Celebrating Christmas

When seeking to understand the origin of Christmas, a Christian will quickly find that there are a lot of articles and books offering insight into this topic. Many of those articles and books unfortunately draw from sources which overstate claims and which do not actually quote original historical documents or provide citations for where the reader can find them and examine them for themselves. The point is that many sources on this topic tend to exaggerate their evidence. And, unfortunately, much of the argumentation in favor of early Christians celebrating Christmas (or against modern Christians celebrating it) has been constructed from this evidence as well as from some less-than-credible rhetoric.

This study is designed to present an analysis of the Christmas holiday (celebrating Jesus’ birthday on December 25) from simple, verifiable evidence. We will use citations from common and available resources and actual historical texts. Our intention is to show in a concise, clear, step-by-step manner the historical realities about this subject as well as a consideration of what Christians should do regarding the Christmas holiday.

In this study we will answer the following questions:

1. Is the celebration of Christmas ever mentioned in the Bible?
2. Was Christmas celebrated by the earliest Church before 200 AD? When did the celebration of Christmas begin?
3. Does the feast of the Epiphany prove that early Christians were celebrating Christ’s birth in winter sometime near the end of December?
4. What Was the Early Christian View Regarding Birthdays?
5. Was Jesus born on December 25th?
6. Why was that day (December 25) chosen?
7. Is there evidence that Christians (particularly Gentile Christians) were re-adopting their former pagan holidays unto the Lord?
8. Is it ever acceptable to incorporate Pagan religious rites into the worship of the true God?
9. Doesn't Romans 14-15 tell us that Christians are free to celebrate any holiday they want as long as they do so in faith unto the Lord and that other Christians should not condemn them for doing so?
10. Can Christmas be considered a Christian holiday? Should Christians practice Christmas?
After answering these questions, we will take a look at the history of Christians not celebrating Christmas over the centuries before it developed into the holiday we know it as today. This portion of our study will establish from history that Christians who don’t celebrate Christmas should not be viewed with concern or alarm and should not be identified as unorthodox or strange. And lastly, we will investigate possible times of year for Jesus’ birth based on biblical indicators. This section of our study will seek to provide grounds for evaluating Christian interest in celebrating Jesus’ birthday on December 25.

1. Is the celebration of Christmas ever mentioned in the Bible?

Well, certainly Jesus' birth is recorded in the bible but the annual celebration of that event is neither instructed nor practiced in the bible. Likewise, the bible never specifically identifies the day or month of Jesus’ birth. While the angels rejoiced and the shepherds came to see Christ when he was born, the subsequent celebration of Jesus’ birthday on any day, let alone December 25, is not mentioned or instructed in the bible.

2. Was Christmas celebrated by the earliest Church before 200 AD? When did the celebration of Christmas begin?

As we begin to investigate when Christians began to celebrate the birth of Christ, there are two things worth clarifying.

First, the name Christmas itself wasn’t used until over a thousand years after Christ.

"The word for Christmas in late Old English is Cristes Maesse, the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038..." - Catholic Encyclopedia

Although it is worth noting that the name Christmas itself points to the close ties this celebration to Roman Catholicism and the Roman Catholic Mass, the timetable for the term “Christmas” is also important. Throughout this study we will see reference materials that describe the origin of “Christmas” or earliest references to “Christmas.” This is perfectly natural because that is the name by which the holiday is known today. After all, these reference materials are written for modern readers. But we should keep in mind that when reference materials describe early evidence of the celebration of Christmas, they do not intend to assert that the holiday was known by that title in the earliest centuries. Instead, they are simply concerned with the earliest evidence for the birth of Christ in general, especially on December 25, and not the use of the term “Christmas” in particular.
Second, it is important here to be clear about the questions we are seeking to answer. In a more general sense, we are simply trying to determine when Christians first began to celebrate the birth day of Jesus Christ, regardless of whether that celebration occurred on December 25 specifically or some time of the year. In a more specific sense, we are also trying to determine when December 25 was first celebrated as the birth of Jesus Christ. The next few quotes will help start our investigation of questions.

**Christmas – The Chronography of 354 AD contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian liturgical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.[51][52]** The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century.[52] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.[53] Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.[54] In 245, Origen of Alexandria, writing about Leviticus 12:1–8, commented that Scripture mentions only sinners as celebrating their birthdays, namely Pharaoh, who then had his chief baker hanged (Genesis 40:20–22), and Herod, who then had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:21–27), and mentions saints as cursing the day of their birth, namely Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14–15) and Job (Job 3:1–16).[55] In 303, Arnobius ridiculed the idea of celebrating the birthdays of gods, a passage cited as evidence that Arnobius was unaware of any nativity celebration. Since Christmas does not celebrate Christ's birth "as God" but "as man", this is not evidence against Christmas being a feast at this time.[8] The fact the Donatists of North Africa celebrated Christmas may indicate that the feast was established by the time that church was created in 311.– wikipedia.org

**Christmas - The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. The celebration of this day as Jesus' birth date was probably influenced by pagan (unchristian) festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light. Various peoples in northern Europe held festivals in mid-December to celebrate the end of the harvest season. - World Book 2005 (Deluxe), Copyright 2004 World Book, Inc. and its licensors.**

**Christmas - It [Christmas] was celebrated in Rome by AD 336, and the date December 25 was probably chosen to coincide with the Roman winter solstice festival and birthday of Mithra. - Britannica Concise at education.yahoo.com**

There are several points worth highlighting from the Wikipedia excerpt above.

First, it is important to note that Wikipedia actually mentions two separate calendar events as celebrations of Christ’s birth. The first is Christmas, on December 25, as we can see in the first line of the excerpt. But the second is the feast of the Epiphany, which is mentioned in the second sentence and again about
midway through the quote. Since we are investigating when Christians first began to celebrate Jesus’ birthday, regardless of which date they assigned to it, we will also need to investigate the earliest historical evidence regarding the celebration Christ’s birth as part of the feast of Epiphany. But first, we’ll focus on investigating the earliest celebrations of Christ’s birth on December 25.

Second, with regard to the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25, it is interesting that all the dates provided by Wikipedia are in the fourth century. One reason for this is that for the first few centuries, Christians objected to the celebration of birthdays in general, as we can see from the quote below from Britannica.

Christmas - The actual observance of the day of Jesus' birth was long in coming. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. Numerous church fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays… – Encyclopedia Britannica

In addition, early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (120-202 AD) and Tertullian (155-220 AD) also provide additional confirmation that the birthday of Christ was not celebrated prior to at least the middle of the third century. Even though both authors mention other Christian feast days in their writings, neither mentions the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts... - Catholic Encyclopedia

Likewise, as late as 248 AD, Origen not only omits the celebration of Jesus’ birthday among Christian feast days, but he also contrasts festivals kept by Christian with the sacred days observed by pagans.

If it be objected to us on this subject that we ourselves are accustomed to observe certain days, as for example the Lord’s day, the Preparation, the Passover, or Pentecost, I have to answer, that to the perfect Christian, who is ever in his thoughts, words, and deeds serving his natural Lord, God the Word, all his days are the Lord’s, and he is always keeping the Lord’s day. – Origen, Against Celsus, Book 8, Chapter XXII

Again, compare the festivals, observed among us as these have been described above, with the public feasts of Celsus and the heathen, and say if the former are not much more sacred observances than those feasts in which the lust of the flesh runs riot, and leads to drunkenness and debauchery. It would be too long for us at present to show why we are required by the law of God to keep its festivals by eating “the bread of affliction,” or “unleavened with bitter herbs,” or why it says, “Humble your souls,” and such like. – Origen, Against Celsus, Book 8, Chapter XXIII
Against Celsus – Against Celsus is the title of a major work by the Church Father Origen of Alexandria, countering the writings of Celsus. It was written in 248 AD. – wikipedia.org

As we can see, the fact that Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origin omit the celebration of Christ’s birth from their Christian festivals confirms Wikipedia’s depiction that the earliest dates for celebrating Christ’s birth were in the fourth century. The Columbia Encyclopedia also summarily agrees that Christmas “did not become widespread until the 4th cent.”


However, as we can see, Columbia Encyclopedia also speculates that Christmas might have been celebrated as early as “A.D. 200.” We know that this statement is intended as speculation because of the use of the word “probably,” which denotes the uncertainty regarding documentation for such early dating.

Nevertheless, it is important to address this reference to the year 200 AD. As we have seen, those pieces of historical evidence which include specific dates, all point to the origin of Christmas in the late third century or fourth century. Irenaeus and Tertullian, who lived to 202 and 220 AD respectively, do not include Christmas in their list of feasts. And according to the reference sources above, the earliest evidence for the celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25 dates to 336 or 354 AD. In light of this information, the basis for the 200 AD date becomes a more pressing matter. And Britannica’s article on Christmas may provide some insight into why sources like the Columbia Encyclopedia use the word “probably” when speculating that the celebration of Christ’s birth might date to the year 200 AD. In particular, Britannica describes that the ancient writer Sextus Julius Africanus provides evidences the Christians were celebrating the birth of Christ at least by 221 AD.

"Christmas - December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus’ birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date. – Encyclopedia Britannica

An article on the well-known creationist website Answers in Genesis makes a similar claim about Julius Africanus.

So, it is not without biblical merit that December may have been the date of Christ’s birth if we use Rosh Hashanah as the start of the new year. Around AD 220, Julius Africanus, an early Christian writer, reckoned that Jesus was conceived on March 25. Hence, nine months later—about December 25—Jesus was born. – The Origin of Christmas, by Bodie Hodge on December 19, 2008; last featured December 21, 2014, https://answersingenesis.org/holidays/christmas/the-origin-of-christmas/
There are several points worth discussing here.

First, it must be noted that Britannica concludes their statement about with the assertion that December 25 “later became the universally accepted date.” In other words, whatever evidence exists in the writings of Julius regarding 221 AD, Britannica does not interpret the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 to be prevalent at that early point in time. Instead, the overall picture suggested by Britannica is one in which December 25 developed as a festival date in the decade or so before Julius first mentions it, but only in a limited geographic community. The implication is that it took another one hundred years for December 25 to spread from that limited geographic community, and consequently it only “became widespread” in the fourth century, as Columbia Encyclopedia notes.

Second, it is necessary to delve into who Sextus Julius Africanus was and what we know of his writings in general.

**Sextus Julius Africanus – Writings – He wrote a history of the world (Chronographiai, in five books) from Creation to the year AD 221, covering, according to his computation, 5723 years. He calculated the period between Creation and Jesus as 5500 years, placing the Incarnation on the first day of AM 5501 (our modern March 25 1 BC), according to Venance Grumel, La Chronologie (1958). This method of reckoning led to several Creation eras being used in the Greek Eastern Mediterranean, which all placed Creation within one decade of 5500 BC. The history, which had an apologetic aim, is no longer extant, but copious extracts from it are to be found in the Chronicon of Eusebius, who used it extensively in compiling the early episcopal lists. – wikipedia.org**

There are four important points from the Wikipedia quote above.

Number one, we can see that Julius wrote “a history of the world” called “Chronographiai” in the year AD 221. If Julius provides an affirmation related to Christmas in this work, this would allow us to date the celebration of Christmas to the year of 221 AD.

Number two, as noted by Wikipedia.org, Julius’ work “Chronographiai” attempted to trace the years of world history “between Creation and Jesus.” Wikipedia also notes that Julius’ placed “the Incarnation on the first day of AM 5501 (our modern March 25 1 BC), according to Venance Grumel, La Chronologie (1958).” Here it should be noted that there are biblical and historical grounds for concluding that the Jewish people marked the start of the year in autumn. Below are a few salient quotes supporting the conclusion that ancient Israelis marked the start of creation in autumn at the feast of Rosh Hashanah, not in spring. (For more on this see our Chronology study entitled “A Timeline of Biblical World History.)

**As shown before, among the Jews this day was called Rosh ha-Shanah (the Feast of the New Year). The majority belief of Jewish elders (which still**
dominates the services of the synagogues) was that the Day of Trumpets was
the memorial day that commemorated the beginning of the world.
Authorized opinion prevailed that the first of Tishri was the first day
of Genesis 1:1–5. It “came to be regarded as the birthday of the world.” – Ernest
L. Martin, The Star that Astonished the World

Rosh Hashanah – In the earliest times the Hebrew year began in autumn
with the opening of the economic year…It is likely that the new year was
celebrated from ancient times in some special way. The earliest reference to
such a custom is, probably, in the account of the vision of Ezekiel (Ezek
40:1). This took place at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the
month (Tishri). On the same day the beginning of the year of jubilee was to
be proclaimed by the blowing of trumpets (Lev 25:9)… This first day of the
seventh month was appointed by the Law to be "a day of blowing of
trumpets". There was to be a holy convocation; no servile work was to be done;
and special sacrifices were to be offered (Lev 23:23-25; Num 29:1-6). – wikipedia.org

Sabbatical Year And Jubilee: Talmudic and Samaritan Calculation of
Jubilees – The first cycle commenced after the conquest of the land and its
distribution among the tribes, which, occupied fourteen years, and the last jubilee
occurred on the "tenth day of the month [Tishri], in the fourteenth year after
that the city was smitten" (Ezek. xl. 1), which was the New-Year's Day of the
jubilee ('Ab. Zarah 9b; 'Ar. 11b-12b). - www.jewishencyclopedia.com

Rosh Hashana – Rosh Hashana is also known as the Day of Remembrance, for
on this day Jews commemorate the creation of the world, and the Jewish
nation recalls its responsibilities as God’s chosen people. – Encyclopedia
Britannica

The important point here concerns Julius’ reliability as a witness to the most
ancient Christian calendar. If ancient Jews believed that creation began in autumn
but Julius instead identified spring as the time when creation began, that raises
questions about Julius’ awareness and attention to accuracy when it comes to
dating traditions that predate him in the Judeo-Christian culture. But, our larger
question at this point isn’t whether Julius Africanus is accurate in his
identification of the day of Jesus’ birth, but whether he actually does provide any
attestation that Christians in his day were identifying December 25 with Jesus’
birth. With regard to this issue, several points must be made. Although it may
have become common in the Greco-Roman world to mark the start of the year at
the spring equinox by the time of Julius Africanus we would still need to
determine two additional points from his writings. One, it would be necessary to
confirm that Julius Africanus identified the first day of the year with the
conception of Christ. Two, it would be necessary to determine whether he was
speaking of a day in spring or of Rosh Hashanah in autumn. If neither of these
additional points can be determined from his writings, then it is not possible to
conclude that his works provide an identification of Christ’s birth on December
25, nine months after the ancient day marking the spring solstice (March 25).
Number three, Wikipedia also states that this work from Julius “is no longer extant,” which raises a question. If there are no existing copies of Julius’ work, then how is it possible to attribute any early documentation regarding Christmas to him? The answer to that question is, of course, provided by Wikipedia, which explains that texts attributed to Julius appear in a work titled “Chronicle” or “Chronicron,” which was written by an author named Eusebius. Below is some basic information regarding Eusebius and his work “Chronicle.”

**Eusebius** – Eusebius of Caesarea; AD 260/265 – 339/340), also known as Eusebius Pamphili, was a Roman historian, exegete, and Christian polemicist of Greek descent…He completed the first editions of the Ecclesiastical History and Chronicle before 300. – wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eusebius

**Chronicon (Eusebius)** – The Chronicon or Chronicle (Greek: Παντοδαπὴ ιστορία Pantodape historia, "Universal history") was a work in two books by Eusebius of Caesarea. It seems to have been compiled in the early 4th century. It contained a world chronicle from Abraham until the vicennalia of Constantine I in A.D. 325. – wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronicon_%28Eusebius%29

There are several additional points worth noting here with regard to the historical quality of this particular piece of evidence. In other words, is the critical phrasing related to Christmas in a document that is reasonably well-preserved and readily identifiable as the work of Sextus Julius Africanus?

One, as we can see from the quotes above, Eusebius lived between approximately 260-340 AD and his work Chronical “seems to have been compiled in the early 4th century” although a first edition of the work was completed prior to 300 AD.

Two, it is also important to note that Eusebius’ work “Chronicle” has “been lost in the original Greek” according to Wikipedia’s article on Eusebius under the subsection regarding the word “Chronicle.” This is stated plainly in the quote below, which also notes excerpts survive in the writing of Jerome, who wrote in Latin, in an Armenian translation, and “a few fragments” that “exist in Greek.” Eusebius’ “Chronicle” is also said to exist in excerpts from “later chronographists” such as “George Syncellus,” who we will discuss momentarily.

**Eusebius, Chronicle** – The work as a whole has been lost in the original Greek, but it may be reconstructed from later chronographists of the Byzantine school who made excerpts from the work, especially George Syncellus. The tables of the second part have been completely preserved in a Latin translation by Jerome, and both parts are still extant in an Armenian translation. The loss of the Greek originals has given an Armenian translation a special importance; thus, the first part of Eusebius' Chronicle, of which only a few fragments exist in the Greek, has been preserved entirely in Armenian,
though with lacunae.
– wikipedia.org

Three, according to Wikipedia’s article on “Sextus Julius Africanus,” in addition to the excerpts of Julius’ work that we find in Eusebius, “there are also fragments in George Synellus, Cedrenus and the Chronicon Paschale.” According to Wikipedia’s article on George Synellus, this particular author “died after 810.” Wikipedia also has an article titled, “George Kedrenos,” which provides his alternate identification as “Cedrenus” and describes that “In the 1050s he compiled A concise history of the world.” Lastly, Wikipedia’s article on the “Chronicon Paschale” explains that this is the name for “a 7th-century Greek Christian chronicle of the world.”

Four, when it comes to the alleged date for Christ’s birth, the critical segment from Julius is titled, “Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ,” as we will see below. Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org) provides two footnotes numbered 1057 and 1058 as part of its introductory portion to this segment from Julius. Footnote 1058 explains this specific segment from Julius “is extant in two MSS. in the Electoral Library of Munich, and in one belonging to the Imperial Library of Vienna.” (Incidentally, the abbreviation “MSS” denotes manuscripts.) In other words, it would seem that the critical segment from Julius concerning the birthdate of Christ appears only in two surviving manuscripts. Moreover, footnote 1057 states, “I place this apocryphal fragment here as a mere appendix to the Genealogical Argument. An absurd appendix, indeed.” The characterization that this particular statement is “apocryphal” indicates that it is not considered authentic, which leads to our next point. However, it is also worth noting that the author of this footnote regarded this segment of text from Julius as “An absurd appendix.”

Five, the introductory note provided by ccel.org for this critical segment cautions the reader, saying, “This narrative, so far from its being to be ascribed to a writer well reputed by the common voice of antiquity, does not contain anything worthy of the genius of the chronographer Africanus.” The introduction goes on to describe a work called “the Cesti,” which was ascribed to another author who also wrote under “the name of Africanus” as well. In essence, ccel.org is suggesting that there were two different authors with the name Africanus. Moreover, ccel.org characterizes this other Africanus in quite unreliable terms, stating that, he “has been long marked by critics with the character either of anile credulity, or of a marvellous propensity to superstitious fancies.” And, in its conclusion regarding the segment titled, “Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ,” the introduction from ccel.org concludes by saying, “I can readily fall in with the opinion of those who think that he is a different person from the chronographer, and would ascribe this wretched production also to him.” To put it simply, there is scholarly opinion that the critical segment pertaining to the birth date of Christ does not actually come from the reputable third century author known as Sextus Julius Africanus who wrote the Chronography in 221 AD, but from a different author entirely who had a “marvellous propensity to superstitious fancies.”
As a matter of principle, there is no problem accepting the excerpts in Eusebius or these other writers as historically valid and accurate. So for the sake of argument, we will proceed under the assumption that the text attributed to Julius does date to 221 AD. But as a matter of principal, the fact that samples of Julius’ texts are so scarce and fragmented makes it difficult to compare copies and rule out the possibility of later embellishment of his texts. Consequently, it is worth noting that even if Julius provides an attestation of Christmas being celebrated in 221 AD, at best the attestation would exist only in copies of a work from the late third or early fourth century AD after Christmas had already become widespread. At worst, it would exist in documents dating anywhere from the seventh century or later or it could possibly be entirely inauthentic. In any case, with such limited certainty surrounding this critical segment from Julius, it should hardly be regarded as a reliable or important cornerstone in the efforts to substantiate early evidence that Christians identified December 25 as the birthday of Jesus Christ.

Number four, at this point, it would probably be helpful to provide some specifics regarding the remaining texts ascribed to Sextus Julius Africanus.

One, there is the issue of the amount of text from Julius. The remnant of Julius’ works in Eusebius is relatively meager in size. When all of the excerpts are collected together, they total is less than 20 pages. This, in turn, makes it quite easy to read through the entirety of Julius’ writing to determine the exact nature of his comments, particularly those that could touch on the subject of the season or month of Jesus’ birth. And when that process is complete, it becomes clear that any assertions about Jesus’ birth in December are based on conjecture from the reader rather than any direct statement by Julius.

Two, we can survey critical terms in order to demonstrate that Julius himself neither directly nor indirectly conveys the celebration of Christ’s birth at all, let alone on December 25.

Below are 5 times when the word “birth” occurs in Julius’ writings. As we can see, not a single one of them uses the term in connection with any kind of date or season or month. The excerpts below are taken from “Extant Works (Julius Africanus)” made available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm.

1. Herod, knowing that the lineage of the Israelites contributed nothing to him, and goaded by the consciousness of his ignoble birth, burned the registers of their families.
2. This he did, thinking that he would appear to be of noble birth, if no one else could trace back his descent by the public register to the patriarchs or proselytes, and to that mixed race called georae.
3. And then, in the depth of evening, Dionysus appeared in the temple, unaccompanied by the Satyrs, and said to the images: Pege is not one of us, but stands far above us, in that she gives birth to a man whose conception is in divine fashion.
4. We have brought gifts in His honour, with the view of proclaiming those mighty things which we know to have happened in our country on occasion of His birth; and do you bid us take your bribes, and conceal the things which have been communicated to us by the Divinity who is above the heavens, and neglect the commandments of our proper King?

5. Seth, when 205 years old, begot Enos; from Adam therefore to the birth of Enos there are 435 years in all.

Likewise, below are all 6 times when the word “born” appears in Julius’ writings. Again, not a single one of them uses the term in connection with any kind of date or season or month.

1. For if the generations are different, and trace down no genuine seed to Joseph, and if all has been stated only with the view of establishing the position of Him who was to be born—to confirm the truth, namely, that He who was to be would be king and priest, there being at the same tune no proof given...

2. For this artificer who is born, the son of the chief artificer, framed by his excellent skill the roof of the third heavens, and established by his word this lower world, with its threefold sphere of habitation.

3. For you will find the Christ of the Omnipotent God borne in bodily form in the bodily arms of a woman.

4. What is this that attends you, and with what purpose are you here? And we said: He whom you call Messias is born. And they were confounded, and dared not withstand us.

5. For the Christ, the Son of the Most High, is born, and He is the subverter of your law and synagogues.

6. Lighted torches are borne upon it, but when extinguished they sink.

Compounding this problem is that terms like “December,” “January,” “winter,” or even solstice or “autumn” are not mentioned anywhere in Julius’ writings. So, already is should be apparent how difficult it will be to assert that Julius identifies Christ’s birth in December. Julius does mention two months by name, March and July.

