The Truth About Christmas

The Bible does not give the date of Jesus' birth, nor does it say that we should celebrate his birthday. As McClintock and Strong's Cyclopedia states: "The observance of Christmas is not of divine appointment, nor is it of NT [New Testament] origin."

Instead, an examination of the history of Christmas exposes its roots in pagan religious rites. The Bible shows that we offend God if we try to worship him in a way that he does not approve of. 

Exodus 32:5-7.

History of Christmas customs

1. Celebrating Jesus' birthday: The early Christians did not celebrate Jesus' birth because they considered the celebration of anyone's birth to be a pagan custom. The World Book Encyclopedia.
2. December 25: There is no proof that Jesus was born on that date. Church leaders likely chose this date to coincide with pagan festivals held on or around the winter solstice.
3. Gift-giving, feasting, partying: The Encyclopedia Americana says: "Saturnalia, a Roman feast celebrated in mid-December, provided the model for many of the merry-making customs of Christmas. From this celebration, for example, were derived the elaborate feasting, the giving of gifts, and the burning of candles."
4. Christmas lights: According to The Encyclopedia of Religion, Europeans decorated their homes with lights and evergreens of all kinds to celebrate the winter solstice and to combat evil spirits.
5. Mistletoe, holly: The Druids ascribed magical properties to the mistletoe in particular. The evergreen holly was worshiped as a promise of the sun's return. The Encyclopedia Americana.
6. Christmas tree: Tree worship, common among the pagan Europeans, survived after their conversion to Christianity. One of the ways in which tree worship survived is in the custom of placing a Yule tree at an entrance or inside the house in the midwinter holidays. Encyclopædia Britannica.

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Why Don't Jehovah's Witnesses Celebrate Christmas?

Common misconceptions

Myth: The reason why Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate Christmas is that they do not believe in Jesus.

Fact: We are Christians. We believe that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. Acts 4:12.

Myth: You divide families by teaching members not to celebrate Christmas.

Fact: We care deeply about families, and we use the Bible to help build stronger families.
**Myth:** You miss out on the “Christmas spirit” of generosity, peace on earth, and goodwill toward men.

**Fact:** We strive to be generous and peaceable every day. *(Proverbs 11:25; Romans 12:18)* For example, the way we conduct our meetings and preach is in harmony with Jesus’ instruction: “You received free, give free.” *(Matthew 10:8)* In addition, we direct attention to God’s Kingdom as the true hope for peace on earth. *(Matthew 10:7)*

**Why don’t Jehovah’s Witnesses celebrate Christmas?**

- Jesus commanded that we commemorate his death, not his birth. *(Luke 22:19, 20)*
- Jesus’ apostles and early disciples did not celebrate Christmas. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* says that the Nativity feast was instituted no earlier than 243 [C.E.], more than a century after the last of the apostles died.
- There is no proof that Jesus was born on December 25; his birth date is not recorded in the Bible.
- We believe that Christmas is not approved by God because it is rooted in pagan customs and rites. *(2 Corinthians 6:17)*

**Why make Christmas an issue?**

Many still celebrate Christmas despite knowing about its pagan roots and lack of support from the Bible. Such persons could ask: Why should Christians take such an unpopular stance? Why make it an issue?

The Bible encourages us to think for ourselves, to use our “power of reason.” *(Romans 12:1, 2)* It teaches us to value the truth. *(John 4:23, 24)* So while we are interested in how others view us, we adhere to Bible principles even if it means that we become unpopular.

Although we choose not to celebrate Christmas ourselves, we respect each person’s right to decide for himself in this matter. We do not interfere in the Christmas celebrations of others.

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**When Was Jesus Born?**

**The Bible’s answer**

The Bible does not give a specific date for the birth of Jesus Christ, as these reference works show:

- The true birth date of Christ is unknown. *(New Catholic Encyclopedia.)*
- The exact date of Christ’s birth is not known. *(Encyclopedia of Early Christianity.)*

While the Bible does not directly answer the question, “When was Jesus born?” it does describe two events surrounding his birth that lead many to conclude that he was not born on December 25.
Not in winter

1. **The registration.** Shortly before Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus issued a decree ordering all the inhabited earth to be registered. Everyone had to register in his own city, which might have required a journey of a week or more. (Luke 2:1-3) That order probably made to support taxation and military conscription would have been unpopular at any time of year, but it is unlikely that Augustus would have provoked his subjects further by forcing many of them to make long trips during the cold winter.

2. **The sheep.** Shepherds were "living out of doors and keeping watches in the night over their flocks." (Luke 2:8) The book *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* notes that flocks lived in the open air from the week before the Passover (late March) through mid-November. It then adds: "They passed the winter under cover; and from this alone it may be seen that the traditional date for Christmas, in the winter, is unlikely to be right, since the Gospel says that the shepherds were in the fields."

