

30/11/2014. *Christmas time?*

Was Christmas really on December 25th, four days after the shortest day, the solstice? If not, why do we celebrate it then? Should we?

There is no statement in the gospels of when in the Jewish year Jesus was born, but there are clues. Mary became pregnant with Jesus six (lunar) months after Elizabeth (Luke 1), who conceived John the Baptist after her husband Zechariah returned from duty in the Temple – which must mean soon after. Following its unique start, Mary's pregnancy would have been the usual nine months, for nothing else untoward is stated. So there were about $6 + 9 = 15$ months from Zechariah's duty to Jesus' birth. Luke also states which of the Levite priestly subtribes Zechariah was from – Abijah – and 1 Chronicles 24 sets out the order in which the 24 subtribes served. Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* vol. 7, ch. 17, paragraph 7) wrote in the first century that a tour of duty lasted one week, so that the rota was run through twice each year. (The festivals partly made up the missing time.) This gives two windows for Jesus' nativity, centred about late January and late July with an uncertainty of a few weeks. (Shmuel Safrai, in 'A priest of the division of Abijah,' *Jerusalem Perspective* vol. 2.5, p.1-2, February 1989, explains when Zechariah's duty took place.) Some of the uncertainty is because the Jews added an extra month every few years to keep their lunar calendar tuned to the solar calendar, and we do not know when in that cycle Jesus was born. (The Jews were not then keeping the two calendars tuned by the calculation-free method of starting the year at the first new moon after the barley near to Jerusalem had reached the 'Aviv' stage; *Aviv* was the name of the first month, from a word for a young head of grain. A sheaf of harvested barley was to be waved in the Temple during Passover, held in the first month; see Leviticus 23:5-11).

Consider Luke's record that there was no room in the 'inn' at Bethlehem (although Luke's word could also mean the guest quarters in Joseph's relatives' house). The lack of room is often presumed to be because of travellers for the census, for which people had to register in their home town (Luke 2:1-3). But registration had to be done *by* a particular date, not on a particular date. So the overcrowding is unlikely to be due to the census, whereas the three big annual Jewish festivals – Passover, Weeks, Tabernacles – crammed the area around Jerusalem. Nor is it clear from this account that Joseph and Mary travelled while she was almost due to give birth, rather than reaching Bethlehem some weeks earlier. (Winter travel was difficult and would not be undertaken if the journey could be done at another time.) Many believers suggest that, since the Jewish Messiah was expected to come at the harvest festival of Tabernacles (as his brothers understood: John 7), which is when his second coming will take place (Zech 14:16), then his first coming must also have been at that time, to give faithful Jews (Simeon and Anna in Luke 2:25-38?) the chance to identify him. Tabernacles is preceded by the Festival of Trumpets, which would also befit the coming of the Messiah. If Jesus was born at Tabernacles then the miracle of the incarnation was in winter. Others have reasoned, from evidence that includes the 'star' (comet?) of Bethlehem and astronomical records, and the (Temple?) sheep and shepherds living outside in the fields at night – unlikely in winter – that Jesus was born at Passover, the festival signifying freedom. (See 'The Star of Bethlehem' by Colin Humphreys in *Tyndale Bulletin* vol. 43.1, p.31-56; 1992.) Some guess that the nativity or incarnation took place in the spring, when new growth begins; a spring nativity would mean a summer incarnation (and a spring incarnation would mean a winter nativity).

We don't know the year, for King Herod tried to have the baby Jesus killed yet our calendar impossibly has Herod dying in 4BC – meaning four years Before Christ's birth! Eventually the time of year was lost; hence the speculation about it two centuries later by Clement of Alexandria and subsequent Christian writers. The earliest reference to a Christmas *celebration* – on December 25th – is from the mid-4th century, roughly the time that Pope Julius I is said to have chosen that date, and after Christianity had become a favoured religion. That is the day of the year promoted by Emperor Aurelian in AD274 as a celebration of the sun god, *sol invictus*, and under the Julian calendar of that era it corresponded to the winter solstice. (The Julian calendar has since drifted by more than two weeks; it is still used by the Russian Orthodox church, which consequently celebrates Christmas in January.) The Jews also have a winter festival of light, Hanukkah, which celebrates the relighting of the sacred oil lamps in the Temple after the Jews had won their religious freedom back in the Maccabean wars about 200 years before Christ's ministry; Hanukkah migrates around December (and occasionally late November) and is mentioned in John 10:22-39 with no hint that it was the time of year of Jesus' birth. The winter solstice is also close to other pagan celebrations such as the Romans'

Saturnalia. Later, the church aimed to take over pagan festivals as a mission strategy. Pope Gregory advocated this trick in a letter to his missionaries in England early in the 7th century (included in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, book I, ch. 30), although it encourages syncretism. In the 17th century Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans briefly outlawed midwinter Christmas celebrations. In the 19th century, Christmas celebrations became popular in England as a result of pictures of Queen Victoria and Albert celebrating it, of Charles Dickens' tale *A Christmas Carol* and, within the Church of England, the revival of ritualism due to the high 'Oxford Movement.' In our secular age this celebration has mutated into an orgy of materialism during which fewer people are converted than at other times of year.

The fact that the New Testament doesn't state the time of year means it doesn't matter to God whether the church knows it – or, therefore, celebrates it. The high priority which most churches now give to Christmas has no basis in scripture. For 300 years after Christ the church had no annual celebration of his birth, which explains why the time of year was forgotten. The New Testament contains no command to celebrate Easter – clearly deriving from one of the Jewish festivals – let alone Christmas.

There is no ban on a Christian calendar in the New Testament, so Christians are free to keep one (Romans 14:5-6; Paul's apparently negative statements in Galatians 4:10-11 are specifically against Jewish believers in Christ trying to force gentile believers to conform to the Jewish calendar). Cromwell was wrong. Conversely, no calendar is commanded in the New Testament (Colossians 2:16), so no Christian leader should press church tradition on those who prefer not to (or who wish to celebrate it at Tabernacles!) This is a matter of private conscience, with no question of disloyalty to Jesus. Personally I prefer to celebrate the Incarnation and the Virgin Birth of Jesus in my heart each day. I am aware that persecuted churches – including the early church – are unable to hold public celebrations, but it is not for the right to hold Christmas celebrations that they are suffering. Let us be glad that our culture leaves us free to; and, whether your celebration is large or small, please prefer phrases such as "At this time of year when we celebrate his birth" to "He was born at this time of year," and take care to keep Christ at the centre of it. I wish you a happy Christmas.