He refers to March when totaling up a number of Greek years and events in Herod’s reign in a passage that nowhere mentions Christ or his birth, not even the year in which he was born let alone the month or date. (Please note, the quote below comes from Christian Classics Ethereal Library and we have included the footnote from that site, which explains the meaning of Julius reference to March.)

“4. After the taking of Alexandria the 188th Olympiad began. Herod founded anew the city of the Gabinii, 1123 the ancient Samaria, and called it Sebaste; and having erected its seaport, the tower of Strato, into a city, he named it Cæsarea after the same, and raised in each a temple in honour of Octavius. And afterwards he founded Antipatris in the Lydian plain, so naming it after his father, and settled in it the people about Sebaste, whom he had dispossessed of their land. He founded also other cities; and to the Jews he was severe, but to
The Church Ethic: 312 Celebrating Christmas

other nations most urbane. It was now the 189th Olympiad, which (Olympiad) in the year that had the bissextile day, the 6th day before the Calends of March,—i.e., the 24th of February,—corresponded with the 24th year of the era of Antioch, whereby the year was determined in its proper limits.1124

1124 The text is: ἦν ᾽Ολυμπιὰς ρπθ᾽, ἡτις πρὸ * καλανδῶν Μαρτίων κατὰ Ἀντιοχείς καθ' ἑτεῖ ἥρθη, δι᾽ ἡς ἐπὶ τῶν ἱδίων ὀρίων ἐστὶ ὁ ἐνιαυτός. In every fourth year the 24th day of February ( = vi. Cal. Mart.) was reckoned twice. There were three different eras of Antioch, of which the one most commonly used began in November 49 b.c. Migne refers the reader to the notes of Goarus on the passage, which we have not seen. The sense of this obscure passage seems to be, that that period formed another fixed point in chronology.”

http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf06.v.v.xvii.html

The first thing to notice about Julius’ comments in the quote above is that his intention is to correlate events related to the nation of Israel and its kings near the time of the New Testament to Greek history and time-keeping methods from the same period. In the midst of this effort, his notation regarding the “Calends of March” can be taken to convey that the Greek year began in March. However, three points are worth noting here. Number one, a comment about the start of the Greek year would not necessitate that the Jewish perception of time likewise began the year in March. Number two, if we look at the text closely, we see that Julius is not actually referring to a date in March, but rather to “the 24th day of February” which was six days before the “Calends of March.” Consequently, even if this segment from Julius did provide a date for Jesus’ birth or conception (or the first day of the year in the Greek calendar) it would be identifying a date of February 24. If Julius was here referring to the conception of Christ, then Jesus’ birth would have been in November, not December. Number three, as we look at the context, we can see that there is no mention of Jesus’ conception or birth in this particular segment of his writing. Therefore, this reference to March does not provide any attestation to the timing of Jesus’ birth or conception.

Similarly, Julius refers to July in a section where Julius discusses a Christian widow named Symphorosa and her seven sons who were all martyred. The text of that quote is below. Notice that Julius also uses the word “natal” in this statement, but it is clearly in reference to a day set apart to honor these martyrs on July 18 and the language of the statement has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus’ birth.

The natal day, moreover, of the holy martyrs of Christ, the blessed Symphorosa and her seven sons, Crescens, Julian, Nemesius, Primitivus, Justin, Stracteus, and Eugenius, is held on the 18th July. – Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

So, as we can see, neither Julius’ mention of March nor his mention of July was intended to identify the month of Jesus’ birth or his conception, nor can either reference even plausibly be used for the purpose given the context.

In addition, Julius does mention the word “month” 12 times in his writings, but never for the purposes of identifying a particular month or counting months from
or to a particular date of the year. Instead, he exclusively uses the term “months” when converting the length of a Jewish lunar year in order to reconcile with the total number of years in the records of other nations, such as the Greeks. In fact, the word “year” or “years” occurs over 135 times in Julius’ writings. And there is a good reason for this. Simply put, all of Julius chronological calculations are concerned solely with identifying a number of years, never a particular day, month, or season of the year.

At this point, it is reasonably hard to imagine how anyone could assert that Julius’ provides any attestation regarding the date, month, or season of Christ’s birth. As it turns out, the argument is based entirely on a single reference to the season of Spring. In Wikipedia’s article on Christmas below, we find the explanation that “Sextus Julius Africanus suggested that Jesus was conceived on the spring equinox” accompanied by several citations numbered 196, 197, and 198. The full citations are also included in the quote below.

**Christmas, Date** - In *Chronographai*, a reference work published in 221, Sextus Julius Africanus suggested that Jesus was conceived on the spring equinox.[196][197] The equinox was March 25 on the Roman calendar, so this implied a birth in December.[198]

197 Roll, p. 79, 80. Only fragments of Chronographai survive. In one fragment, Africanus referred to "Pege in Bethlehem" and "Lady Pege, Spring-bearer." See "Narrative Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ Narrative".
Roll p. 87.

As the Wikipedia article suggests, the entire line of reasoning here hinges on the idea that the text of Julius connects Jesus’ conception to the spring equinox. In other words, Julius never mentions when Jesus was born, but the birth can be calculated from the date of his conception. (Reasonably speaking, if we knew when Jesus was conceived we could approximate his birth around nine months later.) Fortunately, Wikipedia’s footnote 197 points us directly to the section of Julius’ writing where this reference to Jesus’ conception is supposed to be found and it even highlights for us the specific phrase “Spring-bearer” which is the source of the conjecture.

Number five, there are three issues worth noting about this segment of the text from Julius.

One, this entire section of his writing is recounting statements supposedly made by statues of pagan gods in the Persian temple of Juno to the pagan Persian priest Prupupius in which the statues of the gods actually speak. In fact, the declaration concerning the “Spring-bearer” is stated by the pagan god Dionysus and the
Satyrs. This is plainly evident in the quote below, which concludes with the statement using the term “Spring-bearer.”

Events in Persia: On the Incarnation of Our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ. –

Event first of all became known from Persia. For nothing escapes the learned jurists of that country, who investigate all things with the utmost care. The facts,[3] therefore, which are inscribed upon the golden plates,[4] and laid up in the royal temples, I shall record; for it is from the temples there, and the priests connected with them, that the name of Christ has been heard of. Now there is a temple there to Juno… Now about that time (as the records on the plates testify), the king having entered the temple, with the view of getting an interpretation of certain dreams, was addressed by the priest Prupupius thus: I congratulate thee, master: Juno has conceived. And the king, smiling, said to him, Has she who is dead conceived? And he said, Yes, she who was dead has come to life again, and begets life. And the king said, What is this? explain it to me. And he replied, In truth, master, the time for these things is at hand. For during the whole night the images, both of gods and goddesses, continued beating the ground, saying to each other, Come, let us congratulate Juno. And they say to me, Prophet, come forward; congratulate Juno, for she has been embraced… And then, in the depth of evening, Dionysus appeared in the temple, unaccompanied by the Satyrs, and said to the images: Pege is not one of us, but stands far above us, in that she gives birth to a man whose conception is in divine fashion. O priest Prupupius! what dost thou tarrying here?… To Myria is given the blessed lot of bearing Pege in Bethlehem, and of conceiving grace of grace. Judæa has seen its bloom, and this country is fading. To Gentiles and aliens, salvation is come; to the wretched, relief is ministered abundantly. With right do women dance, and say, Lady Pege, Spring-bearer, thou mother of the heavenly constellation. Thou cloud that bringest us dew after heat, remember thy dependents, O mistress. The king then, without delay, sent some of the Magi under his dominion with gifts, the star showing them the way. – Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

Given this context, it should be noted that if this is the earliest attestation about the date of Christ’s birth, then Julius is identifying pagan gods as the source of that date. This is hardly a scenario for an orthodox, authentically Christian origin for the celebration of Christ’s birth.

Two, notice that the terms “March” and “equinox” do not appear in this passage. Instead, the word “Spring-bearer” has been taken to denote the idea of giving birth to spring. This in turn is taken to convey the idea of the first day of Spring, which is the equinox.

Three, the main problem here is that the surrounding context mentions both the birth and the conception of Christ. Dionysus and the Satyrs declares “To Myria is given the blessed lot of bearing Pege in Bethlehem, and of conceiving grace of grace.” Both “bearing” and “conceiving” are mentioned. Likewise, when
Dionysus and the Satyrs begin to speak, they say, “she gives birth to a man whose conception is in divine fashion.” Certainly, the conception is mentioned here, but so is the declaration that “she gives birth.” Since both “birth” and “conception” are mentioned here with regard to this phrase “Spring-bearer,” we must ask whether it was Christ’s conception or birth that Julius has in mind. If Julius intends to refer to Christ’s birth and he is referring to the start of spring then the entire argument that Julius attests to Christ’s birth in December falls apart.

Number six, there two major lines of argument that need to be discussed regarding Julius’ use of the term “Spring-bearer.”

The first major line of argument concerns whether or Julius Africanus actually intended the term “Spring-bearer” as a reference to the season of spring or to the spring equinox. Consider again the portion of the text in which we find the key phrase “Spring-bearer.” It occurs in a statement from the pagan gods to the priest Prupupius. Their comments identify Myria as Jesus’ mother, which corresponds to the biblical name, “Mary.” They state that Myria as “bearing Pege.” And they use the title “Lady Pege” and “Spring-bearer” back to back.

O priest Prupupius! what dost thou tarrying here?... To Myria is given the blessed lot of bearing Pege in Bethlehem, and of conceiving grace of grace. Judæa has seen its bloom, and this country is fading. To Gentiles and aliens, salvation is come; to the wretched, relief is ministered abundantly. With right do women dance, and say, Lady Pege, Spring-bearer, thou mother of the heavenly constellation... – Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

These remarks are paralleled in comments Julius records from the same figures slightly earlier in this passage. Just like the quote above, the quote below refers to Jesus’ mother as “Myria.” However, in this portion of the quote we also note that Myria is described as a stream sending water forth which produces a single fish. By implication, of course, that single fish is Christ.

Her name, moreover, is Myria; for she bears in her womb, as in the deep, a vessel of a myriad talents’ burden. And as to this title Pege, let it be understood thus: This stream of water sends forth the perennial stream of spirit,—a stream containing but a single fish, taken with the hook of Divinity, and sustaining the whole world with its flesh as though it were in the sea. You have well said, She has an artificer [in espousal]; but by that espousal she does not bear an artificer on an equality with herself. For this artificer who is born, the son of the chief artificer, framed by his excellent skill the roof of the third heavens, and established by his word this lower world, with its threefold sphere of habitation. – Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

Here it is critical to note that Myria is identified as one who sends forth a stream. Although this passage was not originally written in English, the English rendering illustrates a critical point. The words “spring” can refer to a season of the year, but it is also a synonym for a stream or fountain of water. In fact, the first
definition provided for the noun “spring” in Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary is “a source of supply; especially: a source of water issuing from the ground.” Here we must consider whether it is possible that the original language may also have intended the phrase “spring-bearer” not in reference to the season or the equinox, but in reference to a water source just as a the text describes Myria sending forth a stream.

On that note, evidence that “Spring-bearer” might be better understood to refer to “sending forth a stream” comes from the term “Pege” which appears multiple times in this passage and actually means “stream” or “fountain” in Greek.

4077 pege
probably from 4078 (through the idea of gushing plumply); n f; TDNT-6:112.837; { See TDNT 626 }
AV-fountain 8, well 4; 12
1) fountain, spring
2) a well fed by a spring

This interpretation is confirmed by a footnote in the copy of the text provided by ccel.org. Immediately after the first occurrence of the word “Pege,” ccel.org includes Footnote 1062, which states, “i.e., Fountain, Spring, or Stream.”

For the mighty Sol has embraced her. Then the goddesses say to the gods, making the matter plainer, Pege i.e., Fountain, Spring, or Stream. is she who is embraced; for did not Juno espouse an artificer? 1062 i.e., Fountain, Spring, or Stream. — Julius Africanus, II.—Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf06.v.iv.html#

And, as a matter of fact, we see the term “bearing Pege,” which literally means “bearing a fountain or spring” just a few lines earlier before we find the terms, “Lady Pege” and “Spring-bearer.” In addition, the fact that “Spring-bearer” appears immediately after the phrase “Lady Pege,” which means “Lady Fountain” also suggests that the phrase “Spring-bearer” was meant as another synonymous title for the idea of a “Fountain-bearer.”

To Myria is given the blessed lot of bearing Pege...With right do women dance, and say, Lady Pege, Spring-bearer... — Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

It seems reasonable then to consider the possibility that, rather than referring to the season of spring or the spring equinox, Julius is using the phrase “Spring-bearer” as an alternative meant to correspond to the that Myria sends forth a stream of water as well as the phrase “bearing Pege,” which literally means “bearing a fountain.”

To be clear, it is still possible that the term “Spring-bearer” could or should be meant to refer to the season of the year depending on whether the original language of this fragment uses a term that refers to the season of the year rather
than a word that could mean “water, fountain, stream, or spring.” However, any assertions regarding the wording of the original language of this fragment necessarily must provide the actual wording in the original language, not simply conjecture or surmise about what that wording could be. Apart from such a display, the possibility that “Spring-bearer” is not intended to refer to the season or equinox must also be considered as reasonably possible. And if that is the case, Julius’ writing would not provide any identification for the time of year of either Christ’s birth or his conception.

The second major line of argument regarding the term “Spring-bearer” concerns whether or not it would have been meant as a reference to Christ’s miraculous conception or to his birth. As it turns out, there are several pieces of evidence telling us that Julius was interested in Christ’s birth, not his conception.

One, after the Magi visit Christ, they return and report their experiences to the king who sent them. Julius records their report. Notice from the last line of the quote below that, according to the Magi, when they arrived at “that place to which we were sent” Christ was already “in His second year.” This corresponds to Herod’s effort to eliminate the Christ by killing all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two after the Magi come to Herod in Matthew 2:16.

And we came to that place then to which we were sent, and saw the mother and the child, the star indicating to us the royal babe. And we said to the mother: What are you named, O renowned mother? And she says: Mary, masters. And we said to her: From where are you sprung? And she replies: From this district of the Bethlehemites. Then said we: Have you not had a husband? And she answers: I was only betrothed with a view to the marriage covenant, my thoughts being far removed from this. For I had no mind to come to this. And while I was giving very little concern to it, when a certain Sabbath dawned, and straightway at the rising of the sun, an angel appeared to me bringing me suddenly the glad tidings of a son. And in trouble I cried out, Be it not so to me, Lord, for I have not a husband. And he persuaded me to believe, that by the will of God I should have this son. Then said we to her: Mother, mother, all the gods of the Persians have called you blessed. Your glory is great; for you are exalted above all women of renown, and you are shown to be more queenly than all queens. The child, moreover, was seated on the ground, being, as she said, in His second year… – Extant Works (Julius Africanus), http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0614.htm

As we can see, it has already been well over a year since Jesus’ birth by the time that the Magi arrive to visit him.

Two, notice also the urgency that Dionysus and the Satyrs place on Prupupius’ need to depart when they say “O priest Prupupius! What dost thou tarrying here?” And for this same reason, the sentence after the occurrence of the term “Spring-bearer” records that “The king then, without delay, sent some of the Magi under his dominion with gifts.” This suggests that the birth itself is imminent or has already occurred and Prupupius is in danger of missing this event altogether.
This timetable and the urgency favor that this is a reference to Christ’s birth, not his conception. If Dionysus and the Satyrs are announcing that the birth was already occurring, then their urgency makes perfect sense. On the other hand, if they are announcing the conception, then there was still plenty of time for the Magi to conceivably arrive in Judea for the birth. The idea that the Magi were given a nine month head start and were ushered to travel with the urgency of the gods and the king and yet it still took them two years seems contrary to the sentiment of this passage. No doubt it took the Magi over a year to travel to Judea even if they started at the time of the birth. But using the birth as the starting point for the announcement is still the best explanation of the gods’ urgency and the fact that the Magi still don’t arrive until Christ is in his second year.

Three, before Dionysus and the Satyrs speak, the priest Prupupius also emphasized that the birth was at hand.

Her name, moreover, is Myria; for she bears in her womb, as in the deep, a vessel of a myriad talents’ burden. And as to this title Pege, let it be understood thus: This stream of water sends forth the perennial stream of spirit,—a stream containing but a single fish, taken with the hook of Divinity, and sustaining the whole world with its flesh as though it were in the sea. You have well said, She has an artificer [in espousal]; but by that espousal she does not bear an artificer on an equality with herself. For this artificer who is born, the son of the chief artificer, framed by his excellent skill the roof of the third heavens, and established by his word this lower world, with its threefold sphere of habitation.

As we can see, Prupupius starts by stating that “she bears in her womb,” but then continues to describe Jesus as a “single fish” ushering forth from the waters of her womb. This language is suggestive of the birth process in which the woman’s water breaks before the child is born. (For a biblical example referring to water breaking forth during birth, see Job 38:8.) Prupupius concludes with the phrase “this artificer who is born.” Here again, we find ample reason to conclude that Prupupius and the gods are describing the impending birth of the Christ, rather than focusing on his pending conception.

Four, notice that just a few sentences before the phrase “Spring-bearer,” Julius describes a declaration to the priest Prupupius that “Myria” is “bearing Pege in Bethlehem.”

O priest Prupupius! what dost thou tarrying here?... To Myria is given the blessed lot of bearing Pege in Bethlehem, and of conceiving grace of grace. Judæa has seen its bloom, and this country is fading. To Gentiles and aliens, salvation is come; to the wretched, relief is ministered abundantly. With right do women dance, and say, Lady Pege, Spring-bearer, thou mother of the heavenly constellation.
The important point here is that Bethlehem is where Jesus was born, but it was most certainly not where Jesus was conceived. There are several items worth highlighting.

Luke 1:26-27 states that “the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” Verse 39 then state that “Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda.” And as soon as Mary’s cousin Elizabeth meets her, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy.” Elizabeth then declares to Mary, “blessed is the fruit of thy womb” and proceeds to refer to Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” Both of these phrases as well as the reaction of Elizabeth’s unborn child suggest that Mary was already pregnant by the time she left Nazareth to visit Elizabeth.

But, in verse 45 records that Elizabeth assures Mary, “there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.” This phrase could suggest that the conception had not yet occurred but was yet to be performed. However, it is worth noting that Gabriel tells Mary several other things besides just declaring the incarnation to her. In verses 30-35, Gabriel tells Mary that the child she conceives will “reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.” It may have been those statements that Elizabeth was placing in the future, not the conception, in which case the reaction of Elizabeth’s unborn child and her references to the terms “fruit of the womb” and “mother of my Lord” can be interpreted naturally to infer that the conception had already occurred.

In addition, even if Mary only conceived Jesus after he visit to Elizabeth, the conception still doesn’t occur in Bethlehem. Luke’s Gospel specifically identifies Bethlehem by name in chapter 2:4 when recording the birth of Jesus. However, when chapter 1:39 records where Mary traveled to visit Elizabeth, it says that she “went into the hill country” and “into a city of Juda.” There is no mention of Bethlehem or any city name. Since Luke identifies Bethlehem by name just a few verses later in chapter 2, it seems probable that if he intended to convey that Elizabeth lived in Bethlehem, he would have identified it by name in chapter 1:39. The fact that chapter 1 instead uses the generic term “a city of Juda” infers that this is some other city, the name of which is not important. In fact, given that Elizabeth’s husband Zacharias is a priest, it is likely that Luke’s description of “a city of Juda” that is in “the hill country” is meant to harken back to Joshua 21:10-11, which states that the city of Hebron was given to the “children of Aaron” who were the priests of Israel and that it was in “the hill country of Judah.” Consequently, it is most likely that Mary visited Elizabeth in Hebron.

Moreover, Luke 2:4-7 records that when Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem and it was time for Mary to give birth, when the child was born they “laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” If Bethlehem was where Mary’s cousin Elizabeth lived, there would be no need for Mary and Joseph to stay at an inn and no need for Jesus to be born in a manger. Joseph and Mary would have stayed with Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias and Jesus would
have been born in their home. Consequently, we can conclude that Elizabeth did not live in Bethlehem and the miraculous conception of Jesus took place most likely in Nazareth although Hebron is a less likely possibility.

Lastly, although Julius also uses the phrase “conceiving grace of grace” in the same sentence that he states that “Myria” is “bearing Pege in Bethlehem,” the pressing fact is that the word “bearing” is associated with Bethlehem. This means that when Julius uses the word “bearing” he is referring to Jesus’ birth, not his conception. And consequently, when we see the term “Spring-bearer” just a few sentences later, we must conclude that it refers to Jesus’ birth, not his conception.

Five, additional evidence that Julius is not referring to the miraculous conception of Christ can be found as he counts the number of years prior to in the effort to pinpoint a prophetic timetable given in Daniel. In particular, Julius references “seventy weeks,” which the angel Gabriel describes in Daniel 9:21-27 and which conclude with the coming of the Messiah. Of course, the critical question here is what is meant by the “coming” of the Messiah. Here it is interesting to note that Julius identifies the completion of Daniel’s seventy weeks with “the 16th year of Tiberius Caesar.” We see this about midway through the quote below where Julius writes, “and from that to the 16th year of Tiberius Caesar is a period of about 60 years. 3. It is by calculating from Artaxerxes, therefore, up to the time of Christ that the seventy weeks are made up, according to the numeration of the Jews.”

1. This passage, therefore, as it stands thus, touches on many marvellous things. At present, however, I shall speak only of those things in it which bear upon chronology, and matters connected therewith. That the passage speaks then of the advent of Christ, who was to manifest Himself after seventy weeks, is evident. For in the Saviour’s time, or from Him, are transgressions abrogated, and sins brought to an end. And through remission, moreover, are iniquities, along with offences, blotted out by expiation; and an everlasting righteousness is preached, different from that which is by the law, and visions and prophecies (are) until John, and the Most Holy is anointed. For before the advent of the Saviour these things were not yet, and were therefore only looked for...2. It remained in this position, accordingly, until Nehemiah and the reign of Artaxerxes, and the 115th year of the sovereignty of the Persians. And from the capture of Jerusalem that makes 185 years. And at that time King Artaxerxes gave order that the city should be built; and Nehemiah being despatched, superintended the work, and the street and the surrounding wall were built, as had been prophesied. And reckoning from that point, we make up seventy weeks to the time of Christ. For if we begin to reckon from any other point, and not from this, the periods will not correspond, and very many odd results will meet us. For if we begin the calculation of the seventy weeks from Cyrus and the first restoration, there will be upwards of one hundred years too many, and there will be a larger number if we begin from the day on which the angel gave the prophecy to Daniel, and a much larger number still if we begin from the commencement of the captivity. For we find the sovereignty of the Persians comprising a period of 230 years, and that of the Macedonians extending over 370 years, and from that to
the 16th year of Tiberius Cæsar is a period of about 60 years. 3. It is by calculating from Artaxerxes, therefore, up to the time of Christ that the seventy weeks are made up, according to the numeration of the Jews. For from Nehemiah, who was despatched by Artaxerxes to build Jerusalem in the 115th year of the Persian empire, and the 4th year of the 83d Olympiad, and the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes himself, up to this date, which was the second year of the 202d Olympiad, and the 16th year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, there are reckoned 475 years, which make 490 according to the Hebrew numeration, as they measure the years by the course of the moon; so that, as is easy to show, their year consists of 354 days, while the solar year has 365½ days. For the latter exceeds the period of twelve months, according to the moon’s course, by 11¼ days. Hence the Greeks and the Jews insert three intercalary months every 8 years. For 8 times 11¼ days makes up 3 months. Therefore 475 years make 59 periods of 8 years each, and 3 months besides. But since thus there are 3 intercalary months every 8 years, we get thus 15 years minus a few days; and these being added to the 475 years, make up in all the 70 weeks. – The Extant Fragments of the Five Books of the Chronography of Julius Africanus, XVI, On the Seventy Weeks of Daniel.