In early fall

We can estimate when Jesus was born by counting backward from his death on Passover, Nisan 14 in the spring of the year 33 C.E. (John 19:14-16) Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his three-and-a-half-year ministry, so he was born in the early fall of 2 B.C.E. (Luke 3:23).

Why is Christmas on December 25?

Since there is no evidence that the birth of Jesus Christ occurred on December 25, why is Christmas celebrated on this date? The *Encyclopædia Britannica* says that church leaders probably chose it to coincide with the pagan Roman festival marking the birthday of the unconquered sun, at the time of the winter solstice. According to *The Encyclopedia Americana*, many scholars believe that this was done in order to make Christianity more meaningful to pagan converts.

Jesus’ Birth Where and When?

LUKE 2:1-20

- JESUS IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM
- SHEPHERDS VISIT THE BABY JESUS

Caesar Augustus, the emperor of the Roman Empire, has decreed that everyone must be registered. So Joseph and Mary must travel to the city of his birth, the city of Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem.

Many people are in Bethlehem to register. The only place that Joseph and Mary can find to stay is a stable, where donkeys and other animals are kept. Jesus is born there. Mary wraps him in strips of cloth and lays him in a manger, the place where food for the animals is put.

God must have seen to it that Caesar Augustus made this registration law. Why? Because this made it possible for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, the hometown of his ancestor King David. The Scriptures had long before foretold that this would be the city where the promised Ruler would be born. (Micah 5:2)

What an important night this is! Out in the fields, a bright light gleams around a group of shepherds. It is Jehovah’s glory! One of God’s angels tells the shepherds: "Do not be afraid, for look! I am..."
declaring to you good news of a great joy that all the people will have. For today there was born to you in David’s city a savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this is a sign for you: You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." Suddenly, many more angels appear and say: "Glory in the heights above to God, and on earth peace among men of goodwill." Luke 2:10-14.

When the angels leave, the shepherds say to one another: "Let us by all means go over to Bethlehem and see what has taken place, which Jehovah has made known to us." (Luke 2:15) They go in a hurry and find the newborn Jesus just where the angel said they would. When the shepherds relate what the angel told them, all who hear about it are astonished. Mary cherishes all these sayings and draws conclusions in her heart.

Many people today believe that Jesus was born on December 25. But in the area of Bethlehem, December is rainy and cold. On occasion, it even snows. At that time of the year, shepherds would hardly be out in the fields overnight with their flocks. Also, it is unlikely that the Roman emperor would have required a people who were already inclined to revolt against him to travel for days in the dead of winter to register. Evidently, Jesus was born sometime in October.

- Why do Joseph and Mary have to go to Bethlehem?
- On the night Jesus is born, what marvelous thing happens?
- Why is it not reasonable to think that Jesus was born on December 25?

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OUR READERS ASK . . .

What Is Wrong With Christmas Customs?

Christmas has long been described as a traditional Christian festival to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Many of the customs used in this celebration, however, make us wonder how they came to be associated with Jesus’ birth in the first place.

For one thing, there is the myth of Santa Claus. The modern-day jolly, white-bearded, rosy-cheeked, red-suited Santa is known to have been a successful Christmas advertisement created for a North
American beverage company in 1931. During the 1950s, some Brazilians tried to replace Santa Claus with a native legendary figure—Grandpa Indian. The result? Santa Claus not only defeated Grandpa Indian but even "defeated the child Jesus and became the official representative of the feast of December 25," says Professor Carlos E. Fantinati. But are myths such as Santa Claus the only problem with Christmas? For the answer, let us go back to early Christianity.

During the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus, states the Encyclopedia Britannica. Why? Christians viewed birthday celebrations as a pagan custom, something to be avoided altogether. In fact, no mention of the date of Jesus' birth can be found in the Bible.

In the fourth century, despite the stand taken by the early Christians against the custom of celebrating birthdays, the Catholic Church instituted Christmas. The church wanted to strengthen its position by removing one of the main obstacles in its way—the popularity of the pagan Roman religions and their winter solstice festivals. Each year, from December 17 through January 1, most Romans feasted, gamed, reveled, paraded, and joined in other festivities as they paid homage to their deities, says Christmas in America, by Penne L. Restad. And on December 25, the Romans celebrated the birth of the Invincible Sun. Instituting Christmas on that day, the church cajoled many Romans into celebrating the birth of Jesus instead of the birth of the sun. Romans were still able to enjoy the trappings of these midwinter festivals, says Santa Claus, a Biography, by Gerry Bowler. In reality, they continued to mark the new days with old ways.

Clearly, then, the main problem with Christmas celebrations lies in their unsavory origins. In his book The Battle for Christmas, Stephen Nissenbaum refers to Christmas as nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer. Christmas, therefore, dishonors God and his Son, Jesus Christ. Is this just a trivial matter? The Bible asks: "What fellowship do righteousness and lawlessness have? Or what sharing does light have with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14) Like the trunk of a tree that has grown crooked, Christmas is so twisted that it cannot be made straight—Ecclesiastes 1:15.