

## “Remember the Reasons”

The first evidence marking December 25 as the date of Jesus’s birth comes around 336 AD. Yet, the Roman Emperor Aurelian instituted the festival “Birth of the Unconquered Sun” on December 25, 274 AD. Is the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 appropriated from a pagan festival?

The idea that the Church appropriated a pagan festival goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. A German Protestant Paul Jablonski desired to show that the celebration of December 25 was one of the many “degenerations” of the pure apostolic witness. But I’m not convinced that the selection of December 25 is altogether influenced by the Roman festival. Instead, I think there is evidence to suggest that December 25 was the date determined by the work of early Christians.

An important idea among some in Judaism around the time of Christ is that some holy men died on the same day as their birth or conception. The seed form of this idea is found in Deuteronomy 31:2. Preceding his death, Moses states that he is “120 years old today”. The Jewish Talmud, which is a collection of writings, uses this text to support the idea that Moses died on his birthday.

If this idea was known during the time of Christ, then it is plausible that early Christians applied it to determine the birth of Jesus. It requires knowing the date of Christ’s death, which, although revealed in Scripture, is not without its apparent contradiction. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke state Jesus died on Passover. In contrast, John tells us that Jesus died on the Eve of Passover, just when the Passover lambs were slaughtered in the Temple. However, this is not a contradiction, since John uses “Passover” to refer to the festival week instead of just a meal. Instead, the gospels harmonize to reveal that Jesus was crucified on Friday, the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, which corresponds to March 25. Supposing that some holy men died on the same day as their birth or conception, Jesus was conceived on March 25 and born nine months later, December 25. From a 4<sup>th</sup> century sermon by John Chrysostom, it appears Christmas was celebrated on December 25.

I concede that not everyone will agree with what I wrote. My point is to provide a plausible explanation for the selection of December 25 from the effort of the early church and not an appropriation from pagan festivities. Ultimately, Scripture doesn’t reveal the date of his birth. I’m uncertain that he was born on December 25. But I don’t think the exact date of his birth is important for Christians to determine. Instead, Christians should remember the reasons for the incarnation of our Lord, namely, to reveal the Father’s glory, to save sinners, and to give eternal life. These are the reasons we celebrate our Lord’s birth and give thanks.

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