When we investigate what biblical event occurred in the sixteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, we arrive at Luke 3:1-3, 21-23. This passage from Luke begins with the notation, “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” and then proceeds to explain that it was at this time when John the Baptist started his ministry. Verses 21-23 then explain that “when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized” and at this point “Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age.” Consequently, here we see another piece of evidence that Julius’ Chronography was not calculating up to Christ’s miraculous conception as a milestone or as its focal point. And while other portions of the his text focus on the point in time when the Magi arrived when Christ was “in his second year” as we have already noted, this passage uses the terms “the advent of Christ” and “the time of Christ” to refer to Jesus’ being made publically to Israel when John baptized him in the Jordan River. But in neither case do we see any evidence that Julius was citing Jesus’ miraculous conception date as a milestone in his calculation of the years of history.

And six, we will examine the writing of Clement of Alexandria in more detail in our next section when we discuss the Epiphany. But in the quote below, Clement of Alexandria testifies that certain theologians had identified the date of Christ’s birth or his suffering to the Egyptian months of Pachon, Phemenoth, or Pharmuthi.

Chapter 21. The Jewish Institutions and Laws of Far Higher Antiquity Than the Philosophy of the Greeks – From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon...And treating of His passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the
sixteenth year of Tiberius, on the twenty-fifth of Phamenoth; and others the
twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi and others say that on the nineteenth of
Pharmuthi the Saviour suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the
twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi. – Clement of Alexandria, The
Stromata (Book I), www.newadvent.org/fathers/02101.htm

As we can see from Catholic Encyclopedia and Wikipedia below, the Egyptian
months of Pachon, Phemenoth, and Pharmuthi are spring months, not winter
months, and they roughly correspond to March, April, and May.

Christmas – About A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria (Strom., I, xxi in P.G.,
VIII, 888) says that certain Egyptian theologians "over curiously" assign, not the
year alone, but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on 25 Pachon (20 May) in
the twenty-eighth year of Augustus. [Ideler (Chron., II, 397, n.) thought they did
this believing that the ninth month, in which Christ was born, was the ninth of
their own calendar.] Others reached the date of 24 or 25 Pharmuthi (19 or 20
April). With Clement's evidence may be mentioned the "De pasch
computus", written in 243 and falsely ascribed to Cyprian (P.L., IV, 963
sqq.), which places Christ's birth on 28 March, because on that day the
material sun was created.” – Catholic Encyclopedia

Egyptian calendar, Ptolemaic and Roman calendar –

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Seasonal Names</th>
<th>Middle Kingdom</th>
<th>New Kingdom</th>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Coptic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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<td>ΦΑΜΕΝΩΘ, Φαμενώθ</td>
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Paremhat – also known as Baramhat, is the seventh month of the Coptic
calendar. It lies between March 10 and April 8 of the Gregorian calendar. –

Incidentally, here we might take a moment to briefly reference the document “De
pasch computus,” which Catholic Encyclopedia dates to 243 AD. First, this
document dates Christ’s birth to March, not December, which makes it useless in
supporting Christmas. Second, simply identifying the date of Christ’s birth or any
event in Christ’s life does not equate to a celebration or festival concerning that
event. Third, this document is “falsely ascribed to Cyprian” according to the
Catholic Encyclopedia, which makes it difficult to determine whether this
document even originated among orthodox Christians or heretics. For all these
reasons, despite dating to 243 AD, this document does not help to establish any
Christian celebration of the birth of Christ prior to the late third century or early
fourth century.

But returning to the topic at hand, the fact that Clement of Alexandria identified
two groups of theologians who placed Christ’s birth and suffering in springtime
would support that Julius’ reference to “Spring-bearer” would theoretically also denote Christ’s birth during springtime, not his conception.

Consequently, even if Julius’ intended the term “Spring-bearer” to refer to the season of spring, as opposed to the idea of a figurative stream of water, this passage from Julius still does not provide any unambiguous identification that Jesus’ conception was in spring or by extension that his birthday was in December.

Ultimately, there are too many obstacles, which prevent this passage from being cited as reliable evidence that Christians identified December 25 as Jesus’ birth day in the earliest decades of the third century. We have no surviving copy of Sextus Julius Africanus apart from quotations in documents written in the fourth, seventh, eighth, and eleventh centuries AD when Christmas had already become popular. The fragments that we have are so scarce that it is difficult to rule out later embellishment, even if we assume the texts authentically originate from Sextus Julius Africanus. The particular fragment that is relevant to the date of Christ’s birth is regarded by some scholars as inauthentic and superstitious. The language of the particular passage would suggest that the key phrase “Spring-bearer” could refer to a stream or fountain rather than to the season of spring or the spring equinox. And even if the spring season or the spring equinox was mentioned, the language of the passage and a comparison to other writings of that time would suggest that the passage is referring to Jesus’ birth in spring rather than his conception.

As we stated earlier, with such limited certainty surrounding this critical segment from Julius, it should hardly be regarded as a reliable or important cornerstone in the efforts to substantiate early evidence that Christians identified December 25 as the birthday of Jesus Christ. This is hardly the kind of reliable testimony that is required when looking for evidence that early Christians celebrated Christ’s birth in December around 200 AD. Consequently, in light of all these facts, it must be concluded that the modern assertion that Julius identifies Jesus’ birth in December is unwarranted, modern revisionism at best. The text of Julius demonstrates that he absolutely does not provide any real basis for identifying Christ’s birth in December.

Now that we’ve finished our examination of Sextus Julius Africanus, we should also take a few moments to mention more recent claims that surface periodically online reporting that second century Christians such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, or Theophilus of Antioch identified December 25 as the day of Jesus’ birth. When encountering historical claims of this kind it is important to confirm their historical veracity. If true, such a claim would be easy for an article or book to demonstrate. Simply quote the early church writer’s remarks on the subject and provide the citation to where in his works the quote can be found.

Consider the following two citations of Irenaeus regarding December 25, both of which appear on Wikipedia’s article on Christmas.
Christmas, Choice of December 25 – In his work Adversus Haereses, Irenaeus (c. 130–202) identified the conception of Jesus as March 25 and linked it to the crucifixion at the time of the equinox, with the birth of Jesus nine months after on December 25 at the time of the solstice.[88]…Date – Irenaeus (c. 130–202) viewed Christ's conception as March 25 in association with the Passion, with the nativity nine months after on December 25.[88]

- wikipedia.org

First, notice that these two statements regarding Irenaeus are phrased in a way that sounds as though Irenaeus himself makes a statement about the nativity being on December 25.

Second, notice that Wikipedia includes a footnote (numbered 88) for both of these two references to Irenaeus. When we follow that footnote, we find that the source of the information regarding Irenaeus is the book “Symbols of the Saints” by Michael Alan Anderson. We even find the specific pages in Anderson’s work where this information can be found, namely pages 42-46. Below is the full quote from Anderson’s book, which can be viewed through Google Books.

https://books.google.com/books?id=FdN4aGeUhpsC&pg=PA42&lpg=PA42&dq=irenaeus+%22december+25%22&source=bl&ots=rizQIZmDvu&sig=So4qCuA29tve-7GayHuoaVbbNzc&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjnrYjRp9DJAhVV82MKHeDTAHo4ChDoAQguMAQ#v=onepage&q=irenaeus%20%22december+25%22&f=false

The unusual concurrence in the early liturgical calendars of the Annunciation with the historical date of the Passion on March 25 was not an accident. For the first Christians, the expectation of Christ (parousia) at the time of Pascha was understood as his arrival both at the incarnation and at his second coming. For instance, the second-century Christian apologist, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon referred to the “coming” of Christ specifically at the day of his conception. 40 Christ’s nativity on December 25 therefore fell nine months after the day of his conception on March 25, a day specifically with the Passion in early Christianity. Contrary to the traditional view that March 25 is nine months “back” from Christmas, Christ’s nativity is discovered by a “forward computation,” calculated from the March 25 Pascha and the simultaneous themes of the Annunciation.41

The argument for the ‘forward computation’ of Christmas was reasserted by the late nineteenth-century French priest and historian Louis Duchesne, Origines du culte Chretien (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1902), 263-4.


Number one, Anderson’s reference to Irenaeus appears about halfway through the first paragraph in which he simply states, “For instance, the second-century Christian apologist, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon referred to the “coming” of Christ specifically at the day of his conception.”

Number two, notice that unlike the Wikipedia article, Anderson does not imply that Irenaeus himself mentions Christ’s birth on December 25.

Number three, notice also that Anderson does not display the actual text of the critical statement or passage from Irenaeus.

Number four, Anderson provides two footnotes for this section, but only the first of those footnotes (footnote 40) pertains to Irenaeus. Here in the footnote, Anderson identifies where in Irenaeus writing we can find the critical statement in which Irenaeus ‘referred to the ‘coming’ of Christ specifically at the day of his conception.” Specifically, Anderson cites Against Heresies, book I, chapter VII, paragraphs 1-2. For comparison to Anderson’s claims, below are paragraphs 1-2 of chapter VII of Book I of Irenaeus’ Against Heresies. Unfortunately, the quote is rather long, but it is necessary to place it here in its entirety in order to demonstrate that nothing is being omitted. (Please note, the bolded section behind the chapter number at the top of the quote below is the title for the section and is not part of paragraphs 1 or 2.)

Chapter VII.—The mother Achamoth, when all her seed are perfected, shall pass into the Pleroma, accompanied by those men who are spiritual; the Demiurge, with animal men, shall pass into the intermediate habitation; but all material men shall go into corruption. Their blasphemous opinions against the true incarnation of Christ by the Virgin Mary. Their views as to the prophecies. Stupid ignorance of the Demiurge.

1. When all the seed shall have come to perfection, they state that then their mother Achamoth shall pass from the intermediate place, and enter in within the Pleroma, and shall receive as her spouse the Saviour, who sprang from all the Æons, that thus a conjunction may be formed between the Saviour and Sophia, that is, Achamoth. These, then, are the bridegroom and bride, while the nuptial chamber is the full extent of the Pleroma. The spiritual seed, again, being divested of their animal souls, and becoming intelligent spirits, shall in an irresistible and invisible manner enter in within the Pleroma, and be bestowed as brides on those angels who wait upon the Saviour. The Demiurge himself will pass into the place of his mother Sophia; that is, the intermediate habitation. In this intermediate place, also, shall the souls of the righteous repose; but nothing of an animal nature shall find admittance to the Pleroma. When these things have taken place as described, then shall that fire which lies hidden in the world blaze.
forth and burn; and while destroying all matter, shall also be extinguished along with it, and have no further existence. They affirm that the Demiurge was acquainted with none of these things before the advent of the Saviour.

2. There are also some who maintain that he also produced Christ as his own proper son, but of an animal nature, and that mention was made of him by the prophets. This Christ passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube; and there descended upon him in the form of a dove at the time of his baptism, that Saviour who belonged to the Pleroma, and was formed by the combined efforts of all its inhabitants. In him there existed also that spiritual seed which proceeded from Achamoth. They hold, accordingly, that our Lord, while preserving the type of the first-begotten and primary tetrad, was compounded of these four substances,—of that which is spiritual, in so far as He was from Achamoth; of that which is animal, as being from the Demiurge by a special dispensation, inasmuch as He was formed [corporeally] with unspeakable skill; and of the Saviour, as respects that dove which descended upon Him. He also continued free from all suffering, since indeed it was not possible that He should suffer who was at once incomprehensible and invisible. And for this reason the Spirit of Christ, who had been placed within Him, was taken away when He was brought before Pilate. They maintain, further, that not even the seed which He had received from the mother [Achamoth] was subject to suffering; for it, too, was impassible, as being spiritual, and invisible even to the Demiurge himself. It follows, then, according to them, that the animal Christ, and that which had been formed mysteriously by a special dispensation, underwent suffering, that the mother might exhibit through him a type of the Christ above, namely, of him who extended himself through Stauros, and imparted to Achamoth shape, so far as substance was concerned. For they declare that all these transactions were counterparts of what took place above. – Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book I, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.ii.viii.html

There are several points worth noting from these two paragraphs from Irenaeus, cited by Anderson.

One, as can be seen from reading the quote at length, these two paragraphs entail Irenaeus recording the beliefs of the Gnostic heretics, not the proper beliefs of Christians. This is demonstrated by several facts. Irenaeus discusses the Gnostic belief in the Demiurge, a lower divine being who created the material world in error as well as the Gnostic belief in higher divine beings called the Pleroma and Aeons, such as Sophia and Achamoth. And he describes the Gnostic view in which a “Spirit of Christ” was “placed within” the material or “animal Christ,” which merely “passed through Mary just as water flows through a tube” rather than actually being conceived of her and biologically related to her. And he goes on to describe the Gnostic view in which the “Spirit of Christ” did not and could not suffer the crucifixion under Pilate but left the “animal Christ” before the suffering began. This contrasts directly with the orthodox Christian view held both in ancient and modern times in which the Person of the Word of God himself became incarnate in the womb of Mary, Himself becoming human in addition to his divinity, with his humanity descended from Adam and Abraham and King David. Moreover, the both the ancient and modern orthodox view holds that the
divine Person of the Word of God (the Second Person of the Trinity) did himself suffer on the cross under Pilate.

Two, the fact that Irenaeus is describing Gnostic beliefs is relevant because it raises the question of whether these two paragraphs could even theoretically attest to any supposed orthodox Christian belief that Christ was conceived in March or, by extension, born in December. Even if the paragraphs did contain language related to the timing of the conception or birth of Christ, it would have to be demonstrated that Irenaeus intended such a statement as a reflection of orthodox belief, which is particularly challenging given that the entirety of these two chapters is about describing heretical beliefs.

Three, most importantly as we can see there is no language whatsoever in either paragraph that even vaguely comments on the timing of Jesus’ conception or birth in any way. In fact, to be thorough we might also include the remaining three paragraphs from Chapter VII in order to demonstrate that there is no mention of the timing of Jesus’ conception or birth anywhere in the chapter. Instead, Irenaeus continues to simply record the particular beliefs of the Gnostics concerning the Achamoth, Demiurge, and their heretical understanding of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.

3. They maintain, moreover, that those souls which possess the seed of Achamoth are superior to the rest, and are more dearly loved by the Demiurge than others, while he knows not the true cause thereof, but imagines that they are what they are through his favour towards them. Wherefore, also, they say he distributed them to prophets, priests, and kings; and they declare that many things were spoken by this seed through the prophets, inasmuch as it was endowed with a transcendentally lofty nature. The mother also, they say, spake much about things above, and that both through him and through the souls which were formed by him. Then, again, they divide the prophecies [into different classes], maintaining that one portion was uttered by the mother, a second by her seed, and a third by the Demiurge. In like manner, they hold that Jesus uttered some things under the influence of the Saviour, others under that of the mother, and others still under that of the Demiurge, as we shall show further on in our work.

4. The Demiurge, while ignorant of those things which were higher than himself, was indeed excited by the announcements made [through the prophets], but treated them with contempt, attributing them sometimes to one cause and sometimes to another; either to the prophetic spirit (which itself possesses the power of self-excitement), or to [mere unassisted] man, or that it was simply a crafty device of the lower [and baser order of men]. He remained thus ignorant until the appearing of the Lord. But they relate that when the Saviour came, the Demiurge learned all things from Him, and gladly with all his power joined himself to Him. They maintain that he is the centurion mentioned in the Gospel, who addressed the Saviour in these words: “For I also am one having soldiers and servants under my authority; and whatsoever I command they do.” They further hold that he will continue administering the affairs of the world as long as that is fitting and needful, and specially that he may exercise a care over the Church;
while at the same time he is influenced by the knowledge of the reward prepared for him, namely, that he may attain to the habitation of his mother.

5. They conceive, then, of three kinds of men, spiritual, material, and animal, represented by Cain, Abel, and Seth. These three natures are no longer found in one person, but constitute various kinds [of men]. The material goes, as a matter of course, into corruption. The animal, if it make choice of the better part, finds repose in the intermediate place; but if the worse, it too shall pass into destruction. But they assert that the spiritual principles which have been sown by Achamoth, being disciplined and nourished here from that time until now in righteous souls (because when given forth by her they were yet but weak), at last attaining to perfection, shall be given as brides to the angels of the Saviour, while their animal souls of necessity rest for ever with the Demiurge in the intermediate place. And again subdividing the animal souls themselves, they say that some are by nature good, and others by nature evil. The good are those who become capable of receiving the [spiritual] seed; the evil by nature are those who are never able to receive that seed. – Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book I, Chapter VII, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.ii.viii.html

In point of fact, Irenaeus never identifies any day, let alone December 25, as the day of Christ’s birth. Nor does he identify the day or month of Christ’s conception. Nor does he make any remarks that would allow anyone to deduce the day of Christ’s birth by relation to other events in Jesus’ life.

The case is similar with Irenaeus’ disciple, Hippolytus. Below we see Wikipedia’s article on Christmas indicates Hippolytus “may have” identified December 25 as the birth of Jesus.

Christmas, Choice of December 25 – Date – Hippolytus of Rome (170–235) may also have identified December 25 for the birth of Jesus and March 25 for the conception.[8][190] – wikipedia.org

One reason for the “may have” in Wikipedia’s reference to Hippolytus is to the fact that the shorter versions of Hippolytus’ works contain no reference to December 25 nor any identification of any day of the year as the day of Christ’s birth. However, as with other ancient texts, there are longer versions of Hippolytus’ writings which are available from later periods. As is normally the case in such instances, reputable and qualified historians do not use the longer version as it is generally agreed to include late-dating additions that weren’t originally penned by Hippolytus. It is only in the longer version of one of Hippolytus’ work that includes an insertion which specifically states that Jesus was born on December 25. Similarly, with regard to Theophilus of Antioch, the only reference to Jesus being born on December 25 is found, not in the extant copies of his own writings from the late second-century, but in a sixteenth-century AD German collection of lost fragmentary materials (called the Magdeburg Centuries).

In summary, there is an important lesson here. One should always be suspicious of any claim that doesn’t provide the actual text of the critical historical
document. And unfortunately, most online assertions regarding second and third-century Christian writers identifying Jesus’ birth on December 25 are simply repeating false or unsubstantiated claims without ever having sought to verify whether the claims were true in the first place before passing them on.

As it stands, the available historical record firmly and clearly shows that, prior to the fourth century AD, no Christian identified Jesus’ birth with the month of December, let alone the specific day of December 25. Any claims to the contrary ought to be thoroughly investigated and confirmed against the original source material before being accepted as reliable.

In conclusion regarding second century attestation of the date of Jesus’ birth, we have seen that it is not possible to trace the celebration of Christ’s birth in December to 221 AD based on Sextus Julius Africanus. Nor is it possible to attribute any inference regarding the date of Jesus’ birth to Irenaeus, Hippolytus, or Theophilus of Antioch in the second century. Instead, the 336 Roman calendar and the 354 AD Chronography as well as the festival lists of Origen, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, and even Britannica’s summary all attest that according to historical evidence, the celebration of Jesus’ birth in December did not begin until the late third century or first half of the fourth century AD.

Last, we should state that even if Christmas were celebrated as early as the first decade or two after the year 200 AD, it must not be overlooked that this is still quite a late development. Two hundred years is a long time and can entail a great deal of cultural change. The United States was founded in 1776 yet two hundred years later in 1976, the culture was notably different. Of course, modern technology has impacted cultural transformation, but even in ancient times two centuries is more than enough time for the development of new beliefs and practices, which are not authentic and run contrary to the earliest Christianity of the apostles.

3. Does the feast of the Epiphany prove that early Christians were celebrating Christ’s birth in winter sometime near the end of December?

As we have already seen from Wikipedia and World Book, by 336 and 354 AD when we find the earliest evidence of the celebration on December 25, “the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.” This suggests the celebration of Christ’s birth during the Epiphany may have been earlier than the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25.

With regard to the feast of the Epiphany, there are two major issues that we want to address.

First, today the feast of Epiphany commemorates, not the birth of Christ, but either the visit of the Magi or Christ’s baptism by John.
Epiphany – Epiphany (Koine Greek: Ἐπιφάνεια, Epiphaneia, "Manifestation", "striking appearance") [1] or Theophany,[2] (Ancient Greek: Θεοφάνεια, Theophaneia meaning "Vision of God")[3] also known as Three Kings' Day,[4] is a Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God the Son as a human being in Jesus Christ. In Western Christianity, the feast commemorates principally (but not solely) the visit of the Magi to the Christ child, and thus Jesus' physical manifestation to the Gentiles.[5][6] Moreover, the feast of the Epiphany, in some Western Christian denominations, also initiates the liturgical season of Epiphanytide.[7][8] Eastern Christians, on the other hand, commemorate the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, seen as his manifestation to the world as the Son of God.[9] The traditional date for the feast is January 6. – wikipedia.org

However, as Britannica notes below, “the festival originated in the Eastern church, where it at first included a commemoration of Christ’s birth.” The central emphasis on the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus were solidified after Christ’s birth became increasingly associated with December 25 instead of January 6.

Epiphany – (from Greek epiphaneia, “manifestation”), festival celebrated on January 6, one of the three principal and oldest festival days of the Christian church (the other two are Easter and Christmas). Some Orthodox churches celebrate Christmas Eve on January 6 and Epiphany on January 19. It commemorates the first manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi, and the manifestation of his divinity, as it occurred at his baptism in the Jordan River and at his first miracle at Cana in Galilee. The festival originated in the Eastern church, where it at first included a commemoration of Christ’s birth. In Rome, by 354 Christ’s birth was being celebrated on December 25, and later in the 4th century the church in Rome began celebrating Epiphany on January 6. In the Western church the festival primarily commemorates the visit by the Magi to the infant Jesus. In the East it primarily commemorates the baptism of Jesus. – Encyclopedia Britannica

Before we discuss the direct association of Epiphany with the birth of Jesus, we should take a few moments to discuss whether its association with the visit of the Magi provides any information about the timing of the birth of Jesus. For instance, if the early church believed that the Magi visited on January 6 that might lead some to conclude that Jesus must have been born shortly before January 6. Consequently, it might be perceived that the association of the Magi with January 6 provides some secondary attestation that Jesus’ birth was in late December. But this is not at all the case.

