*) that whereas the *official calendar* of Julius Caesar had the 25th of December marked as the Solstice, the *Pagan calendar* of the time had nothing at all between Saturnalia on the 17th and the New Year feast from the 1st to the 3rd of January, meaning there was *no religious significance* to the date.

## Saturnalia

Next up, let's examine Saturnalia. This is a very old Roman festival of the god Saturn, which evolved from a summer festival of the Greeks. As far as we know, it was moved from the 19th of December to the 17th by Julius Caesar, and over time it evolved into a longer 7-day festival running from the 17th to the 23rd of December. This was a prominent festival with widespread appeal, and it enabled time where slaves, for a few days at least, were treated as masters.

It is, therefore, likely that certain aspects of it, such as gift-giving, may well have had some influence in how Christmas was celebrated, although, of course, gift-giving is very common throughout cultures all around the world. There was certainly no straight-up hijack of the festival

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas>

from Paganism into Christianity as is often portrayed. There is no evidence for the festival ever taking place on the same day as Christmas day.

## Tammuz

Next we have Tammuz. This dates back a long way before Rome; it is of Babylonian origin. It's actually referred to in the Old Testament by Ezekiel<sup>3</sup> but, by all accounts, this one goes back a lot further still, to before 2500 BC. Tammuz is an ancient Mesopotamian deity associated with agriculture and shepherds. A link between him and Christmas is one which Hislop espoused in his *Two Babylons* book.

In a much more recent publication entitled *A Case Study in Poor Methodology*, Ralph Woodrow says that he was initially inspired by Hislop's work to write a book himself supporting the links between early Babylonian religion and Catholicism. Yet later on he realised just how tenuous it all was, so much so that he deleted the book from print and now warns against what he had previously written. Here is a quote from Woodrow regarding what Hislop (in mixing together Egyptian and Babylonian religions with early Genesis characters) had to say:

*Hislop taught that Tammuz (whom he says was Nimrod [reincarnated]) was born on December 25, and this is the origin of the date on which Christmas is observed. Yet his supposed proof for this is taken out of context. Having taught that Isis and her infant son Horus were the Egyptian version of Semiramis and her son Tammuz, he cites a reference that the son of Isis was born "about the time of the winter solstice." When we actually look up the reference he gives for this (Wilkinson's Ancient Egyptians, vol. 4, 405), the son of Isis who was born "about the time of the winter solstice" was not Horus, her older son, but Harpocrates. The reference also explains...that the Egyptians celebrated the feast of his mother's delivery in spring. Taken in context, this has nothing to do with a December celebration or with Christmas as it is known today.*

There isn't actually any clear evidence for a festival for Tammuz at all, but the scholarly consensus is that if there *was* a festival then it would have been more likely held around either *spring time* or the time of the *Summer Solstice*.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 8:14-15

## Mithras

Next up we'll have a look at Mithras. Mithraism is a religion which appeared in the Roman Empire at the end of the 1st Century (around 80-100 AD), by which time Christianity was of course pretty well established already as a religion. There are suggestions that it was inspired by Persian Zoroastrianism, but there is no good evidence of a direct link between the two.

It's actually pretty hard to find any useful information at all about what this religion actually was all about, except for it being worship of the god Mithras, along with some initiations and rituals which were done. This, I guess, gives it a certain mysterious feel, which may have caused some to think that this was a source of so much corruption within Christianity. It initially grew rapidly but was in decline by the 3rd Century, and was virtually dead by the 4th.

So what about a link with the 25th of December date? Well, the first reference we have to Mithraism being linked with Christmas isn't until the 18th Century, and there is absolutely no credible evidence whatsoever that Mithras had a festival on or anywhere close to the 25th of December. Despite this, Mithras is the one most likely to be used today as supposed evidence for Christmas being of Pagan origins.

In the blog 'History for Atheists', academic writer Tim O'Neill attempts to correct popular misconceptions about history, presenting his data as a means to reach out to modern day Atheists who bring up supposed links between Paganism and Christianity. He delves right into the history in a lot of detail.

