

“Was Jesus Born on December 25?”

Many Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25. The first widespread, liturgical 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. Are Christians right to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25? I affirm that it is a reasonable date. Is the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 appropriated from a pagan festival? Not necessarily.

First, there is also evidence that Christians studied to find the date long before 274 AD, such as the early 3rd century Christian Hippolytus. To calculate the date of his birth requires knowing the date of his death. According to the gospel of John, Jesus died on the Eve of Passover, just when the Passover lambs were slaughtered in the Temple. John uses “Passover” to refer to the festival week instead of just a meal. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke state that Jesus died on Passover. The gospels harmonize to reveal that Jesus was crucified on Friday, the 15th of Nisan, which corresponds to March 25. How did they arrive at Dec. 25?

An important idea around the time of Christ is that some holy men died on the same day as their 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 the date of his conception. Supposing that some holy men died on the same day as their conception, Jesus was conceived on March 25 and born nine months later, December 25. Additionally, other early Christians separately arrived at the same conclusion as Hippolytus. So, I suggest that the celebration of Dec. 25 at the date of Jesus’s birth is plausible, not arbitrarily selected.

Second, the challenge that the Church appropriated a pagan festival goes back to the 17th and 18th 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. It is possible that the date was selected by the Roman Emperor Aurelian because of the rise of Christianity. Evidence supports his hostility to Christianity. His hostility could have been shown by creating an alternative pagan festival.

Ultimately, Scripture doesn’t reveal the date of his birth. 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.

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