Details from the New Testament indicate that the visitation of the Magi did not occur at Christ’s birth.

Number one, Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth. But when Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary were travelling to Bethlehem because of a census. Once they arrived in Bethlehem they were unable to find room in the inn. When Mary gave
birth, Jesus was placed in a manager where livestock were kept. (See Luke 2:1-7.) However, as Matthew 2:11 reports when the Magi arrived, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were no longer residing in the stable (or cave), instead they were in a house. Moreover, King Herod had sought information from the Magi regarding when the star announcing Jesus’ birth had first appeared to them. Based on their response, King Herod, attempted to kill the Christ by ordered all children under the age of two to be put to death (Matthew 2:16). This informs us that the star announcing the birth of the Christ had first appeared to the wise men around two years prior to their visit with King Herod. This would explain why the Magi found Christ in a home instead of a stable (or cave). Simply put, the Magi didn’t encounter Christ on his birthday in Bethlehem but at some point up to two years later when he was back home. Therefore, the association between the Epiphany and the Magi would not function as a celebration of Christ’s birth.

Number two, we should also note that Luke’s account of Christ’s actual birth in Bethlehem doesn’t mention the arrival of the wise men. And, by comparison, Matthew’s account begins with Jesus having already been born in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod. Matthew does stipulate that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem (verse 1), that the Jewish leadership correctly deduced that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem (verses 4-6), and that Herod directed the wise men to Bethlehem (verse 8). However, the text never states that the wise men actually went to Bethlehem. Rather according to verse 9, when they left Herod they didn’t simply head to Bethlehem but instead were directed by the star to the location of Jesus.

Number three, Matthew 2:16 does record that Herod sent his men to kill all the children in Bethlehem. But it is clear from the passage that he is acting on the only information he had at the time. Verses 1-6 explain that Herod got the information about Bethlehem, not from the Magi, but from the best speculations from the chief priests and scribes of his own people. The Magi never provided him with the location, only with the timetable of two years. And this is why Herod widened his search area beyond Bethlehem to the neighboring areas that border it. Given the chief priests’ identification of Bethlehem, Herod correctly figured that given the two-year timetable, it was likely that the child was no longer in Bethlehem. As such, Herod’s efforts to kill the children of Bethlehem do not prove that the Magi visited Jesus while he was still in Bethlehem.

Number four, while Luke uses the Greek word “brephos” (1025) to describe Jesus as a newborn or infant, Matthew instead uses “paidion” (3818) which means “a young child” and includes a larger age range from babies to toddlers.

Number five, even the fragmentary quote falsely attributed to Julius Africanus and cited in support of Jesus’ birth on December 25 places the wise men’s visit, not when Jesus was a newborn, but at some point during his second year of age.

The king then, without delay, sent some of the Magi under his dominion with gifts, the star showing them the way...And we came to that place then to which we were sent, and saw the mother and the child, the star indicating to
us the royal babe. And we said to the mother: What art thou named, O renowned mother? And she says: Mary, masters. And we said to her: Whence art thou sprung? 1072 And she replies: From this district of the Bethlehemites. 1073 Then said we: Hast thou not had a husband? And she answers: I was only betrothed with a view to the marriage covenant, my thoughts being far removed from this. For I had no mind to come to this. And while I was giving very little concern to it, when a certain Sabbath dawned, and straightway at the rising of the sun, an angel appeared to me bringing me suddenly the glad tidings of a son. And in trouble I cried out, Be it not so to me, Lord, for I have not a husband. And he persuaded me to believe, that by the will of God I should have this son. Then said we to her: Mother, mother, all the gods of the Persians have called thee blessed. Thy glory is great; for thou art exalted above all women of renown, and thou art shown to be more queenly than all queens. The child, moreover, was seated on the ground, being, as she said, in His second year, and having in part the likeness of His mother. - Julius Africanus, II.—Narrative of Events Happening in Persia on the Birth of Christ

So, even though many Christians today mistakenly think the wise men visited Jesus when he was an infant, the New Testament itself indicates that the Magi did not visit Jesus when he was a newborn in a stable in Bethlehem. Rather, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were no longer at the stable (or cave) or at the inn in Bethlehem, but had most likely returned to Nazareth, Joseph’s home town. Jesus was no longer a newborn infant, but a baby or toddler perhaps as old as two years. Consequently, even if the Epiphany was associated with the Magi prior to the fourth century, such early celebrations of the Epiphany still would not speak to the identification of Christ’s birthday.

Second, beyond issues related to the Magi, the most important issues regarding the feast of the Epiphany is the timeframe of its origination and its association with the birth of Christ. In Wikipedia’s article on Christmas, we have already seen that in Eastern Christianity the Epiphany was celebrated in connection with the birth of Jesus by 354 AD. Britannica also states that in the West the “celebration of the nativity of Jesus” on January 6 “seems to have continued until after 380.”

**Christmas – The Chronography of 354 AD contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian liturgical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.[51][52]… Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.[54] – wikipedia.org**

However, these dates associating the Epiphany with the birth of Christ are already more than halfway into the fourth century, over 300 years since the death of Christ. In early Christian terms, this is a long time. Our next indication regarding the earliest celebration of the Feast of Epiphany comes Encyclopedia Britannica.

**Church Year, Epiphany** - In Hellenistic times an epiphany (from the Greek epiphania, “manifestation”), or appearance of divine power in a person or event,
was a common religious concept. The New Testament uses the word to denote the final appearing of Christ at the end of time, but in 2 Timothy 1:10 it refers to his coming as Saviour on earth. In this latter sense, a festival of Christ’s epiphany is first attested among heretical Gnostic Christians (those who believed that mankind was saved by secret knowledge, not faith, and that matter was evil and the spiritual world good) in Egypt in the late 2nd century (Clement of Alexandria, Strōmateis, Book I, chapter 21), on January 6, when he was manifested as Son of God at his baptism. The date is that of an Egyptian solstice, celebrated by pagans as a time of overflow of the waters of the Nile, and in certain mystery cults as the occasion of the birth of a new eon, or age, from the virgin goddess Kore, daughter of the earth-mother goddess Demeter. In other places of the Middle East, the time was associated with miraculous fountains from which wine flowed in place of water. Nothing more is known of an Epiphany feast until the 4th century, when it appears in the Eastern churches as a festival second in rank only to Easter.


There are several interesting points worth noting from Britannica.

Number one, according to Britannica the Feast of the Epiphany originated “among heretical Gnostic Christians…in the last 2nd century.” Britannica cites Book I, Chapter 21 of the work “Stromateis” written by Clement of Alexandria as the source for this identification. Below is some basic biographical data regarding Clement of Alexandria (including dates for his birth and death) as well as the actual quote from Clement’s work “Stromateis.”


Chapter 21. The Jewish Institutions and Laws of Far Higher Antiquity Than the Philosophy of the Greeks – From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon. And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings. And they say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth day of the month Tubi; and some that it was the eleventh of the same month, And treating of His passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the sixteenth year of Tiberius, on the twenty-fifth of Phamenoth; and others the twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi and others say that on the nineteenth of Pharmuthi the Saviour suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi. – Clement of Alexandria, The Stromata (Book I), www.newadvent.org/fathers/02101.htm
As we can see, Clement’s comments also refer to groups who assigned Christ’s birth to Egyptian months of Pachon and Pharmuthi. It is worth noting that Pachon and Pharmuthi correspond roughly to May and April, as we can see in the quote below from Catholic Encyclopedia. Consequently, these dates do not related to the Feast of the Epiphany, which was in January.

**Christmas – About A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria** (Strom., I, xxi in P.G., VIII, 888) says that certain Egyptian theologians "over curiously" assign, not the year alone, but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on 25 Pachon (20 May) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus. [Ideler (Chron., II, 397, n.) thought they did this believing that the ninth month, in which Christ was born, was the ninth of their own calendar.] Others reached the date of 24 or 25 Pharmuthi (19 or 20 April). With Clement's evidence may be mentioned the "De pasch computus", written in 243 and falsely ascribed to Cyprian (P.L., IV, 963 sqq.), which places Christ's birth on 28 March, because on that day the material sun was created. – Catholic Encyclopedia

More importantly, according to Clement “the followers of Basilides” celebrated the day of “Jesus baptism as a festival” and they claimed that baptism occurred on either the fifteenth day or the eleventh day of the Egyptian month of Tubi. Wikipedia explains that Tubi corresponded to December 27 on the Julian calendar, which was the calendar used in Roman and European culture until well after the year 1,000 AD. (See references below.) Consequently, if Tubi began on December 27 of the Julian calendar, then the 11th or 15th of Tubi would be in early January.

**Tobi (month)** - Tobi, also known as Touba, is the fifth month of the Coptic calendar. It lies between January 9 and February 7 of the Gregorian calendar…

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**Julian calendar – Pope Gregory XIII’s reform (see Gregorian calendar), proclaimed in 1582, restored the calendar to the seasonal dates of ad 325, an adjustment of 10 days. The Julian calendar has gradually been abandoned since 1582 in favour of the Gregorian calendar.**

Number two, it should also be noted that Basilides was not a Christian, but indeed a second-century Gnostic heretic, as the excerpt from Britannica notes below.

Number three, Britannica notes that this date, which is the earliest record for the celebration of the Epiphany, originated as, “The date is that of an Egyptian solstice, celebrated by pagans” and “in certain mystery cults as the occasion of the birth of a new eon, or age, from the virgin goddess Kore.”

Interestingly, Wikipedia provides a slightly different date for the earliest celebration of Epiphany.

**Epiphany (holiday) – The earliest reference to Epiphany as a Christian feast was in A.D. 361, by Ammianus Marcellinus[22] St. Epiphanius says that January 6 is hemera genethlion toutestin epiphanion (Christ's "Birthday; that is, His Epiphany").[23] He also asserts that the Miracle at Cana occurred on the same calendar day.[24]…[Footnote] 22: Ammianus Marcellinus, XXI, ii. – wikipedia.org, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_%28holiday%29

Number four, although Britannica’s date comes six decades or more after the date provided in Wikipedia, Wikipedia is not really contradicting Britannica regarding the date. Instead, Wikipedia is providing a date for the earliest celebration of Epiphany “as a Christian feast,” whereas Britannica was referring to its earliest celebration among Gnostic Heretics.

Number five, Wikipedia attributes this early date to Chapter XXI, paragraph II of writing of the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Below is the biographical data regarding Ammianus Marcellinus (including the dates of his birth and death) as well as the actual quote from his work.

**Ammianus Marcellinus, Roman historian, (born c. 330, Antioch, Syria [now Antakya, Tur.]—died 395, Rome [Italy]), last major Roman historian, whose work continued the history of the later Roman Empire to 378. - Encyclopedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/biography/Ammianus-Marcellinus

**Book XXI, II. 5. But to conceal this for a while, on the day of the festival at the beginning of January, which the Christians call Epiphany, he went into their church, and offered solemn public prayer to their God. – Title: The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus, Author: Ammianus Marcellinus, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28587/28587-h/28587-h.htm

Number six, when we look at the actual quote from Ammianus Marcellinus, we do indeed see that the Christians were celebrating the Epiphany in early January by 361 AD. This roughly coincides with Wikipedia’s article on Christmas, which we quoted earlier. According to Wikipedia and World Book, Jesus’ birth was celebrated on December 25 in Rome by 336 or 354 AD, but in the East and the West Jesus’ birth was celebrated on January 6 “until after 380.”

**Christmas - The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. – World Book 2005 (Deluxe), Copyright 2004 World Book, Inc. and its licensors.
Christmas – The Chronography of 354 AD contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian liturgical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.[51][52] The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century,[52] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.[53] The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century,[52] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.[53] Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.[54]. – wikipedia.org

As we can see, even if the celebration of Christ’s birth is traced to the feast of Epiphany, the available evidence in the historical record indicates that the Feast of the Epiphany originated in the late second century AD among Gnostic heretics who borrowed the date from Egyptian pagan celebration of the winter solstice and began using that date primarily to celebrate Christ’s baptism, rather than his birth. According to the historical record, it then took several more decades for the Christians to adopt this holiday from the Gnostic heretics and view it as a celebration of Christ’s birth, which occurred sometime before 336 to 361 AD. From this point forward, there seems to be some overlap between the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 in Rome and on January 6 elsewhere throughout the Christian world with December 25 rising to prominence over January 6 sometime after 380 AD. Simply put, the feast of the Epiphany does not place the celebration of Christ’s birth any earlier than the middle of the fourth century AD.

4. What Was the Early Christian View Regarding Birthdays?

When evaluating how early Christians began to celebrate Christmas, it is important to understand something about the early Christian culture. Perhaps it’s worth considering why the biblical authors and the earliest Christians didn’t specify the date of Jesus’ birth or why there is no evidence of Christians celebrating Jesus’ birth prior to the late third or fourth century AD.

In western society today, individual birthdays are important. In our personal lives we have annual celebrations for the birthdays of friends and family. In our professional lives we have office parties for coworkers’ birthdays. And, countries honor the birth of important historical figures each year with an annual holiday. But this focus on individual birthdays isn’t universal to all societies today, nor has it been a tradition universal to all human cultures throughout human history. On the contrary, some cultures today as well as in the past have not recognized, individual birthdays or used the anniversary of these occasions to mark an individual’s advancement of age.

Birthday – The celebration of the anniversary of one's birth is a phenomenon of modern industrial society. It is connected to the rise of a scientific way of
thinking and to new attitudes about children and childhood. Perfection of the calendar by the Egyptians and Mesopotamians enabled people to reckon exact birth dates, but **ancient and classical cultures rarely celebrated birthdays**, except for those of royalty. **In the East**, Chinese families often recognized birthdays, though mainly for adults; the Japanese, on the other hand, **often collapsed all birthdays to New Year's Day, which they made into a common celebratory event.** – Encyclopedia.com

**East Asian age reckoning** – East Asian age reckoning is a concept and practice that originated in China and is **used in East Asian cultures.** Chinese culture, Japanese culture, Korean culture, Vietnamese culture, and others share this **traditional way of counting a person's age.** Newborns start at one year old, and each passing of a Lunar New Year, rather than the birthday, adds one year to the person's age. In other words, the first year of life is counted as one instead of zero, so that a person is two years old in their second year, three years old in their third, and so on.\[1\]\[2\] Since **age is incremented on the new year rather than on a birthday**, people may be 1 or 2 years older in Asian reckoning than in the Western system. **Today this system is commonly used in everyday life by Chinese in certain regions.** For instance young people still use Xusui commonly in Shanghai.\[citation needed\] The system is also widely used by Koreans, with the exception of the legal system and newspapers. – wikipedia.org

As it turns out one of the ancient, eastern cultures that is unlikely to have celebrated individual birthdays is biblical Israel.

**Birthday** – There are no positive data in the Bible or in rabbinical literature concerning birthday festivals among the ancient Jews. – jewishencyclopedia.com, http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1088&letter=B&search=birthday

**Birthday** – The birthday anniversaries of heathen kings, are considered by the rabbis of the Talmud as legal heathen holidays, which count among those holidays on the three days preceding which **Jews are by Talmudic law required to abstain from concluding any business with a heathen** (Mishnah 'Ab. Zarah i. 3). – jewishencyclopedia.com, http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1088&letter=B&search=birthday#ixzz0wMMY396y

A look at the account of Noah in Genesis provides some corroboration for the possibility that the biblical authors and people of God didn't use individual birth days and months to mark the passing of age. Genesis 7:11 and 8:13 mark the occurrence of key stages of the flood in relation to the calendar year placing events on the first and second months of the year. However, it is just as clear that these passages mark Noah’s age of life using the same months and days. This means that either Noah’s birthday coincidentally happened to occur on the first day of the calendar year or the ancient biblical authors reckoned everyone to age together on New Year’s Day.
The Church Ethic: 312 Celebrating Christmas

Genesis 8:13 And it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth: and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and, behold, the face of the ground was dry.

Genesis 7:11 In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.

A look through the Old and New Testament finds that calendar days and months for the birth of any figure, let alone major figures, are rarely if ever recorded. Neither does the bible ever report a celebration of the birthday of any of God’s people. Even in the case of important persons like Abraham, Moses, or King David, no one celebrated their births as an annual holiday. In fact, in the entire bible, there are only two figures whose birthdays are mentioned. We’ll discuss those two exceptions momentarily. But for now, the evidence indicates that the Jewish culture did not celebrate birthdays, which is important because this is the culture that gave birth to Christianity and the earliest Christian leaders were Jewish men. This would suggest that early Christians likely inherited a lack of interest in birthdays from their Jewish leaders and predecessors.

On that note, history is not silent about the early Christian views on birthdays. Among the early Christians, there was a documented opposition to celebrating the birthday of anyone. This fact is attested to in the quotes below.

Christmas - The actual observance of the day of Jesus’ birth was long in coming. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. Numerous church fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays… – Encyclopedia Britannica

Christmas – In 245, Origen of Alexandria, writing about Leviticus 12:1–8, commented that Scripture mentions only sinners as celebrating their birthdays, namely Pharaoh, who then had his chief baker hanged (Genesis 40:20–22), and Herod, who then had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:21–27), and mentions saints as cursing the day of their birth, namely Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14–15) and Job (Job 3:1–16).[55] In 303, Arnobius ridiculed the idea of celebrating the birthdays of gods, a passage cited as evidence that Arnobius was unaware of any nativity celebration. – wikipedia.org

And on birthdays, when the lawless word reigns over them, they dance so that their movements please that word. Some one of those before us has observed what is written in Genesis about the birthday of Pharaoh, and has told that the worthless man who loves things connected with birth keeps birthday festivals; and we, taking this suggestion from him, find in no Scripture that a birthday was kept by a righteous man. – Origen, Commentary on Matthew, Book X, 22. The Dancing of Herodias. The Keeping of Oaths.
Being, as I have said, unable to know all these things, or to discern them by any power of reason, they fell into these fanciful beliefs, so that they fashioned gods after themselves, and gave to these such a nature as they have themselves, in actions, circumstances, and desires...They see that they are affected by the games, and think that the minds of the celestials are soothed by enjoying games; and because they have pleasure in refreshing themselves with warm baths, they think that the cleanness produced by bathing is pleasing to the gods above. We men gather our vintages, and they think and believe that the gods gather and bring in their grapes; we have birthdays, and they affirm that the powers of heaven have birthdays. – Arnobius, Against the Heathen, Book VII, Chapter 34

As we can see, historical evidence from the writings of Origen in 245 AD and the writings of Arnobius in 303 AD demonstrate how Christians felt about birthdays in the middle of the third century. In addition, it should also be noted that around the year 200, the Christian writer Tertullian authored his work “De Spectaculis” in which he condemns Christian attendance of amphitheater events on the grounds that some of those events “trace their superstitious origin back to birthdays and commemorative celebrations of the emperors.” Clearly, this is not a favorable view of the celebration of birthdays in general even as early as 200 AD.

Chapter 1 - You Servants of God, about to draw near to God, that you may make solemn consecration of yourselves to Him, seek well to understand the condition of faith, the reasons of the Truth, the laws of Christian Discipline, which forbid among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows. You who have testified and confessed that you have done so already, review the subject, that there may be no sinning whether through real or wilful ignorance...Chapter 6 - You have festivals bearing the name of the great Mother and Apollo of Ceres too, and Neptune, and Jupiter Latiaris, and Flora, all celebrated for a common end; the others have their religious origin in the birthdays and solemnities of kings, in public successes in municipal holidays.


Tertullian – Tertullian, Latin in full Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (born c. 155, /160, Carthage [now in Tunisia]—died after 220, Carthage), important early Christian theologian, polemicist, and moralist...During the next 20 to 25 years—i.e., from his early 40s to mid-60s—Tertullian devoted himself almost entirely to literary pursuits. - Encyclopedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/biography/Tertullian

To be clear, the point here is not that birthdays are sinful. Birthdays are scarcely mentioned in the bible. Origen mentions the examples of both Herod and Pharaoh (Exodus 40:20, Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:21). However, the details of these passages reveal that the mention of a birthday may be regarded as incidental details about the setting of an event rather than as a moral message about birthdays. Nothing in the text of these passages characterizes birthdays themselves as wicked, nor does any passage in the bible.
And while birthdays in general are not condemned in the bible, the fact that the early church had an aversion to the celebration of birthdays remains relevant to the search for the earliest celebrations of Jesus’ birthday or Christmas. These quotations from Tertullian, Origen, and Arnobius from 200-303 AD all predate the earliest references to celebrations of the birth of Christ. Therefore, as far as the historical evidence is concerned, we see a lack of concern for birthdays among the Jewish culture followed next by an opposition to birthdays among Christian writers. This historical evidence is consistent with the conclusion that early Christians would have most likely inherited their views regarding birthdays from the Jewish culture. And in addition to historical consistency, an opposition to celebrating birthdays among Jewish and early Christian communities would also explain the absence of any identification or specification regarding the day and year of Jesus’ birth in the New Testament or in the writings of the earliest Christians for the first few centuries after Jesus was born.

5. Was Jesus born on December 25th?

Biblical and historical records show that the earliest Christians didn’t celebrate Christ’s birthday before late third century or first half of the fourth century at the earliest. Today, Christians almost universally identify December 25 with the day of Christ’s birth. This has been the case for many centuries. But what was the basis for the selection of this day and when was December 25 first identified as the day of the nativity?

Of course, just because the early Christians didn’t celebrate the day of Christ’s birth, that doesn’t mean they didn’t know when Christ was born. However, the truth is that the bible doesn’t specify the day or month of Christ's birth. Nor is it reported or identified by the earliest Christian writers in the first three centuries after Christ.

The absence of early historical documentation may allow for some educated speculation. But, as we wonder what day of the year it might have been, it is once again important to be aware that the available historical records show that the earliest dates for the birth of Christ were not in December. Instead, individuals who lived much closer to the events placed Christ’s birth in springtime. It isn’t until the end of the fourth century that we begin to find the first references which placed Jesus’ birthday in the winter months of January or December.

As we read the quotes below we should keep in mind that simply having a date identified with Jesus’ birth doesn’t equate to an annual celebration of the event. And as we have already seen, other cultures, including biblical Jewish culture, didn’t celebrate the day and month of individuals’ births. Consequently, there is a different between knowing the date of an event and celebrating the date of that event. Therefore, as we examine the quotes below, we should only conclude that a celebration or festival is occurring if and when the text specifies that there was such a celebration or festival.
Christmas – About A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria (Strom., I, xxi in P.G., VIII, 888) says that certain Egyptian theologians "over curiously" assign, not the year alone, but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on 25 Pachon (20 May) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus. [Ideler (Chron., II, 397, n.) thought they did this believing that the ninth month, in which Christ was born, was the ninth of their own calendar.] Others reached the date of 24 or 25 Pharmuthi (19 or 20 April). With Clement's evidence may be mentioned the "De pasch computus", written in 243 and falsely ascribed to Cyprian (P.L., IV, 963 sqq.), which places Christ's birth on 28 March, because on that day the material sun was created. But Lupi has shown (Zaccaria, Dissertazioni ecc. del p. A.M. Lupi, Faenza, 1785, p. 219) that there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ's birth. Clement, however, also tells us that the Basilidians celebrated the Epiphany, and with it, probably, the Nativity, on 15 or 11 Tybi (10 or 6 January)...