O'Neill mentions several books written by D.M. Murdock in the 1990s. Her work presented the idea that Christianity in general was derived entirely from earlier Pagan religions. It seems like Murdock's writings can perhaps be seen as a modern day version of Hislop's book. Whereas Hislop writes from an anti-Catholic standpoint, Murdock's work has an entirely anti-religious tone.

Both Hislop and Murdock used an awful lot of conjecture to create what seems to be a compelling story in which it could be very easy to be caught up. O'Neill doesn't mince his words in debunking Murdock's work, which he frustratingly says is still very often quoted by popular Atheists. I'll just give you a short quote, but I would strongly recommend you reading the whole article if you get a chance:

*Her work is a case study in bad New Age nonsense, with tenuous or even totally non-existent parallels presented as evidence...the idea that the date and other elements of Christmas are all derived from paganism is cute, but not sustainable historically. Neat little internet meme “gotchas” may be fun, but those of us who try to be rational and objective should be wary...in the extreme. Do your homework people.*

## Yule

Finally, we’ll look at Yule. The first written evidence we have about the Germanic festival of Yule is in the 6th Century, long after Christmas Day was already established as a Christian festival. Yule is a celebration of the Winter Solstice, and was originally stretched across the whole of the dark North European winter from November through to January. It was only in the 10th Century that the date of the 25th of December started being used.

A quote from Snorri Sturluson (from *History of the Kings of Norway*) states that when King Hakon became King, he decreed that Yule should take place at the same time that Christmas was celebrated. So once again, it appears that *Yule* was actually changed to fit with *Christmas*! Some of the particular aspects of Yule which you may have heard of such as the Yule log don’t appear to have been started until much later still, in the 17th Century, by which time Yule was itself more of a *cultural* than a Pagan religious festival.

It’s around this time that we start seeing things like the Christmas tree appearing too. Despite coming from Northern Europe as well, this has nothing to do with Yule. It started off as the Tree of Paradise, related to a play on the story of Adam and Eve, which was traditionally enacted on Christmas Eve.

In the Victorian era, the tree became more ingrained in Western culture, as did so many other things which give us so much of the traditional Christmas that we see today. It can be easy to pick a Bible verse about someone cutting down a tree in a forest to create an idol (e.g. Jeremiah 10:4) and apply that to the Christmas tree. You can read this in your own time. All I’ll say is that the context of the verse should make it clear that this is an utterly pointless exercise. The tree itself wasn’t a god. The wood was carved to make it look like a god, which was then worshipped. This is what Jeremiah is warning the Jews about, and we therefore shouldn’t have anything to fear from decorating a tree.



## The Christmas Story

In conclusion, seeing both believers and unbelievers falling into the same trap of calling Christmas Pagan is unfortunate, and my main mission right now is to educate and inform our community.<sup>4</sup>

What I have not talked about, however, is the actual Christmas story, so that's what I'm encouraging us all to do. It's in our Bibles, and we all know well how fantastic and compelling a story it is. You get Old Testament prophecy, the hope of a Jewish Messiah bringing salvation to the Gentiles through the birth of a baby born in difficult circumstances. Angels at Jesus' birth proclaim glory to God and peace to mankind. Our world needs this story more than ever.

The secular Christmas message persuades us to spend money we probably don't have on things we definitely don't need.

Whilst so many suffer, the simple hope of Christmas is for a fairer world full of *peace* and *justice*. This on its own should encourage us all to tell this story far and wide, free of fear that it contains anything which would offend our God.

Jesus' birth was the most important birth the world has ever experienced. He was the man who would save people from their sins by his perfect life of obedience and by submitting to death on the cross, knowing he would be raised to glory. Luke tells us the story of him being held in the arms of Simeon, who declared Jesus as salvation from God and a light for revelation to the Gentiles.<sup>5</sup>

This is our hope today. Our world needs this story more than ever.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-10-012-v&readcode=&readtherest=true#therest>; <https://historyforatheists.com/2016/12/the-great-myths-2-christmas-mithras-and-paganism/>; <https://www.equip.org/articles/the-two-babylons/>

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:30-32