Abraham Ecchelensis (Labbe, II, 402) quotes the Constitutions of the Alexandrian Church for a dies Nativitatis et Epiphanie in Nican times; Epiphanius (Hr., li, ed. Dindorf, 1860, II, 483) quotes an extraordinary semi-Gnostic ceremony at Alexandria in which, on the night of 5-6 January, a cross-stamped Kor was carried in procession round a crypt, to the chant, "Today at this hour Kore gave birth to the Eternal"; John Cassian records in his "Collations" (X, 2 in P.L., XLIX, 820), written 418-427, that the Egyptian monasteries still observe the "ancient custom"; but on 29 Choiak (25 December) and 1 January, 433, Paul of Emesa preached before Cyril of Alexandria, and his sermons (see Mansi, IV, 293; appendix to Act. Conc. Eph.) show that the December celebration was then firmly established there, and calendars prove its permanence. The December feast therefore reached Egypt between 427 and 433. Cyprus, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Asia Minor. In Cyprus, at the end of the fourth century, Epiphanius asserts against the Alogi (Hr., li, 16, 24 in P. G., XLI, 919, 931) that Christ was born on 6 January and baptized on 8 November. Ephraem Syrus (whose hymns belong to Epiphany, not to Christmas) proves that Mesopotamia still put the birth feast thirteen days after the winter solstice; i.e. 6 January; Armenia likewise ignored, and still ignores, the December festival. - Catholic Encyclopedia

What we can learn from all of the historical accounts mentioned in Catholic Encyclopedia is that even as late as the early 300’s AD, December 25 was by no means established or universally accepted as Jesus’ birthday. On the contrary, third-century Christians, place Jesus’ birth in spring. The only groups celebrating Christ’s birth in wintertime prior to the fourth century are specifically identified as heretical Gnostic groups, such as the Basilidians. Among other groups, winter dates, including December 25, are not present in the available historical record until the fourth century or later.

This historical record presents us with several important facts regarding the identification of the day of Jesus’ birth. The first is that there is no identification of any particular day and month made in the New Testament itself or in any Christian writing from the first 200 years of church history. This is a tremendous
amount of time without any historical documents identifying the day of year on which Jesus’ was born. The question that emerges from this reality is how Christians of later periods (the fourth and fifth century) could arrive at reliable dates for Christ’s birth when their predecessors either didn’t know the date, didn’t pass along the specific date, or didn’t provide a means to identify it.

Perhaps it could be speculated that Christians prior to the year 200 AD did pass on the specific date but they either did so orally or the written records attesting to it simply didn’t survive. However, on this point we also have to account for two other historical facts.

First, we have already seen evidence that earlier Christians were unconcerned with birthdays, which suggests they would not have taken pains to ascertain the date of Christ’s birth, let alone to pass it on and preserve it.

Second, the amount of confusion over the date in the third century must also be accounted for. While the first two centuries are absent of any historical document that would identify the date of Christ’s birth, when we first begin to see historical attempts to identify the date in the third century, we find a variety of opinion arguing for at least five different months, including March, April, and May in spring and then December, and January in winter. This is exactly the type of confusion that we would expect if there was not preceding record identifying the birth of Christ prior to the third century.

Third, the rationale provided for third and fourth century dates is also informative. The absence of any apostolic or other early tradition regarding the date of Christ’s birth prior to the second century would force the third and fourth century Christians to develop some other means of determining the date. But on what basis would they select a particular day to celebrate Christ’s birth? Under the circumstances, various methodologies may have been employed by later Christians to figure out the day of year upon which Jesus was born. For instance, Catholic Encyclopedia reports that one popular method for determining the time of year of Christ’s birth has involved biblical connections to Jewish feast days. While the Catholic Encyclopedia disagrees with these connections, some authors have identified Jesus’ birthday with the feast of Tabernacles in September.

**Analogy to Old Testament festivals.** It seems impossible, on analogy of the relation of Passover and Pentecost to Easter and Whitsuntide, to connect the Nativity with the feast of Tabernacles, as did, e.g., Lightfoot (Hore Hebr, et Talm., II, 32), arguing from Old Testament prophecy, e.g. Zacharias 14:16 sqq.; combining, too, the fact of Christ's death in Nisan with Daniel's prophecy of a three and one-half years' ministry (9:27), he puts the birth in Tisri, i.e. September. As undesirable is it to connect 25 December with the Eastern (December) feast of Dedication (Jos. Ant. Jud., XII, vii, 6). - Catholic Encyclopedia

Similarly, we have already seen the Catholic Encyclopedia explain that the document from 243 AD, known as "De pasch computa” placed “Christ's birth on
28 March, because on that day the material sun was created.” Ultimately, the fact that third and fourth century Christians had to resort to such external reference points or calculations as a basis for determining Christ’s birthdate is exactly what we would expect if there was no existing traditions or apostolic teaching on this topic handed down for the first few centuries.

In addition, these above quotes help to illustrate that the methods for determining the exact birthday of Christ are just as varied as the dates derived from them. And based on the evidence in the historical record, there are no earlier documents prior to the late third century which provide a particular day or even a time of year. More importantly, these quotes also demonstrate that December 25 was not identified with Christ’s birth by the most ancient Christians. In fact, December 25 was not identified with Christ’s birth until over 300 years or more after Jesus was born. However, this raises an interesting question. If third and fourth century Christians had devised multiple, contradictory methods of identifying Christ’s birth and there was no information in scripture identifying Christ’s birth, then why was December 25 chosen? This leads us to our next section.

6. Why was that day (December 25) chosen?

As we have seen there is no biblical or historical identification of December 25 with Jesus’ birthday for three hundred years after Christ. This leaves the lingering questions of when and why December 25 was chosen as the day to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

In theory, there are three possible answers to the question of why December 25 was identified as Jesus’ birthday.

The first possible answer would be that December 25 has been transmitted in the historical record from the New Testament onward as the day of Jesus’ birth. However, as we have seen, neither the bible nor a study of the first 300 years of Christian writings identifies Christ’s birth with December 25, which rules out this first option. Therefore, two options remain.

The second possible explanation would be that December 25 is identified as Jesus’ birthday based on calculations that can be performed from other known and reliable chronological factors. However, as we have seen third and fourth century attempts to determine the day of Christ’s birth produced dates in five different months of the year, first in spring and later in winter. So, in the absence of any discernable record of apostolic tradition regarding the date of Christ’s birth and with a variety of options being suggested in differing months and seasons, there was no established or consensus date in the church by the onset of the fourth century. This lack of consensus in the fourth century regarding the birthdate of Christ is reflected in Wikipedia which describes how December 25 had become popular in Rome while January 6 continued to be popular in both the East and the
West well past the year 380 AD, with some Christians still disapproving altogether.

Christmas – The Chronography of 354 AD contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian liturgical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.[51][52] The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century,[52] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.[53] Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.[54] In 245, Origen of Alexandria, writing about Leviticus 12:1–8, commented that Scripture mentions only sinners as celebrating their birthdays, namely Pharaoh, who then had his chief baker hanged (Genesis 40:20–22), and Herod, who then had John the Baptist beheaded (Mark 6:21–27), and mentions saints as cursing the day of their birth, namely Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:14–15) and Job (Job 3:1–16).[55] In 303, Arnobius ridiculed the idea of celebrating the birthdays of gods, a passage cited as evidence that Arnobius was unaware of any nativity celebration.-- wikipedia.org

Ultimately, this lack of consensus even in the fourth century shows that the use of calculations and other methodologies was not a decisive factor in the fourth-century selection of December 25 as Jesus’ birthday. How then did Christians of the fourth century determine which of the various suggested days and months of Christ’s birth should be selected for their annual celebrations?

These questions lead us to the third possible explanation for why December 25 was selected as Jesus’ birthday. The factor which ultimately caused December 25 to be selected from among other possible choices was the influence of ancient pagan celebrations of the birth of the sun at the winter solstice. We have already seen a quote from Britannica that the heretical Basilidian Gnostics instituted the Feast of the Epiphany on the Egyptian solstice date of January 6. And we even saw a quote from the Catholic Encyclopedia describing a third-century document, which identified Jesus’ birthdate in March “because on that day the material sun was created.” However, here we would like to focus our attention on the date of December 25 specifically, since that is the date which has become officially designated as Christ’s birthday.

Church Year, Epiphany - … a festival of Christ’s epiphany is first attested among heretical Gnostic Christians (those who believed that mankind was saved by secret knowledge, not faith, and that matter was evil and the spiritual world good) in Egypt in the late 2nd century (Clement of Alexandria, Strōmateis, Book I, chapter 21), on January 6, when he was manifested as Son of God at his baptism. The date is that of an Egyptian solstice, celebrated by pagans... - Encyclopedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/topic/church-year/History-of-the-church-year#toc67666
Christmas – “…the "De pasch computus", written in 243 and falsely ascribed to Cyprian (P.L., IV, 963 sqq.), which places Christ’s birth on 28 March, because on that day the material sun was created.” – Catholic Encyclopedia

Whether it is called astrology, divination, or observing times, religious celebration of annual astronomic events was common in the ancient pagan world. The bible itself provides testimony to the phenomenon of pagan cultures worshipping the sun, moon, and stars on particular days and times which signaled the changes of seasons, months, and years.

Genesis 1 informs us that on the fourth day God made the sun, moon, and stars and set them in the heavens to be signs for seasons, for days, and for years.

Genesis 1:14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs [0226], and for seasons [4150], and for days, and years: 15 And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. 16 And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. 17 And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, 18 And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good. 19 And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

However, even though God intended for astrological movements to serve as signs marking the progress of time and recurring periods of the calendar, he explicitly forbid the religious worship of such things. Deuteronomy 4 notes that in the time of Moses, pagan nations were worshipping the sun as it moved to particular positions marking different days and seasons of the year. Incidentally, this passage of Deuteronomy was around 1400 years before Christ and over 1700 years before December 25 was selected among other possible dates as Christ’s birthday.

Deuteronomy 4:12 And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice. 13 And he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. 14 And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it….19 And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven. 20 But the LORD hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, even out of Egypt, to be unto him a people of inheritance, as ye are this day.

More importantly, God explicitly forbid his people from engaging in the worship practices of the pagans even as a means to worship him.
Deuteronomy 12:29 When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; 30 Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. 31 Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods.

Likewise, in Jeremiah 10, the prophet repeats God’s command for his people not to adopt these religious customs from the pagan nations who worshipped the sun, moon, and stars, which signaled the change of seasons each year by their movements.

Jeremiah 10:2 Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs [0226] of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them.

Some of the main astronomical events that have been important in marking the calendar year and the changes of seasons are the annual solstices and equinoxes. These are days which mark significant positions in the course of the earth’s annual orbit around the sun. Because the earth is tilted on its axis, we experience seasons and the length of daytime and nighttime changes over the course of the year. The solstices and equinoxes signify key, transitional points in those annual changes. The term “equinox” denotes two days of the year in which the daytime and nighttime are approximately equal to one another in length. Each year, the equinoxes occur in spring and autumn. The term “solstice” denotes two days of the year with the greatest difference in length between daytime and nighttime. Each year, there is a summer solstice in which earth has the longest duration of daylight and the shortest duration of nighttime and there is a winter solstice in which the earth has the shortest duration of daylight and the longest duration of nighttime.

Of these events, the winter solstice has long been a critical juncture of calendar transitions and an object of religious fascination and celebration among pagan cultures. On this day, the amount of daylight stopped decreasing and again began to extend to its summer zenith. For pagan cultures who worshipped the sun, the lengthening of daytime was a cause of religious celebration identified with the day of the sun god’s birth and conquest of darkness.

Winter solstice (redirected from Midwinter) - Winter solstice is an astronomical phenomenon marking the shortest day and the longest night of the year. In the Northern Hemisphere this is the December solstice and in the Southern Hemisphere this is the June solstice...History and cultural significance - The solstice may have been a special moment of the annual cycle for some cultures even during neolithic times. Astronomical events were often used to guide activities such as the mating of animals, the sowing of crops and the
monitoring of winter reserves of food. Many cultural mythologies and traditions are derived from this. This is attested by physical remains in the layouts of late Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeological sites, such as Stonehenge in England and Newgrange in Ireland. The primary axes of both of these monuments seem to have been carefully aligned on a sight-line pointing to the winter solstice sunrise (Newgrange) and the winter solstice sunset (Stonehenge). It is significant that at Stonehenge the Great Trilithon was erected outwards from the centre of the monument, i.e. its smooth flat face was turned towards the midwinter Sun.[3] The winter solstice was immensely important because the people were economically dependent on monitoring the progress of the seasons... Because the event was seen as the reversal of the Sun's ebbing presence in the sky, concepts of the birth or rebirth of sun gods have been common and, in cultures which used cyclic calendars based on the winter solstice, the "year as reborn" was celebrated with reference to life-death-rebirth deities or "new beginnings" such as Hogmanay's redding, a New Year cleaning tradition. Also "reversal" is yet another frequent theme, as in Saturnalia's slave and master reversals... Sol Invictus ("The Unconquered Sun") was originally a Syrian god who was later adopted as the chief god of the Roman Empire under Emperor Aurelian. His holiday is traditionally celebrated on December 25, as are several gods associated with the winter solstice in many pagan traditions.[6] - wikipedia.org

As we can see near the end of the quote above, the term “Sol Invictus (‘The Unconquered Sun’)” referred to what was “originally a Syrian god who was later adopted as the chief god of the Roman Empire.” It is in this respect that the winter solstice becomes relevant to our study of December 25 as the day fourth-century Christians eventually selected as the date of Jesus’ birth.

In our modern world, we can mark the winter solstice with precision. For us, it usually falls on December 21 (or 22). However, in the ancient world it was common to identify this event with the day that, on our calendar, would be December 25. For this reason, Roman culture celebrated the birth of the pagan god Sol on December 25.

Natalis Invicti. The well-known solar feast, however, of Natalis Invicti, celebrated on 25 December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date. For the history of the solar cult, its position in the Roman Empire, and syncretism with Mithraism... - Catholic Encyclopedia

From the quote above, we should also draw attention to the term “Mithraism” and its association with the Roman celebration of the sun god’s birth on December 25. Mithraism was imported from Persia and became a popular and important religion in the Greek and Roman world in the first to fourth centuries AD.

Mithraic Mysteries – The Mithraic Mysteries were a mystery religion practiced in the Roman Empire from about the 1st to 4th centuries AD. The name of the Persian god Mithra (proto-Indo-Iranian Mitra), adapted into Greek as Mithras, was linked to a new and distinctive imagery. Writers of the Roman
Empire period referred to this mystery religion by phrases which can be anglicized as Mysteries of Mithras or Mysteries of the Persians;[1][2] modern historians refer to it as Mithraism,[1] or sometimes Roman Mithraism.[3][4] The mysteries were popular in the Roman military.[5] – wikipedia.org

Mithraism – the worship of Mithra, the Iranian god of the sun, justice, contract, and war in pre-Zoroastrian Iran. Known as Mithras in the Roman Empire during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, this deity was honoured as the patron of loyalty to the emperor. After the acceptance of Christianity by the emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, Mithraism rapidly declined. – Encyclopedia Britannica

"Mithra - Under the Achaemenids, Mithra became increasingly important, until he appeared in the 5th cent. B.C. as the principal Persian deity, the god of light and wisdom, closely associated with the sun. His cult expanded through the Middle East into Europe and became a worldwide religion, called Mithraism. This was one of the great religions of the Roman Empire, and in the 2d cent. A.D. it was more general than Christianity." - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

Whether Persian, Greek, Roman, or Mithraic, the sun god Sol was an important religion in the Greco-Roman world in the period leading up the fourth century AD when Christians first began to celebrate Jesus’ birthday on December 25. Sol worship was of major importance as early as 138-161 AD under Emperor Antonius Pius and Septimius Severus between 193 and 211 AD.

Hellenistic Religion - Syrian solar cults of Sol Invictus (the "Unconquered Sun") and Jupiter Dolichenus played an important role under the emperors Antoninus Pius, the Severans-Septimius, and Alexander-and Elagabalus and these were hailed as the supreme deities of Rome under Aurelian, whose Sun temple was dedicated in 274." - Encyclopedia Britannica

Antoninus Pius – Antoninus Pius, born 19 September, 86 AD – died 7 March, 161 AD), also known as Antoninus, was Roman Emperor from 138 to 161. – wikipedia.org

Septimius Severus – Septimius Severus, in full Lucius Septimius Severus Pertinax, (born April 11, 145/146, Leptis Magna, Tripolitania [now in Libya]—died Feb. 4, 211, Eboracum, Britain [now York, Eng.]), Roman emperor from 193 to 211. He founded a personal dynasty and converted the government into a military monarchy. His reign marks a critical stage in the development of the absolute despotism that characterized the later Roman Empire. – Encyclopedia Britannica

At around 220 AD, the Roman Emperor Elagabalus again placed a renewed interest and emphasis on Sol worship.
Sol – Sol, in Roman religion, in Roman religion, sun god. An ancient god of Mesopotamian origin, he was introduced (c.220) into Roman religion as Sol Invictus by emperor Heliogabalus. His worship remained an important cult of Rome until the rise of Christianity. - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

Sol – The Roman emperor Elagabalus (reigned AD 218-222) built a temple to him as Sol Invictus on the Palatine and attempted to make his worship the principal religion at Rome. The emperor Aurelian (reigned 270-275) later reestablished the worship and erected a magnificent temple to Sol in the Campus Agrippae. The worship of Sol as special protector of the emperors and of the empire remained the chief imperial cult until it was replaced by Christianity. - Encyclopedia Britannica

Elagabalus – Elagabalus or Heliogabalus (Greek: Μάρκος Αυρήλιος Αντωνίνος Αύγουστος; Latin: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus; c. 203 – March 11, 222), was Roman Emperor from 218 to 222. A member of the Severan Dynasty, he was Syrian, the second son of Julia Soaemias and Sextus Varius Marcellus. In his early youth he served as a priest of the god Elagabal (in Latin, Elagabalus) in the hometown of his mother's family, Emesa. – wikipedia.org

Sol Invictus – The first sun god consistently termed invictus was the provincial Syrian god Elagabalus. According to the Historia Augusta, the teenaged Severan heir adopted the name of his deity and brought his cult image from Emesa to Rome. Once installed as emperor, he neglected Rome's traditional State deities and promoted his own as Rome's most powerful deity. This ended with his murder in 222. The Historia Augusta refers to the deity Elagabalus as "also called Jupiter and Sol" (fuit autem Heliogabali vel Iovis vel Solis).[25] While this has been seen as an attempt to import the Syrian sun god to Rome,[26] the Roman cult of Sol had existed in Rome in the earlier Republic.[27] – wikipedia.org

In 270 AD, Emperor Aurelian again reaffirmed Sol’s prominence throughout the empire.

Aurelian – Aurelian (Latin: Lucius Domitius Aurelianus Augustus;[1][2] 9 September 214 or 215 – September or October 275), was Roman Emperor from 270 to 275…Aurelian strengthened the position of the Sun god Sol Invictus as the main divinity of the Roman pantheon. His intention was to give to all the peoples of the Empire, civilian or soldiers, easterners or westerners, a single god they could believe in without betraying their own gods. The center of the cult was a new temple, built in 274 in the Campus Agrippae in Rome, with great decorations financed by the spoils of the Palmyrene Empire. – wikipedia.org

Sol’s importance as an influential object of worship would continue through in the fourth century AD as Emperor Constantine sought to establish harmony in the Roman world between those who worshipped Sol and those who worshipped Christ.
Mystery Religion - The height of Syrian influence was in the 3rd century AD when Sol, the Syrian sun god, was on the verge of becoming the chief god of the Roman Empire. He was introduced into Rome by the emperor Elagabalus (Heliogabalus) in about AD 220, and by about AD 240 Pythian Games (i.e., festivals of the sun god Apollo Helios) were instituted in many cities of the empire. The emperor Aurelian (270-275) elevated Sol to the highest rank among the gods. Sanctuaries of Sol and the gods of other planets (septizonium) were constructed. Even the emperor Constantine the Great, some 50 years later, wavered between Sol and Christ. For some time his religious policy was devised so as to allow the coexistence of both religions. Finally, Christianity was accepted as the official religion. - Encyclopedia Britannica

As we have seen, Greco-Roman worship of Sol was imported from the Persian religion called Mithraism. The Persians have a long tradition of celebrating the winter solstice going back at least as far as the Middle Persian period starting in 224 AD.

Yaldā – Shab-e Chelleh is an Iranian festival celebrated on the "longest and darkest night of the year," that is, in the night of the Northern Hemisphere's winter solstice. Calendrically, this corresponds to the night of December 20/21 (±1) in the Gregorian calendar…References to other older festivals held around the winter solstice are known from both Middle Persian texts as well as texts of the early Islamic period. – wikipedia.org

Middle Persian – Middle Persian is the Middle Iranian language/ethnolect of southwestern Iran that during Sassanid times (224–654 CE) became a prestige dialect and so came to be spoken in other regions of the empire as well. – wikipedia.org

As we might expect, like its Persian counterpart third-century Roman worship of the sun god included celebration of the birth of the sun god on the winter solstice of December 25 at least as early as 274 AD when Aurelian dedicated a temple to Sol. (As noted in the third quote below, it was customary for temples to be dedicated to a god on the anniversary of their birth or “dies natalis.”) Notice, in particular, that the first quote below from Britannica states that the Roman Empire placed the winter solstice on December 25.

Christmas – December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus’ birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date. One widespread explanation of the origin of this date is that December 25 was the Christianizing of the dies solis invicti nati (“day of the birth of the unconquered sun”), a popular holiday in the Roman Empire that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer. Indeed, after December 25 had become widely accepted as the date of Jesus’ birth, Christian writers frequently made the connection between the rebirth of the
sun and the birth of the Son. One of the difficulties with this view is that it suggests a nonchalant willingness on the part of the Christian church to appropriate a pagan festival when the early church was so intent on distinguishing itself categorically from pagan beliefs and practices. – Encyclopedia Britannica

Coptic Calendar – In AD 274, Emperor Aurelian had declared a civil holiday on 25 December (the "Festival of the birth of the Unconquered Sun") to celebrate the deity Sol Invictus. – wikipedia.org

Aurelian – Aurelian (Latin: Lucius Domitius Aurelianus Augustus;[1][2] 9 September 214 or 215 – September or October 275), was Roman Emperor from 270 to 275...Aurelian strengthened the position of the Sun god Sol Invictus as the main divinity of the Roman pantheon. His intention was to give to all the peoples of the Empire, civilian or soldiers, easterners or westerners, a single god they could believe in without betraying their own gods. The center of the cult was a new temple, built in 274 in the Campus Agrippae in Rome, with great decorations financed by the spoils of the Palmyrene Empire. – wikipedia.org

Roman Festivals – Festivals in ancient Rome were an important part of Roman religious life during both the Republican and Imperial eras, and one of the primary features of the Roman calendar. Feriae ("holidays" in the sense of "holy days"; singular also feriae or dies ferialis) were either public (publicae) or private (privatae). State holidays were celebrated by the Roman people and received public funding...List of festivals by month – Following is a month-by-month list of Roman festivals and games that had a fixed place on the calendar. For some, the date on which they were first established is recorded. A deity's festival often marked the anniversary (dies natalis, "birthday") of the founding of a temple, or a rededication after a major renovation. Festivals not named for deities are thought to be among the oldest on the calendar...December 25: Dies Natalis Solis Invicti ("Birthday of the Unconquered Sun"); Brumalia (both Imperial) – wikipedia.org

Glossary of ancient Roman religion – The vocabulary of ancient Roman religion was highly specialized. Its study affords important information about the religion, traditions and beliefs of the ancient Romans. This legacy is conspicuous in European cultural history in its influence on later juridical and religious vocabulary in Europe, particularly of the Western Church.[1] This glossary provides explanations of concepts as they were expressed in Latin pertaining to religious practices and beliefs, with links to articles on major topics such as priesthoods, forms of divination, and rituals...A dies natalis was a birthday ("natal day"; see also dies lustricus above) or more generally the anniversary of a founding event. The Romans celebrated an individual's birthday annually, in contrast to the Greek practice of marking the date each month with a simple libation. The Roman dies natalis was connected with the cult owed to the Genius.[155] A public figure might schedule a major event on his birthday: Pompeius Magnus ("Pompey the Great") waited seven months after he returned from his military campaigns in the East before he staged his triumph, so he could celebrate it on his birthday.[156] The coincidence of birthdays and anniversaries
could have a positive or negative significance: news of Decimus Brutus's victory at Mutina was announced at Rome on his birthday, while Caesar's assassin Cassius suffered defeat at Philippi on his birthday and committed suicide.[157] Birthdays were one of the dates on which the dead were commemorated.[158] The date when a temple was founded, or when it was rededicated after a major renovation or rebuilding, was also a dies natalis, and might be felt as the "birthday" of the deity it housed as well. The date of such ceremonies was therefore chosen by the pontiffs with regard to its position on the religious calendar. The "birthday" or foundation date of Rome was celebrated April 21, the day of the Parilia, an archaic pastoral festival.[159] As part of a flurry of religious reforms and restorations in the period from 38 BC to 17 AD, no fewer than fourteen temples had their dies natalis moved to another date, sometimes with the clear purpose of aligning them with new Imperial theology after the collapse of the Republic.[160] – wikipedia.org

(Incidentally, the last two quotes above trace religious festivals in Rome as far back as the time of the Republic, it would probably be helpful to note that the Republic ended in 27 BC, which makes these very ancient practices that existed long before Christianity itself or Christmas became prominent in the Roman Empire.)

The Roman Republic – The Roman Republic was the period of ancient Roman civilization beginning with the overthrow of the Roman Kingdom, traditionally dated to 509 BC, and ending in 27 BC with the establishment of the Roman Empire. – wikipedia.org

Roman Empire – 27 BC – 285/395 AD (Undivided) – wikipedia.org

In addition, the prevalence of Sol worship in Rome from the first to the fourth centuries also explains why Jesus’ birth was celebrated on December 25 first in Rome and only later became the accepted date in the rest of the Christian world.

Christmas – The Chronography of 354 AD contains early evidence of the celebration on December 25 of a Christian liturgical feast of the birth of Jesus. This was in Rome, while in Eastern Christianity the birth of Jesus was already celebrated in connection with the Epiphany on January 6.[51][52] The December 25 celebration was imported into the East later: in Antioch by John Chrysostom towards the end of the 4th century,[52] probably in 388, and in Alexandria only in the following century.[53] Even in the West, the January 6 celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems to have continued until after 380.[54] – wikipedia.org

Here we have a confluence of five historical facts that must be reconciled into a coherent model that explains the fourth century selection of December 25 as the date to celebrate Christ’s birth.
First, prior to the third century AD, there is no existing Christian tradition identifying any date with the birth of Christ in this historical record. Second, in the third century we begin to find historical evidence that certain groups were assigning a variety of dates and months to Christ’s birth, but there is no consensus regarding any particular date. The earliest of these dates were in spring months. Later the winter months December and January were also used. Third, during this same critical timeframe encompassing the two centuries before December 25 was selected for Christ’s birth, the worship of the sun god was established as a prominent religion in Rome by four Roman Emperors, including Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD), Septimius Severus (193-211 AD), Elagabalus (218-222 AD), and Aurelian (270-275 AD). And part of the annual worship of the Roman sun god entailed the “Dies Natalis Solis Invicti”, which celebrated the birth of the unconquered sun on the winter solstice of December 25. Four, by the time December 25 became the date assigned for Christ’s birth in Rome by 336 or 354 AD, one other major competing date was the Feast of Epiphany on January 6, which was the date of the Egyptian winter solstice when various Egyptian gods were worshipped. The fact that two separate dates for Christ’s birth were winter solstice dates associated with pagan gods shows a pattern that can hardly be regarded as coincidence. And fifth, it is also no coincidence that while January 6 remained popular elsewhere, December 25 became prominent first in Rome, where December 25 was the Roman winter solstice when the Roman sun god’s birth was celebrated. And by the end of the fourth century, December 25 seems to have overtaken January 6 as the date designated for Jesus’ birth.

From these five facts emerges a complete picture. In the Roman world, pagan religious worship centered around annual astrological events, including pagan worship of the birth of the sun on the winter solstice on December 25, which preceded the first emergence of Christian interest in the celebration of Jesus’ birthday and the selection of the Roman winter solstice of December 25 as the day for celebrating Christ’s birth.

Moreover, to these other five factors, we can add a sixth. It was the fourth-century Roman Emperor Constantine who sought to bring the worshippers of Sol and Christ together. And it is no coincidence that not long after Constantine, Christian writers such as John Chrysostom and Eusebius exemplify a tendency for Christians to identify Jesus’ birthday as the same day on which the sun was born, which is language that perfectly parallels what we find in popular Roman religion in the immediately preceding centuries.

The earliest rapprochement of the births of Christ and the sun is in Cypr., 'De pasch. Comp.', xix, 'O quam preclare providentia ut illo die quo natus est Sol . . . nascetur Christus.' - 'O, how wonderfully acted Providence that on that day on which that Sun was born...Christ should be born.' - In the fourth century, Chrysostom - Catholic Encyclopedia

**Christianity** - Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-c. 340) was the court theologian of **Emperor Constantine the Great**, who formed the Orthodox understanding of the mutual relationship of church and state...**Some of Eusebius' remarks echo**
the cult of the Unconquered Sun, the Sol Invictus, who was represented by the emperor according to pagan understanding. The emperor - in this respect he also resembled the pagan god - emperor who played the role of the pontifex maximus (high priest) in the state cult - took the central position within the church as well. - Encyclopedia Britannica

Christmas - Indeed, after December 25 had become widely accepted as the date of Jesus' birth, Christian writers frequently made the connection between the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Son. - Encyclopedia Britannica

These historical facts provide a strong basis for two key conclusions. First, the celebration of Jesus’ birth was most likely the result of cultural influence from the pagan religious systems that surrounded Christians in the Roman world. Second, the specific day of December 25 was chosen by fourth-century Christians because of that day’s importance in influential and popular pagan religious customs involving the birth of the sun god Sol.

After all, other days and times of year had been put forward by Christian writers prior to the fourth century. So what was the compelling reason that led fourth-century Christians to select December 25 over these other options? It wasn’t historical data from earlier periods pointing to December 25. And, it wasn’t due to a consensus among Christian scholars.

As such, the most reasonable explanation is that December 25 was selected because of the prominence and influence of Sol worship in the Roman Empire as figures like Emperor Constantine worked toward harmonizing pagan and Christian culture. What better way to do that than to bring both groups together on a day they could both hold dear? This involved the Roman state recognizing Christian religion and then incorporating Roman state holidays into the Christian calendar. And as we have already seen, the historical records show that it was during this very same period under Constantine that December 25 was selected as the annual day to celebrate Christ’s birth. Notice, in particular, that the first and the last lines of the quote below from Encyclopedia Britannica specifically states that “After the official recognition of Christianity, Christian holidays were substituted for the old system of feriae,” which were “ancient Roman festival days during which the gods were honoured.”

Feriae - Ancient Roman Festival Days - Feriae, ancient Roman festival days during which the gods were honoured and all business, especially lawsuits, was suspended. Feriae were of two types: feriae privatae and feriae publicae. The feriae privatae, usually celebrated only by families or individuals, commemorated an event of personal or ancestral importance. Included in this group were the feriae denicales, or 10 days of mourning observed by a family after the death of one of its members. The holidays observed by all Romans, the feriae publicae, were of three different types: feriae stativae, held annually on a fixed date; feriae conceptivae, movable festivals celebrated annually on days appointed by priests or magistrates; and feriae imperativae, held at official command during
extreme emergencies and after great victories. All feriae publicae were generally observed by prayers, sacrifices, and visits to temples; in addition, the feriae stativae and feriae conceptivae usually included feasts. **After the official recognition of Christianity, Christian holidays were substituted for the old system of feriae.** - Encyclopedia Britannica

And the conclusion we’ve outlined here for the origin of Christmas is not unique or a fringe position. In fact, other reference sources commonly conclude that December 25 was selected as the date of Christ’s birth because of the pre-existing pagan festivals held in Rome at that time of the year.

**Christmas** - The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. The celebration of this day as Jesus' birth date was probably influenced by pagan (unchristian) festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light. Various peoples in northern Europe held festivals in mid-December to celebrate the end of the harvest season. - World Book 2005 (Deluxe), Copyright 2004 World Book, Inc. and its licensors.

**Christmas** - One widespread explanation of the origin of this date is that December 25 was the Christianizing of the dies solis invicti nati ("day of the birth of the unconquered sun"), a popular holiday in the Roman Empire that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer. - Encyclopedia Britannica

**Church Year** - The establishment of Christianity as a state religion, following the conversion of the emperor Constantine (ad 312), brought new developments. The Paschal season was matched by a longer season of preparation (Lent) for the many new candidates for baptism at the Easter ceremonies, and the discipline and penance of those who for grievous sins had been cut off from the communion of the church. **A new focus of celebration, to commemorate the birthday of Christ, the world Redeemer, was instituted at ancient winter solstices (December 25 and January 6) to rival the pagan feasts in honour of the birth of a new age brought by the Unconquered Sun.** - Encyclopedia Britannica

**Christmas** - It [Christmas] was celebrated in Rome by AD 336, and the date December 25 was probably chosen to coincide with the Roman winter solstice festival and birthday of Mithra. - Britannica Concise at education.yahoo.com

**Church Year** - Many have posited the theory that the feast of Christ's Nativity, the birthday of "the sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2), was instituted in Rome, or possibly North Africa, as a **Christian rival to the pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun at the winter solstice.** This syncretistic cult that leaned toward monotheism had been given official recognition by the emperor Aurelian in 274. - Encyclopedia Britannica
(In addition, it should be noted that the rebirth of the sun celebrated on December 25 wasn’t the only religious festival that made that time of year popular in the Roman world. Another important holiday also occurred as the winter solstice approached. This other pagan holiday not only also occurs in late December but it also shares characteristics with Christmas traditions, which also seem to have been adapted into the Christmas holiday by Christians in the third and fourth centuries, most notably including the exchange of gifts.)

**Saturn**, in Roman religion and mythology, god of harvests, later identified with the Greek Kronos. Little is known of the origins of his cult. His reign was regarded as the Golden Age. He was the husband of Ops and the father of Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Pluto, and Neptune. It was said that after the fall of the Titans, Saturn fled to Italy, where he settled on the Capitoline Hill, civilized the people, and taught them the arts of agriculture. At his festival, the **Saturnalia**, held at first on Dec. 17 but later extended for several days thereafter, gifts were exchanged, schools and courts were closed, war was outlawed, and slaves and masters ate at the same table. - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

**Saturn** - Saturn’s great festival, the Saturnalia, became the most popular of Roman festivals, and its influence is still felt in the celebration of Christmas and the Western world's New Year. The Saturnalia was originally celebrated on December 17, but it was later extended to seven days. It was the merriest festival of the year: all work and business were suspended; slaves were given temporary freedom to say and to do what they liked; certain moral restrictions were eased; and presents were freely exchanged. - Encyclopedia Britannica

7. Is there evidence that Christians (particularly Gentile Christians) were re-adopting their former pagan holidays unto the Lord?

In a quote we have already seen above, Encyclopedia Britannica includes one objection to the idea that early Christians adopted pagan custom associated with the sun god into their Christian worship. Specifically, Britannica describes that “it suggests a nonchalant willingness on the part of the Christian church to appropriate a pagan festival when the early church was so intent on distinguishing itself categorically from pagan beliefs and practices.”

**Christmas** – December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus’ birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date. One widespread explanation of the origin of this date is that December 25 was the Christianizing of the dies solis invicti nati (“day of the birth of the unconquered sun”), a popular holiday in the Roman Empire that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer. Indeed, after December 25 had become widely accepted as the date of Jesus’ birth, Christian
writers frequently made the connection between the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Son. **One of the difficulties with this view is that it suggests a nonchalant willingness on the part of the Christian church to appropriate a pagan festival when the early church was so intent on distinguishing itself categorically from pagan beliefs and practices.** – Encyclopedia Britannica

In light of this comment from Britannica, is it reasonable to consider whether Christians of the fourth-century would have been inclined to incorporate pagan religious customs into their Christian worship?

Unfortunately, there is good reason to conclude that fourth-century Christians would indeed have been willing to incorporate pagan worship customs.

First, we have to consider the ever-present pressures and temptations that Christians face to adapt to worldly culture. This is no modern development. It is a very old danger. In Romans 12:2, the Apostle Paul warned the very first generation of Christians, “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Even ardent supporters of Christmas today are concerned about such influences upon Christians. Strike up a conversation with a committed, conservative-voting, American Christian about the moral state of affairs in the United States and you’re likely to quickly find yourself involved in a discussion about how much American Christian culture is being influenced by the world around us on issues like same-sex marriage, divorce rates, not voting republican, or removing Jesus’ from Christmas. You might also hear how too many churches aren’t concerned enough about these or other important issues anymore. Or, you might hear alarm that younger believers aren’t as interested in maintaining certain long-held Christian beliefs or traditions. If such influences and trends are apparent and occurring among Christians today, why is it hard to believe that fourth-century Christians weren’t presented with similar temptations or that they wouldn’t succumb to some of the same pressures?

Second, and more importantly, the New Testament and early Christian writings show that some Christians were beginning to indulge in and return to pagan religious traditions in the period leading up the onset of the Christian celebration of Jesus’ birthday and the selection of December 25.

The New Testament itself documents more than one occasion in which Gentile Christians were in need of correction for engaging in aspects of pagan religious worship. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul has to address Christians who felt that they had the liberty in Christ to go into an idol’s temple and eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods (1 Corinthians 8:9-10). Throughout 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 Paul corrects these trends on the grounds that it harms other Christians who would begin to do these things because of the boldness of others. To be clear, although in 1 Corinthians 10:25-27 Paul does discuss whether Christians can eat sacrificed meet that they buy in the marketplace or at a feast, in chapter 8:10 Paul explicitly addresses the idea that some Christians were going into the idol’s temple. More significantly, in chapter 10 Paul corrects these trends on the grounds that doing such things is an act of idolatry violating our fellowship
with Christ. (More information on this subject is available in our Liberty in Christ study. In addition, a step-by-step analysis of Galatians 4 is available in our study entitled, “Galatians 4 – A Condemnation of Jewish Holy Days or Pagan Holy Days?”)

Several of Paul’s remarks to the Corinthian church are paralleled in his letter to the Galatians as well. For instance, both Galatians and Paul’s second epistle to the Corinthians contain warnings against adopting another gospel and concerning Jewish teachers who were to bring the early Christians back into bondage to the Law of Moses.

Notice two things in particular from chapter 3 of 2 Corinthians. First, Paul begins by avoiding any efforts of self-commendation or self-promotion. Second, Paul explains that he is not a minister of the Law of Moses, which brings death and which is abolished, but of the new covenant of Christ, which endures and brings liberty from the Law of Moses.

2 Corinthians 3:1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?...5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. 7 But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away…11 For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious. 12 Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: 13 And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: 14 But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. 15 But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. 16 Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. 17 Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

Continuing on similar themes, in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians Paul again turns to the topic of those who boast in themselves and when he provides his own credentials, he focusses on his heritage as a Jewish man. This implies that the leaders Paul is criticizing were Jewish also and citing their Jewish heritage as credentials. And it is in this context that Paul criticizes “another gospel,” which makes it likely that Paul’s critique at least includes Jewish leaders who preached Christ alongside a necessity to keep the Law of Moses, which Paul already dispelled in chapter 3.

2 Corinthians 11:4 For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if ye receive another spirit, which ye have not received, or another gospel, which ye have not accepted, ye might well bear with him. 5
For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles…12 But what I
do, that I will do, that I may cut off occasion from them which desire occasion;
that wherein they glory, they may be found even as we. 13 For such are false
apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of
Christ…18 Seeing that many glory after the flesh, I will glory also…22 Are
they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of
Abraham? so am I.

We find similar themes in Galatians 1-3, where Paul once again speaks of his own
pious Jewish background in the midst of a criticism of Jewish leaders who
preached “another gospel” which replaced liberty from the Law of Moses with
bondage to the Law of Moses.

Galatians 1:6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you
into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: 7 Which is not another; but
there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But
though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that
which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9 As we said before, so
say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye
have received, let him be accursed. 10 For do I now persuade men, or God?
or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant
of Christ. 11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me
is not after man. 12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by
the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time
past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of
God, and wasted it: 14 And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my
equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions
of my fathers... 2:1 Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with
Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. 2 And I went up by revelation, and
communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but
privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had
run, in vain. 3 But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was
compelled to be circumcised: 4 And that because of false brethren unawares
brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in
Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage…11 But when Peter was
come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. 12
For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but
when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them
which were of the circumcision. 13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise
with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their
dissimulation…3:1 O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should
not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth,
crucified among you? 2 This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by
the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 3 Are ye so foolish? having
begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? 4 Have ye suffered so
many things in vain? if it be yet in vain. 5 He therefore that ministereth to you the
Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or
by the hearing of faith?
And just like Paul’s comments to the Corinthian Christians in his first epistle, in Galatians Paul also had to address the fact that some Christians were engaging in pagan religious activities. In Galatians 4:8-10, Paul states that Christians there were returning to observing days, months, times, and years just as they had when they worshipped pagan gods.

**Galatians 4:**8 Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. 9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? 10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. 11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain. 12 Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all.

The fact that Paul is concerned about pagan religious feasts is also confirmed by his clear statements in Colossians 2:16 and Romans 14, in which Paul specifically instructs Christians not to judge each other for keeping Jewish holy days. So, in Galatians 4, Paul is not criticizing Christians for keeping Mosaic feast days, which were set by God at certain times of year. (These passages will be discussed more in a subsequent portion of this study. Further study of this topic, including Galatians, is also available in our Liberty in Christ study.)

In addition, we must pay attention to Paul’s phrasing in verse 10 where he discusses “observing days, months, times, and years.” Earlier we discussed Genesis 1:14 where God made the sun, moon, and stars and set them in the heavens to be signs for seasons, for days, and for years.

**Genesis 1:**14 And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs [0226], and for seasons [4150], and for days, and years: 15 And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. 16 And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also. 17 And God set them in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth, 18 And to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was good. 19 And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

We have also seen from Deuteronomy 4:12-14, 19-20, 12:29-31, and Jeremiah 10:2 that God expressly forbid his people from engaging in religious activities, which were practiced by the Gentile nations and which were centered around the sun, moon, and stars. So, it is important to note that Paul’s condemnation of Gentile Christians for returning to their former pagan religious customs of observing days, months, seasons, and years in Galatians 4:8-10 parallels the Greek Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 1:14. (The numbers listed behind words in the texts below denote the specific Greek words used in these verses. As can be seen from a comparison of these numbers, Galatians 4:10 and Genesis 1:14
employ nearly identical language. This demonstrates that both passages refer to celestial movements marking seasons and times of year, which became so important in pagan worship practices.)

**Genesis 1:14** And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons [LXX: 2540], and for days [LXX: 2250], and years [LXX: 1763]:

**Galatians 4:8** Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. 9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? 10 Ye observe days (2250), and months, and times (2540), and years (1763).

As we have seen from Deuteronomy 4:12-15, 19-20, 12:29-31, and Jeremiah 10:2, God did not allow his people to engage in Gentile religious practices centered around observations of the sun, moon, and stars.

**Deuteronomy 18:14** For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God hath not suffered thee so to do.

These observations inform us that for a religious Jew like Paul, the phrase “observing days, and seasons, and years” was a well-known biblical manner of referring to pagan holidays, which were based around various cosmic phenomena such as the winter solstice. (Please visit our article entitled “What is Observing Times” for an in-depth explanation regarding what the phrase “observing the times” means in the Bible and its relationship to the positions of the sun, moon, and stars in the sky.)

Besides, these first-century New Testament attestations, we also have second and early third-century reports that Christians of that period were participating in pagan religious festivals.

Writing at around 180 AD, Irenaeus documents that some Christians were participating in pagan religious festivals and celebrations. As the quote below attests, Irenaeus condemned Christian involvement in such activities as forbidden.

"3. Wherefore also it comes to pass, that the 'most perfect' among them addict themselves without fear to all those kinds of forbidden deeds of which the Scriptures assure us that 'they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.'(5) For instance, they make no scruple about eating meats offered in sacrifice to idols, imagining that they can in this way contract no defilement. Then, again, at every heathen festival celebrated in honour of the idols, these men are the first to assemble; and to such a pitch do they go, that some of them do not even keep away from that bloody spectacle hateful both to God and men, in which gladiators either fight with wild beasts, or singly encounter one another. Others of them yield themselves up to the lusts of the flesh
with the utmost greediness, maintaining that carnal things should be allowed to the carnal nature, while spiritual things are provided for the spiritual. Some of them, moreover, are in the habit of defiling those women to whom they have taught the above doctrine, as has frequently been confessed by those women who have been led astray, on their returning to the Church of God, and acknowledging this along with the rest of their errors." - IRENAEUS, AGAINST HERESIES, BOOK I, CHAP. VI.--THE THREEFOLD KIND OF MAN FEIGNED BY THESE HERETICS: GOOD WORKS NEEDLESS FOR THEM, THOUGH NECESSARY TO OTHERS: THEIR ABANDONED MORALS.

Similarly, at around 200 AD, Tertullian also reports and condemns Christians indulging in the celebrations of the birthdays of various gods as well as pagan feast days, which occurred at year’s end and in winter, such as Saturnalia.

The Minervalia are as much Minerva's, as the Saturnalia Saturn's; Saturn's, which must necessarily be celebrated even by little slaves at the time of the Saturnalia. New-year's gifts likewise must be caught at, and the Septimontium kept; and all the presents of Midwinter and the feast of Dear Kinsmanship must be exacted; the schools must be wreathed with flowers; the flamen's wives and the aediles sacrifice; the school is honoured on the appointed holy-days. The same thing takes place on an idol's birthday; every pomp of the devil is frequented. Who will think that these things are befitting to a Christian master, unless it be he who shall think them suitable likewise to one who is not a master? – Tertullian, On Idolatry, Chapter X.-Of Schoolmasters and Their Difficulties.

By us, to whom Sabbaths are strange, and the new moons and festivals formerly beloved by God, the Saturnalia and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented – presents come and go – New-year's gifts – games join their noise-banquets join their din! Oh better fidelity of the nations to their own sect, which claims no solemnity of the Christians for itself! Not the Lord's day, not Pentecost, even if they had known them, would they have shared with us; for they would fear lest they should seem to be Christians. We are not apprehensive lest we seem to be heathens! – Tertullian, On Idolatry, Chapter XIV.-Of Blasphemy. One of St. Paul's Sayings

Why, on the day of gladness, do we neither cover our door-posts with laurels, nor intrude upon the day with lamps? It is a proper thing, at the call of a public festivity, to dress your house up like some new brothel. However, in the matter of this homage to a lesser majesty, in reference to which we are accused of a lower sacrifice, because we do not celebrate along with you the holidays of the Caesars in a manner forbidden alike by modesty, decency, and purity,—in truth they have been established rather as affording opportunities for licentiousness than from any worthy motive;—in this matter I am anxious to point out how faithful and true you are, lest perchance here also those who will not have us counted Romans, but enemies of Rome’s chief rulers, be found themselves worse than we wicked Christians! - Tertullian, Apology, Chapter XXXV
In this place must be handled the subject of holidays and other extraordinary solemnities, which we accord sometimes to our wantonness, sometimes to our timidity, in opposition to the common faith and Discipline. The first point, indeed, on which I shall join issue is this: whether a servant of God ought to share with the very nations themselves in matters of their kind either in dress, or in food, or in any other kind of their gladness. “To rejoice with the rejoicing, and grieve with the grieving,” is said about brethren by the apostle when exhorting to unanimity. But, for these purposes, “There is nought of communion between light and darkness,” between life and death or else we rescind what is written, “The world shall rejoice, but ye shall grieve.” If we rejoice with the world, there is reason to fear that with the world we shall grieve too. But when the world rejoices, let us grieve; and when the world afterward grieves, we shall rejoice. - Tertullian, On Idolatry, Chapter XIII - Of the Observance of Days Connected with Idolatry

Chapter 1 - You Servants of God, about to draw near to God, that you may make solemn consecration of yourselves to Him, seek well to understand the condition of faith, the reasons of the Truth, the laws of Christian Discipline, which forbid among other sins of the world, the pleasures of the public shows. You who have testified and confessed that you have done so already, review the subject, that there may be no sinning whether through real or wilful ignorance...Chapter 6 - You have festivals bearing the name of the great Mother and Apollo of Ceres too, and Neptune, and Jupiter Latiaris, and Flora, all celebrated for a common end; the others have their religious origin in the birthdays and solemnities of kings, in public successes in municipal holidays. – Tertullian, De Spectaculis, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0303.htm

And Origen speaks similarly in 248 AD, even quoting Paul (Galatians 4) in support of Christians avoiding pagan feast days.

Let us see what Celsus further says of God, and how he urges us to the use of those things which are properly called idol offerings, or, still better, offerings to demons, although, in his ignorance of what true sanctity is, and what sacrifices are well-pleasing to God, he call them “holy sacrifices.” His words are, “God is the God of all alike; He is good, He stands in need of nothing, and He is without jealousy. What, then, is there to hinder those who are most devoted to His service from taking part in public feasts. I cannot see the connection which he fancies between God’s being good, and independent, and free from jealousy, and His devoted servants taking part in public feasts. I cannot see the connection which he fancies between God’s being good, and independent, and free from jealousy, and His devoted servants taking part in public feasts. I confess, indeed, that from the fact that God is good, and without want of anything, and free from jealousy, it would follow as a consequence that we might take part in public feasts, if it were proved that the public feasts had nothing wrong in them, and were grounded upon true views of the character of God, so that they resulted naturally from a devout service of God. If, however, the so-called public festivals can in no way be shown to accord with the service of God, but may on the contrary be proved to have been devised by men when occasion offered to commemorate some human events, or to set forth certain qualities of water or earth, or the fruits of the earth,—in that case, it is clear that those who wish to
offer an enlightened worship to the Divine Being will act according to sound reason, and not take part in the public feasts. For “to keep a feast,” as one of the wise men of Greece has well said, “is nothing else than to do one’s duty;” and that man truly celebrates a feast who does his duty and prays always, offering up continually bloodless sacrifices in prayer to God. That therefore seems to me a most noble saying of Paul, “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.” – Origen, Against Celsus, Book 8, Chapter XXI

Let us now see on what grounds Celsus urges us to make use of the idol offerings and the public sacrifices in the public feasts. His words are, “If these idols are nothing, what harm will there be in taking part in the feast? On the other hand, if they are demons, it is certain that they too are God’s creatures, and that we must believe in them, sacrifice to them according to the laws, and pray to them that they may be propitious.” In reference to this statement, it would be profitable for us to take up and clearly explain the whole passage of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, in which Paul treats of offerings to idols. The apostle draws from the fact that “an idol is nothing in the world,” the consequence that it is injurious to use things offered to idols; and he shows to those who have ears to hear on such subjects, that he who partakes of things offered to idols is worse than a murderer, for he destroys his own brethren, for whom Christ died. And further, he maintains that the sacrifices are made to demons; and from that he proceeds to show that those who join the table of demons become associated with the demons; and he concludes that a man cannot both be a partaker of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons. But since it would require a whole treatise to set forth fully all that is contained on this subject in the Epistle to the Corinthians, we shall content ourselves with this brief statement of the argument; for it will be evident to anyone who carefully considers what has been said, that even if idols are nothing, nevertheless it is an awful thing to join in idol festivals. And even supposing that there are such beings as demons to whom the sacrifices are offered, it has been clearly shown that we are forbidden to take part in these festivals, when we know the difference between the table of the Lord and the table of demons. And knowing this, we endeavour as much as we can to be always partakers of the Lord’s table, and beware to the utmost of joining at any time the table of demons. – Origen, Against Celsus, Book 8, Chapter XXIV

The tendency of Gentile Christians to return to celebrating pagan holidays and religious customs (and justify such action) has a long history in the church. It is documented both by Paul in Galatians 4 and 1 Corinthians. It is reported by Irenaeus (120-202 AD) who was a disciple of Polycarp, the disciple of the Apostle John. And, Tertullian also provides accounts of such tendencies at the onset of the third century AD. So, we have early orthodox Christian testimony that Christians were, in fact, already exhibiting the tendency of re-adopting pagan practices in the period before Christians began celebrating Jesus’ birthday on December 25. Likewise, Christian participation in pagan festivals was taking place long after the establishment and popularization of pagan festivals held on the winter solstice and honoring the birthdays of gods. This includes the celebration of December 25 as the birth of the sun god Sol. And not only that, but
in accordance with biblical commandments Paul, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all condemned this practice of Christians participating in pagan holidays.

To answer the question posed by Encyclopedia Britannica, there has always been pressure on Christians to conform to the world around them, to be part of pleasurable things offered by non-Christians society, allowed by unbiblical religions, and enjoyed by unbelieving loved ones and friends. These temptations are natural and they are still present and affecting the church today. Certainly, some Christians have sought to remain separate from the pagan world around them, but as scripture and history inform us, some Christians also have found it acceptable to participate in pagan celebrations and festivals or at least to incorporate aspects of them into their Christian lives and even their Christian worship. The fact that such trends occurred in the centuries leading up to the Christian celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25 is a clearly established in the historic record. And, it is the only reasonable and historically supportable explanation for why Christians began to celebrate Jesus’ birth on December 25.

8. Is it ever acceptable to incorporate Pagan religious rites into the worship of the true God?

If scripture, history, and reason force us to accept that the celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25 is a result of Christians incorporating pagan religious festivals and customs, the next question will naturally be whether we are permitted to continue to celebrate them after such traditions have become sufficiently Christianized. After all, the Christmas holiday has been part of church practice for around 1600 years going back to the 300’s AD. Why can't we celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25? Even if pagans celebrated the birth of the sun god on December 25 or Christians borrowed this idea from them in the fourth century, aren’t Christians today just keeping traditions that have been part of the church for over a millennia and a half? Christians today aren’t borrowing idolatrous worship ideas; they're celebrating Jesus, right?

Consequently, the next important question for our study is investigating whether it is acceptable for Christians to incorporate aspects of pagan religious worship and give them new meaning in accordance with biblical themes. Can God be glorified by Christianizing pagan worship practices? Is God pleased by Christians using formerly pagan customs as part of their worship of him? Is he alright with it?

Since, historical inquiry leaves little room to debate that celebrating Jesus’ birth on December 25 originated from a “Christianized” celebration of Roman pagan feast days in the fourth century, question #8 is the critical question.

Of course, the bible has ample to say on this particular topic. And though it may be surprising to some, the bible is completely against any mingling of pagan practices into the worship of God. In both the Old and New Testaments, saints
were expressly forbidden from adopting pagan religious customs into the worship of God.

Since we have already examined the passage earlier, we will start with Galatians 4. When speaking about pagan religious celebrations that involved special days and seasons marked by astrological events, Paul explicitly states that Christian participation in such customs renders our acceptance of the gospel in vain. This is a profound statement for the apostle to make. Paul believed that these Gentile Christians who had come to faith in Christ through Paul’s own ministry were now in jeopardy because they were returning to pagan religious activities.

**Galatians 4:8** Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. 9 But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? 10 Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. 11 I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain. 12 Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all.

In the gospels, Jesus chastises those who were part of God’s people but had developed and embraced traditions that were contrary to his teaching. Like Paul in Galatians 4, Jesus says that having ungodly traditions while merely honoring God with our words effectively makes worship of him empty and meaningless.

**Matthew 15:3** But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? ...7 Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, 8 This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. 9 But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

Earlier we looked at Jeremiah 10:2 where God commanded his people not to incorporate pagan practices into their worship of Him and specifically identified pagan devotion to heavenly signs marking annual calendar events associated with the gods of the nations.

**Jeremiah 10:1** Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel: 2 Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. 3 For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. 4 They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.

We should note that verses 3-4 are not describing Christmas trees, but fashioning of idols (or images of false gods) from wood. However, the really interesting part about Jeremiah 10 is that it not only identifies God's command on this issue of adopting pagan customs, but it also identifies a clear depiction of pagan holiday
traditions and astronomical events. Notice that God commands his people not to be “dismayed at the signs in the heavens as the Gentiles were.”

The celebration of the rebirth of the unconquered sun was, in fact, a celebration of the winter solstice, the day on which the length of daylight hours stopped decreasing and began to get longer again. The decreasing time in which the sun was in the sky was definitely a sign in the heavens that dismayed the Gentiles and caused them to celebrate the winter solstice, the point in the year when the daylight again began to increase. This is one of the more prominent "signs of the heavens," which are mentioned here in Jeremiah 10. We should also notice that this passage from Jeremiah describes the pagans’ celebration of these “signs in the heavens” as “vain.” In other words, in God’s eyes this is an empty, useless worship practice that accomplishes nothing.

Not only can we find remarks relevant to ancient solstice practices in this passage in Jeremiah but more importantly we find God's clear command not to learn or practice such things. God’s prohibition against borrowing worship ideas from pagan customs can also be found in Deuteronomy 12.

Deuteronomy 12:29 When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; 30 Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. 31 Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. 32 What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

God’s instructions on borrowing aspects of religious worship from the pagans actually begins earlier in this chapter. In verses 2-4 God prohibits his people from worshipping him on high places as the pagans did.

Deuteronomy 12:1 These are the statutes and judgments, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the LORD God of thy fathers giveth thee to possess it, all the days that ye live upon the earth. 2 Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: 3 And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. 4 Ye shall not do so unto the LORD your God. 5 But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come: 6 And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks: 7 And there ye shall eat before the LORD your God, and ye shall rejoice in all that ye put your
hand unto, ye and your households, wherein the LORD thy God hath blessed thee. 8 Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes…13 Take heed to thyself that thou offer not thy burnt offerings in every place that thou seest: 14 But in the place which the LORD shall choose in one of thy tribes, there thou shalt offer thy burnt offerings, and there thou shalt do all that I command thee.

Upon reading this passage we may be inclined to identify the problem with worshipping God on the high places solely with regard to the idols and altars located there. However, verses 4-5 clearly state that God’s people were forbidden from conducting worship on the high places even if they were worshipping God. (This conclusion will be confirmed in a moment when we look at remarks God makes in the books of Kings and Chronicles.) In concert with this prohibition, God required that worship of him be located solely to a single place, which he would select out of one of their tribes. We know from history that at the time of David God selected Jerusalem as this exclusive place of worship. Consequently, Deuteronomy 12 is discussing the use of high places as locations for worshipping God, not just as places to worship pagan gods.

Of course, celebrating Jesus’ birthday isn’t about where we celebrate, but what and when we celebrate. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Deuteronomy 12 that apply to our study of Christmas, particularly when it comes to questions about God’s people incorporating worship ideas from pagan religious customs. First, we can see that God is strongly against the idea of our using worship ideas borrowed from paganism even when the object of our worship is God, and not pagan idols. Second, when it comes to these kinds of issues God does not grant liberty to his people to decide for themselves what is right or wrong and what they can or can’t do. Rather, he expects them to adhere to the parameters of his commands as is, without adding to them or detracting from them.

Third, it’s worth noting that one of the prohibitions here is simply against worshipping God on high places and groves of trees. To us such things seem harmless enough. There’s nothing inherently wrong with trees, gardens, hills, or mountains. God created them and the earth is the Lord’s after all. Moreover, the Temple was itself built on a mountain ridge and decorated with palm trees, flowers, and pomegranates (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35, 2 Chronicles 3:1 and 5). These similarities clarify exactly what God was objecting to in Deuteronomy 12. It wasn’t elevated locations or trees or gardens. God was against his people incorporating aspects of religious worship into their worship of him. In this case, God was specifically prohibiting the pagan practice of having multiple places of worship. And God was forbidding his people from adopting that pagan custom by worshipping God in multiple locations. In God’s system, there would be only one place to worship. To borrow the pagan practice and worship in multiple locations was a violation of God’s intentions and his explicit commands, even if the worship in those locations was directed to God himself. And, it was a violation that God took seriously.
The books of Kings and Chronicles inform us that God continued to take
seriously the prohibition against worshipping him on the high places as the pagans
did unto their gods. For hundreds of years God’s regular assessments of the kings
of Israel and Judah constantly confirm his ongoing interest and displeasure with
the use of high places. As can be seen in Deuteronomy, God disapproved of this
kind of worship activity even when it was devoted to him. Passages in 1 Kings
22:43 and 2 Chronicles 33:15 demonstrate this fact.

1 Kings 22:43 And he walked in all the ways of Asa his father; he turned not
aside from it, doing that which was right in the eyes of the LORD:
nevertheless the high places were not taken away; for the people offered and
burnt incense yet in the high places.

2 Chronicles 33:15 And he took away the strange gods, and the idol out of the
house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house
of the LORD, and in Jerusalem, and cast them out of the city. 16 And he repaired
the altar of the LORD, and sacrificed thereon peace offerings and thank offerings,
and commanded Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel. 17 Nevertheless the
people did sacrifice still in the high places, yet unto the LORD their God
only.

From these passages, we learn that God takes religious worship of him seriously.
He doesn’t just prohibit worshipping pagan gods, but he expressly prohibits
worship customs borrowed from pagans even when the object of our devotion is
God Himself, not idols or false gods.

If this is the case with something as seemingly innocent as going up on a hill to
worship God, then it seems reasonable for us to be cautious about copying pagan
worship ideas into our worship of God today. Worshipping God on a hilltop or
under a tree must have seemed pretty acceptable in the eyes of God’s people at
the time. But apparently God felt differently. And sure, giving gifts to others,
decorating our homes with trees or lights, and taking a few days off to spend with
our families are innocent enough on their own just like there is nothing wrong
about relaxing under the shade of a tree on a hilltop. It’s when we mix these
things into our worship of God that things become inappropriate. God’s revelation
of himself in scripture shows that he isn’t pleased when his people continue in a
tradition just because at some point their predecessors saw the pagans doing it,
found it appealing, and decided to incorporate it into their religious devotion to
God. And because God recorded his commands plainly in his word, he even holds
later generations responsible even if they didn’t realize what they were doing is
wrong or where it came from.

By the time of 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 33, practices incorporated from the
pagans had been going on for a long time. So long, in fact, that the generations
discussed in these chapters were using pagan worship activities to worship God
without even realizing that it was prohibited to do so. Although we did not
mention it in our previous discussion of 2 Chronicles, chapter 33:25 ends with the
death of King Manasseh who was the king discussed in verse 15. Just two years
later, verses 20-25 record that Manasseh’s grandson Josiah becomes king. Unlike his father, 1 Chronicles 34:3 records that Josiah got rid of the high places and groves of trees. What’s also worthy of note is that 2 Chronicles 34:14 reports the rediscovery of one of Moses’ books of the law. In the account that follows in verses 19-21, the king and the priests read the book and are greatly distressed that the Lord was angry with them and their ancestors for violating commands written in the book. And, just as they feared, verse 24 describes that God was angry and declared that he would bring upon them the curses he had declared in the book for violating his commands. In response, in verse 31 King Josiah committed himself to do all that was commanded in the books and so he removed all pagan worship customs from the people’s worship of God.

This situation is not unlike what many Christians today face when discovering the origins and history of Christmas. Our choice is similar to that of King Josiah. When confronted with commands we or our predecessors have neglected (perhaps even out of ignorance), we must ask, “what does devotion to God require?” Is it prudent or humble before God to continue under the justification that something seems alright in our eyes? These passages from Deuteronomy onward into the New Testament give us good reason to think that continuing in unauthorized worship practices, even when directing our worship toward God, is not something God approves of or is honored by.

God's command on incorporating elements of pagan worship into worshipping him could not be any clearer in scripture. To practice them is a snare. We are not to look to the way the pagans served their gods and imitate it by bringing it into our worship of God. Jewish Christians like Paul understood and applied this command in the New Testament period to Christians in Galatia and Corinth who mistakenly thought there was nothing wrong with things like observing the pagan feasts that were associated with the signs of the heavens and marked special days and seasons. Second-century Christians like Irenaeus and Tertullian likewise condemned such practices as had their Jewish predecessors. Since celebrating Jesus’ birth on December 25 started as a pagan day of celebration, these biblical passages provide a strong basis against Christians participating in Christmas, a holiday whose traditions mostly trace to pagan worship customs – regardless of the fact that many of those customs are afterwards assigned Christian meaning. This includes everything from the day on which it is celebrated to wreaths and year-end gift giving just to name a few.

In Deuteronomy 12, God is very specific. We are not to incorporate pagan practices to do “unto the LORD our God.” We are not to add or detract from what God has commanded us. We don’t have the liberty of doing things that seem right in our own estimation. Since God never commanded us to celebrate the birth of Christ on an annual day, and never recorded for us what day or month Jesus’ was born, we should be hesitant against adopting religious worship customs involving the celebration of the birth of a deity on a day chosen to coincide with the signs of the sun, moon, and stars in the heavens. When considering the celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25 it is important to be aware that God expressly forbid
his people from doing unto him things which he didn’t command and which they
picked up from what pagan cultures did to worship their gods.

And although Deuteronomy is an Old Testament book, this particular prohibition
concerns idolatry and the New Testament records that God’s commandments
regarding idolatry are one of the aspects of the Law of Moses that continue into
the new covenant. It is one thing for Christians to be freed from the obligation to
circumcise, or keep dietary restrictions, or even to offer sacrifices, but Christ
Jesus did not free us to worship false gods or to borrow customs from idolatrous
worship. In addition, we should be aware that commands regarding idolatry in the
Law of Moses are not altered in the New Testament. God is very particular and
explicit in the Law of Moses about how to conduct worship and what not to do.
And the reason for his specificity is tied to declarations that God is a jealous God
(Exodus 20:5, 34:14, Deuteronomy 4:24, 6:15, Joshua 24:19).

Moreover, like the Law of Moses, the New Testament affirms that God is jealous
as it warns us to avoid idolatrous practices (1 Cor. 10:14, 22). In fact, when Paul
discusses idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14, he states that Old Testament
commands on idolatry are examples that still apply to Christians and he warns
them to “flee from idolatry.” And 1 Corinthians 10 is not an isolated incident.
New Testament authors uphold the portion of the Mosaic Law which specifies
God’s commands and prohibitions about idolatry and worship. And, they
specifically upheld Deuteronomy 12 as binding on Christians. In Acts 15:29 (and
21:25) the apostles and leaders of the church in Jerusalem cite Deuteronomy
12:23-28 and appeal to that passage as the basis for the prohibition against
consuming blood. And the fact that the apostles are citing one portion of
Deuteronomy 12 makes it all the more reasonable to conclude that they likewise
would have upheld the very next verses in Deuteronomy 12:29-32, which forbid
God’s people from worshipping him in any manner that he did not command or
which was borrowed from pagan customs.

There’s something tangible that we can learn from the fact that the bible portrays
God’s jealousy as an inherent factor in the prohibition against incorporating pagan
worship practices. In the bible, God sometimes compares his relationship to his
people in comparison to a married couple. To illustrate how God’s jealousy
relates to borrowing pagan customs to worship God, imagine a wife whose
husband who always made a point of taking her out on a date on a regular basis,
but the husband always insisted these romantic evenings take place at a particular
Italian restaurant, which the wife wasn’t particularly fond of. Imagine also that the
husband asked her to wear a specific perfume that she wasn’t particularly fond of
either. Finally, imagine the wife somehow eventually discovered that this
particular restaurant was the place where the husband always used to go with his
first love from high school and the perfume was the fragrance that this high
school sweetheart used to wear. Although her husband isn’t cheating on his wife,
even the least jealous wife would be understandably unhappy about the matter.
No matter how much her husband tried to explain that the entire evening was
meant to express his love and affection for his wife, it would be difficult to ignore
that some part of the husband’s intention was to relive enjoyable aspects of a
relationship he previously had with someone else. In the same way, God repeatedly explains his disgust with his people worshipping him in manners copied from how the nations worshipped their gods in these same terms.

Therefore, these biblical warnings and commandments give us ample reasons to be seriously hesitant about adopting religious customs learned from pagans. God doesn’t take such matters lightly. So, we should be cautious about following in the footsteps of fourth-century Christians who were somehow persuaded to mirror the religious celebrations of the pagan world around them in their worship of Jesus. As Paul instructs us, we should “flee idolatry.” If even the New Testament, says that God is a jealous God, we should probably walk circumspectly and steer clear of provoking him (1 Corinthians 10:14, 22).

9. Doesn't Romans 14-15 tell us that Christians are free to celebrate any holiday they want as long as they do so in faith unto the Lord and that other Christians should not condemn them for doing so?

Romans 14:1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. 2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. 3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. 4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. 5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. 6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

Well, the first thing to note about Romans 14 is that Paul is discussing the issue of eating meat or just eating vegetables. At first glance, this might seem similar to the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. However, unlike 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, there is no mention of meat sacrificed to idols in this passage in Romans. So, we have no biblical basis to assume Paul is talking about meat sacrificed to idols here in Romans 14-15. Instead, Paul is simply talking about eating meat as opposed to just eating vegetables. But exactly why were some opposed to eating meat if it was not about the meat being sacrificed to idols?

The answer comes in verses 14-15.

Romans 14:14 I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.
Paul's reference to the teaching of the Lord Jesus is a clear reference back to such passages as Matthew 15:11-20 and Mark 7:15-23. In these passages Jesus is discussing and abolishing Mosaic dietary laws which were instituted in the Law given at Mount Sinai. Paul's reference to that teaching indicates that the same topic is in view here. In other words, some of the Jewish Christians were refusing to eat any meat because they were still conscious of Mosaic food restrictions and their consciences were so weak that they preferred to eat only vegetables rather than feel guilty about violating some aspect of the food laws regarding meat. This is similar to Daniel’s approach when he found himself living in a Gentile society. Rather than eating things forbidden by Mosaic commands, in Daniel 1:8-16 we see that Daniel chose to restrict himself to just eating vegetables. As Christians living in Rome, it makes sense that some Jewish believers would follow Daniel’s model if, like Peter in Acts 10:9-16, they had not yet become comfortable with or fully understood the implications of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 15:11-20 and Mark 7:15-23.

The fact that Romans 14 is discussing Mosaic food laws is significant for 2 reasons.

First, this is significant because it means that Paul is saying that Christians are free to either keep or not keep the Jewish food laws which were required by the Law of Moses. In Acts 21:20, James too indicates that many Jewish Christians chose to keep the Law of Moses. Likewise, when Paul speaks of holidays in this chapter, we can assume that Paul is also talking about the Jewish holidays required by the Law of Moses. This is simply an issue between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Some of the Jewish Christians were continuing to keep the dietary laws of Moses and eating only vegetables. Unfortunately, they were condemning the Gentiles for eating meat. Likewise, some of the Christians in Rome were also celebrating the holidays required by Moses law (Romans 14:6). Others were probably condemning those who kept the feast days for rebuilding the Law of Moses (Galatians 2:16-21). So, the entire chapter is taking place within the New Testament discussion about Jewish and Gentile Christians and keeping the Law of Moses. In this case, the specific issue involves Mosaic food laws and Mosaic holidays.

The crucial exegetical point is that pagan holidays are not in view here at all in Romans 14. As can be seen from passages such as 1 Corinthians 8-11 and Galatians 4 along with numerous New Testament condemnations of idolatry, Paul never grants permission for Christians to knowingly engage in any kind of pagan religious customs. Instead, they were to stay as far away from such things as possible, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 10:14. As such, within the larger historical context of the New Testament as well as the early church not to mention Paul’s own writings, it would be very inconsistent to interpret Paul’s remarks in Romans 14 as an allowance to participate in pagan festivals, especially since nothing in the passage indicates that pagan religious customs were in view. In order to be consistent with what Paul says throughout his writings, we must conclude that Paul's proclamation that Christians are free to celebrate holidays in Romans 14
was only intended to address holidays prescribed in the Law of Moses and was not in any way intended to include pagan festivals.

Paul's acceptance of Jewish holidays is further upheld in Colossians 2:16-17 where the inclusion of the words “new moon” and “Sabbath” shows that he allowed Christians liberty regarding feast days God prescribed in the Law of Moses. Likewise, Paul's prohibition of Christians adopting pagan holidays based around the position of sun, moon, and stars is expressly stated in Galatians 4:8-12, which we have covered above. (Please visit our article entitled “What is Observing Times” for more information regarding what the phrase "observing the times" means in the bible as well as its relationship to the positions of the sun, moon, and stars in the sky.) And, in keeping with the instructions of the Jewish apostles, early church leaders through the second and early third century continued to condemn Christians for eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in pagan worship and feast days.

Second, it is significant that Romans 14 is about Mosaic dietary laws and feast days because it frames the issue in the following way. When Paul writes (verse 5) “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind,” Paul is does not in any way mean that a person can make an unclean thing turn clean by their faith. Rather, Christ had made all food clean by his proclamation. Formerly restricted food was clean because of Jesus’ proclamation, not simply because people had personally realized or believed that such food was actually okay to eat independently on their own apart from Christ’s teaching. Personal belief didn't make it clean. Christ's proclamation did. So Paul was not saying that faith made any unclean thing clean.

Instead, Paul is simply stating in verses 5 and 22-23 of Romans 14 that doubt can make a clean thing unclean if we partake while believing it is sin. But this does not make the opposite true: that faith can make an unclean thing clean if we do it thinking that it’s acceptable. Simply put, faith cannot make a sinful thing clean but doubt can make a clean thing sinful if we partake of it while believing it is a sin. One does not logically lead to the other. Paul's words here do not teach that faith can make pagan worship customs acceptable. Instead, not celebrating Mosaic festivals can be sinful if we doubt that we have liberty from the Law of Moses and are instead persuaded that such things are still required.

In such cases, what makes the action sinful is the fact that the person acting outside the Law of Moses does so even though they believe the Law of Moses is still required. Technically they are not violating the specific Mosaic commands because those commands are no longer required under the New Covenant. However, their actions are still sinful because they are willingly choosing to act in a way they believe is contrary to God’s will. Even though the specific law they believe they are breaking isn’t really in effect, their actions are sinful because they violate the command to love God first, which can be found in such passages as Deuteronomy 10:12, 11:1, 13, 22 and Matthew 12:30. It is never acceptable to do something when you believe that doing so is against God’s will. On the other hand, mistakenly thinking you can do something that God, in fact, forbids and condemns does not in any way make it acceptable in God’s eyes no matter how
sincerely you are convinced of your misguided belief.

In short, to answer question 9, when it comes to incorporating worship practices borrowed from pagan religion into our worship of God, it doesn’t matter how deeply or sincerely we believe our actions are acceptable. Our personal belief or opinion on the matter does not and cannot make such practices acceptable to God. Rather, only the opposite is true. Even though Christ has given us liberty regarding our diet and celebrating Mosaic festivals, eating food prohibited by Moses or failing to participate in a Mosaic festival is wrong if you believe such things are still required in the New Covenant. And there is no proclamation anywhere in the bible that participating in pagan festivals or incorporating pagan worship customs into our worship of Christ is acceptable to Christians. Rather, such things are condemned in scripture. On the other hand, in the New Covenant Christians are free to keep the Mosaic festivals and dietary laws so long as we don’t condemn others for not doing so. And as we have shown above, Paul, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all condemned Christians who believed they could celebrate the pagan festivals such as the winter solstice, which were based around the positions and movements of the sun, moon, and stars in the sky and which marked the coming of particular days and seasons.

10. Can Christmas be considered a Christian holiday? Should Christians practice Christmas?

Based upon the evidence we have examined in this study, the celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25 cannot be considered a Christian holiday. We cannot make a pagan holiday or worship custom godly by simply changing the God who is the object of that holiday worship or by placing a new Christianized meaning into a pagan act of devotion. God has unequivocally attested to his hatred of such practices. Christians should not celebrate Christmas, or any other religious holiday that originates and borrows from pagan religious customs. The early church celebrated the coming of Christ as well as his atoning death and resurrection every day, or at least every week. They did not have an annual holiday or celebration of his birth. They didn’t place any significance on December 25. Consequently, there is good reason to conclude that we shouldn’t either.

We should learn a lesson from the story of King Saul. God gave him a command to destroy all the livestock of Amalek. Instead of simply doing what God told him, Saul disobeyed God under the justification that he would use some of the sheep as a sacrifice to glorify God. The consequence was that God stripped him of his position as king.

1 Samuel 15:3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass. ...13 And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the
LORD: I have performed the commandment of the LORD. 14 And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 15 And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed. 16 Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the LORD hath said to me this night. And he said unto him, Say on. 22 And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king...26 And Samuel said unto Saul, I will not return with thee: for thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD hath rejected thee from being king over Israel. 27 And as Samuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it rent. 28 And Samuel said unto him, The LORD hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou.

God has given us a command not to incorporate pagan practices into our worship of him. Which does God prefer, holidays devoted to Him or obedience? We should not make the same mistake as Saul, thinking we can glorify God by breaking his command. Whose example should we follow King Josiah or King Saul?

Timeline of Relevant Biblical and Historical Facts

A careful and responsible study of the available biblical and historical material produces the following sequence of events regarding the development of the Christian celebration of Jesus’ birthday on December 25. This list is meant to summarize facts demonstrated throughout our study. It shows that a historically supportable understanding of these developments leads to the conclusion that Christian celebration of Jesus’ birthday on December 25 was the result of the influence and incorporation of pagan worship practices by fourth-century Christians who went against both scriptural commands and several centuries of precedent established by earlier Christians who neither celebrated the nativity nor identified it with December 25.

1. Pagan nations worshipped the sun, moon, and stars and celebrated feast days in honor of these gods in accordance with the movement of these celestial objects in the heavens signaling the annual coming of days and seasons. One of these ancient days of worship was the winter solstice which occurred around December 25.
2. God condemns and prohibits his people from adopting pagan forms of worship and doing them unto him. This specifically includes a prohibition against
borrowing customs associated with the observance of special days marked by the movement of the sun, moon, and stars.

3. The New Testament records the account and various details of Christ’s birth, but never identifies a day or month in which it occurred. The New Testament never institutes, mentions, commands, or reports Christians celebrating Jesus’ birthday at all. Neither did the early church for 300 years after Christ.

4. Starting from the time of the New Testament itself and spanning into Christian authors from the third century, early Christian documents report that some Christians were participating in pagan religious customs and forms of worship, as well as annual festivals based on the positions of celestial objects, the birthdays of gods, as well as winter and year-end festivities. New Testament and Christian leaders of the first two centuries condemned Christians who engaged in such activities.

5. In the period stretching from first through fourth centuries AD, Roman society borrowed the sun god Sol from a Persian religion called Mithraism. Sol was widely popularized in the Greek and Roman world by successive Roman emperors who strengthened his worship beginning in the mid-second century.

6. By the late third century, worship of the birthday of Sol on the Roman winter solstice date of December 25 had become an important holiday in the Roman world.

7. For over 200 years after Christ, Christians did not identify any particular day or month with Jesus’ birth. Only in the third century, do Christians first begin to identify particular days and months with the nativity. Third century evidence records the placement of Jesus’ birth in springtime.

8. The Feast of the Epiphany originated in the late second century AD among Gnostic heretics who borrowed the date from Egyptian pagan celebration of the winter solstice and began using that date primarily to celebrate Christ’s baptism, rather than his birth. According to the historical record, it then took several more decades for the Christians to adopt this holiday from the Gnostic heretics and view it as a celebration of Christ’s birth, which occurred sometime before 336 to 361 AD. From this point forward, there seems to be some overlap between the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 in Rome and on January 6 elsewhere throughout the Christian world with December 25 rising to prominence over January 6 sometime after 380 AD.

9. According to the evidence in the historical record, Christians did not celebrate Jesus’ birth for at least 300 years after Christ.

10. In the fourth century after Christ, the Roman Emperor Constantine sought to harmonize worship of Sol and Christ. In their writings, church leaders like John Chrysostom and Eusebius equated the birth of Christ with the day on which the sun was born. And, Christians began to celebrate Jesus’ birth and selected December 25 as the day for that annual holiday.

Summary Review of Questions

1. **Is the celebration of Christmas ever mentioned in the Bible?** No. The bible does not record the celebration of Jesus’ birth as an annual holiday.

2. **Was Christmas celebrated by the earliest Church before 200 AD?** When did the celebration of Christmas begin? Christians were not celebrating Christmas until the close of the third century AD. Similarly,
Christians did not identify Jesus’ birth with December 25 until the fourth century, over three hundred years after Christ.

3. **Does the feast of the Epiphany prove that early Christians were celebrating Christ’s birth in winter sometime near the end of December?** No. The earliest evidence for the Feast of the Epiphany record that it began among the heretical Gnostics who established the celebration on the date of the Egyptian winter solstice when pagan gods were celebrated. The Gnostics regarded the Feast of the Epiphany as a celebration of Jesus’ baptism, not his birth. The earliest evidence for the association of Epiphany with Christ’s birth isn’t until the fourth century.

4. **What Was the Early Christian View Regarding Birthdays?** Historical evidence indicates that the earliest Christians and their Jewish predecessors had a general opposition to the celebration of birthdays in general.

5. **Was Jesus born on December 25th?** The bible does not specify the day or month when Jesus was born. Christian writings from the first two centuries after Christ’s birth do not identify the day of his birth. Therefore, there is no biblical or historical reason to believe he was born on December 25. The earliest Christians did not identify that day with Jesus’ birth. On the contrary the first dates proposed for the nativity placed the event in spring.

6. **Why was that day (December 25) chosen?** Neither the scripture nor any writing from at least the first two centuries after Christ identify a day and month for Christ’s birth. In the third-century Christians identified the nativity with springtime, while fourth-century Christians began to place Jesus’ birth in December or January. Therefore, the reason the December date was eventually selected is not due to biblical or historical considerations. Rather, December 25 was selected in the fourth century because of the influence of prevalent pagan religious customs.

7. **Is there evidence that Christians (particularly Gentile Christians) were re-adopting their former pagan holidays unto the Lord?** Yes. Paul, Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp, the disciple of the Apostle John), and Tertullian testified to Christians doing so and condemned them for it.

8. **Is it ever acceptable to incorporate Pagan religious rites into the worship of the true God?** No. Both testament contain prohibitions against God’s people participating in or incorporating aspects of pagan religion or worship practices into their worship of God.

9. **Doesn’t Romans 14-15 tell us that Christians are free to celebrate any holiday they want as long as they do so in faith unto the Lord and that other Christians should not condemn them for doing so?** No. Romans is discussing keeping feast days instituted in the Law of Moses, not pagan holidays.

10. **Can Christmas be considered a Christian holiday? Should Christians practice Christmas?** No.
What about celebrating Christmas without all the things that come from paganism?

Whether it’s out of tradition, a desire to commemorate the birth of Christ, to simply to spend time with loved ones and friends during the holiday season, some Christians may be compelled to want to continue to celebrate Christmas. However, pressing biblical and historical realities may prompt them to consider attempting to celebrate Christmas free from aspects borrowed from paganism.

An informed and genuine endeavor of this sort will ultimately prove such attempts to be untenable. First and foremost, celebrations placed on or near December 25 would need to be abandoned because they were selected to coincide with pagan religious festivals honoring the winter solstice. (For a look at possible times of year when Christ was born based on biblical indicators please see the related study entitled “The Time of Year of Jesus’ Birth.”)

Second, all of the major Christmas holiday customs that Christians enjoy today are not derived from biblically instituted worship practices, but were borrowed from pagan traditions. You can give a pagan act of worship a new meaning intended to reflect some biblical truth in place of the pagan meaning, but it doesn’t change the fact that the initial idea to engage in that act of worship didn’t come from biblically authorized rituals, but from paganism.

On the contrary, we have to logically conclude that any attempt to incorporate pagan customs into the worship of God would inherently entail assigning new, biblical association, meanings, or identities with those pagan customs. If, as Deuteronomy 12:4, 28, and 30 anticipate, God’s people wanted to worship in him in a manner he didn’t prescribe and which they saw the pagans doing to their gods, they wouldn’t be likely to keep the same meaning that was associated with the ritual when it was done pagan god. Rather, one of the first steps in justifying this incorporation would be to give the worship act a new meaning somehow related to the God of Israel. This new meaning would replace the reason the pagans had in mind when they did the same thing to honor something about their god. The mere fact that it is possible to give a more biblically-suited meaning to a pagan ritual is not that impressive of an accomplishment. Nor does such a replacement avoid God’s prohibition against these incorporations. When God prohibits the incorporation of pagan customs, he is necessarily also declaring any attempts to assign new, godly meaning to those customs as inadequate and ineffective. After all, if the new meaning sanitized the unacceptable pagan meaning, then there would be no need for God to prohibit the incorporation of the pagan custom into the worship of God in the first place. Consequently, if God doesn’t institute a particular act of worship to commemorate some biblical event, inventing a biblical reason to coopt a pagan act of worship into our devotion to God is still a violation of God’s commands.

In order to further illustrate the futility of simply providing new “Christian” names or meanings associated with pagan customs, we offer two examples, one modern and one scriptural.
With regard to a contemporary example, the mottos “Jesus is the reason for the season” or “Keep Christ in Christmas” serve as a familiar reminder of a grassroots campaign to maintain what many modern Christians feel is the “true meaning” of Christmas. And, of course, such slogans are a sort of protest against modern trends to celebrate Christmas as a less religious or entirely nonreligious holiday. In other words, Christians object when others replace the Christian meaning of Christmas with other sentiments and other ideologies, even when those ideologies are as benign as simply celebrating time with loved ones. But what modern Christians may not realize is that when they offer these kinds of objections, they are inherently asserting that the original meaning of a holiday matters and, in fact, that the original meaning remains paramount even when glossed over, discarded, or replaced by newer sentiments. Consequently, the intuitive and logical reaction behind slogans like “Jesus is the reason for the season” and “keep Christ in Christmas” inadvertently demonstrates why Christians cannot simply sanitize customs and holidays that were originally pagan by simply assigning new names or meanings to those customs. And any Christian who has repeated such slogans must take seriously the charge that Christmas originated from pagan religious customs.

With regard to a scriptural example that illustrates the problems with simply “Christianizing” names and meanings, we can turn to Exodus 32. In Exodus 32:1-10, when the people of Israel engaged in idolatry while Moses was up on Mount Sinai they didn’t revert to the gods they knew from Egypt. To be clear they did mold a calf idol. But they weren’t worshipping some Egyptian calf god. Instead, they called the calf idol “Yahweh” who brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 12:4, 5, and 8). And they regarded their religious feast to the calf idol as a feast unto the Lord (Exodus 32:5) at a time of year when God had not commanded any feast. (It was at least two months after Passover plus the 40 days Moses spent on the mount with God, Exodus 19:1-3 and 24:18.) So, here we have God’s people worshipping Yahweh by a feast day they had decided to institute themselves, at a different time of year when no feast days were established by God, using imagery and prohibited worship customs borrowed from their experience with Egyptian paganism, but with new meanings associated with God bringing them out of bondage. Notice, of course, that God had indeed brought the Israelites out of bondage to Egypt. This event was a historical fact, a cornerstone of Jewish history, and something which the Israelites should indeed have been thankful for. The same is true for the birth of Christ. Yet none of those considerations were sufficient to override the fact that at the heart of this celebration in Exodus was something borrowed directly from pagan religion. We see this demonstrated plainly by the reactions of God and Moses, which are recorded in Exodus 32:12 and 26-28. Because of this religious celebration, God wanted to consume the entire nation and, indeed, many of them being put to death.

Likewise, in the New Testament Paul cites these events in 1 Corinthians 10:2-12 as he explains to Christians why they, too, must avoid all forms of idolatry lest they tempt Christ to destroy them as well. The fact that Paul cites this example concerning the calf idol, demonstrates that the New Covenant does not permit
Christians to borrow elements of idolatry and reassign them to God along with meaning related to Christian history.

(A few words should be included here regarding the use of the plural term “gods” in Exodus 32:1 and 4. In particularly, it should be noted that this is the same Hebrew word “elohim” which is commonly used to refer to Yahweh throughout the Books of Moses and the entire Old Testament. For examples see Genesis 2:4, 5, 7, Exodus 3:18, 4:5, and 5:1. Exodus 32:4-5, and 8 confirm that Aaron had in mind only one god, rather than multiple gods, because those verses describe that he fashions only one golden calf. In addition, the fact that Aaron calls the calf idol “Yahweh” in verse 5 (commonly translated in English as “the LORD”) also demonstrates that it was not Egyptian gods that he had in mind. It could be pointed out that the Israelites engaged in drinking and nakedness as part of their festivities. And God is certainly greatly displeased by the entire scene. However, their nakedness isn’t even mentioned in God’s initial remarks. Instead, in verse 8 God identifies the basic nature of their transgression with the phrase, “they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed thereunto.” In light of God’s opening description here, it’s difficult to imagine that God would have been less angry if they were fully clothed but worshipping the calf idol.)

Given these biblical and historical facts, sensibility would warrant steering clear of any tradition, including Christmas traditions, which doesn’t originate in scripture and is copied later from customs first exhibited in pagan religious worship.

Thirdly, and decisively, we must acknowledge that the idea of honoring the birthday of a god is a religious act that was not known to or instituted in scripture, but which was practiced by pagan religions. The earliest Christians for over 300 years after Christ didn’t celebrate Jesus’ birthday and their godly predecessors in the biblical periods didn’t even celebrate the birthdays of ordinary people let alone important scriptural figures. These facts alone wouldn’t prevent us from celebrating birthdays because celebrating a friend or family member’s birthday doesn’t constitute an act of religious worship. After all, we don’t worship our friends and family as god. But, for those who celebrate Christmas, the annual commemoration of Jesus’ birth is intended as an act of religious devotion and worship. Therefore, regardless of what day we celebrate it on, worshipping Jesus’ by celebrating his birthday is a concept that isn’t instituted by the bible but instead is borrowed from paganism. As such, biblical commands warrant avoiding this worshipful practice.

As we conclude our analysis, it might be helpful to consider a few scenarios that might have been more acceptable when it comes to the historical development of Christmas. Perhaps the best case scenario would have been one in which the celebration of Jesus’ birthday on December 25 was established and recorded as an annual Christian holiday in the New Testament itself and passed down in the earliest Christian writers after the New Testament. And if the celebration of Christmas cannot be traced to the New Testament, then maybe the next best thing
would have been if early Christians developed customs celebrating the birth of Jesus on a date that was completely unrelated to pagan worship practices and completely independent of any pagan phenomenon. But the historical record demonstrates that neither of these acceptable scenarios is valid. From the day of the year, to the concept of celebrating the birth of a god, to Santa Claus, Christmas trees, and gift giving around the time of the winter solstice, all the fundamental and characteristic elements of Christmas come from well-known and long-established pagan religious customs well before Christians first began to celebrate Christmas. In addition, the onset of Christian celebration of Christmas was preceded by a period of time in which Gentile Christians were reengaging in pagan worship customs.

Ultimately, given the inextricable relationship between Christian Christmas traditions and their preceding pagan counterparts, once we remove the elements of Christmas that are traceable to pagan religious customs, there is simply nothing left of Christmas to celebrate. The idea of celebrating God’s birthday is foreign to biblical Christianity and arises instead from paganism. But, even if you could celebrate Jesus’ birth you’d have to do it some other time of year when no one else was celebrating it thereby forfeiting the much-cherished time spent with friends, family, and other loved ones over the winter holiday season. And you’d have to leave out all or most of the familiar and favorite traditions, which characterize the holiday. Put simply, once the paganism is removed what’s left is certainly not recognizable in any way that would fill the place the holiday has come to hold in the hearts of so many Christians.