
THE HISTORICITY OF CHRISTMAS: AN ANALYTICAL VIEW

*Muhammad Farman

** Prof. Dr. Hafiz Munir Ahmed khan

ABSTRACT

As important as the birth of Jesus is in Christianity, the Christian world has doubts about its historicity. The Gospels do not provide any authentic information about when Jesus was born, but Christianity insists that December 25 is the date of Jesus' birth. Therefore, the question remains whether Jesus was born on December 25 or is only a claim of Christianity. Moreover, Christmas is also celebrated to commemorate the birth of Jesus on the 25th of December, but its authenticity is as doubtful as the historicity of the birth of Christ. There is nothing in the teachings of Jesus that he commanded Christians to celebrate this day. In this article, the same primary point has been discussed whether Jesus was really born on December 25, the day that Christmas is celebrated as a memorial.

Keywords: Christmas, Jesus Christ, Nativity, 25 December, Christianity

Etymology of Christmas

In modern times, the term Christmas is defined in such a way that the word "Christmas" is made up of two words. The first word is "Christ" and the second word is "Mass". The combination of these two words is Christmas which literally means "Mass on Christ's day". It is generally believed that these terminological meanings of Christmas have been prevalent in Christianity from the beginning, but this is of course a historical error because Christmas with these terminological meanings has a modern origin¹ While this term did not exist until the 4th century AD. The ancient term of this festival, which is celebrated in memory of the birth of Christ, is "Yule" (Yule), which is borrowed from the German word "Joi".² The word Yule refers to the festival that ancient pagans celebrated to commemorate the beginning of the sun god's journey from north to south. It is called "Nadidad" in Spanish, "Natale" in Italian, and "Noel" in French. The corrupted form of all these names is today's word "Nativity", which itself is derived from the Latin word "nātīvitās",³ but a slight glimpse of its pronunciation is also found in the above-mentioned words.

* Ph.D. Scholar, Department of comparative religion and Islamic culture, university of Sindh Jamshoro.

** Dean, faculty of Islamic studies, University of Sindh Jamshoro.

Hypothesis of Calculation

According to calculations, the March 25 Annunciation feast, which commemorated the conception of Jesus, later came to be connected with the Incarnation. Then, Christmas was reckoned to be nine months away. French author Louis Duchesne put out the calculation theory in 1889.⁴ according to gospel of Luke The annunciation to Mary is said to have occurred while Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was in her sixth month of pregnancy.⁵ The ecclesiastical feast honouring the Annunciation of the Lord was thus established in the seventh century and given the date of March 25; this day is nine months before Christmas in addition to being the customary date of the equinox.⁶ It had nothing to do with the Quartodeciman, which by this point had been forgotten.⁷

Early Christians commemorated Jesus' life on a day that is said to have been equal to Passover on the local calendar, which is 14 Nisan. This celebration is known as the Quartodeciman because Passover was observed on the 14th day of the month. On this day, Christians commemorated all the significant occasions in Christ's life, particularly his passion. Paul mentions Passover in his epistle to the Corinthians, which was likely observed at Corinth in accordance with the local calendar. The date of the commemoration of the Passion according to Tertullian (d. 220), a Latin-speaking North African, is March 25.⁸ In 165 A.D, Good Friday was chosen as the new day for the Passion. The calculating theory states that the Quartodeciman festival persisted in certain locations and that the feast came to be connected with the Incarnation.

Though not proven, the calculation hypothesis is regarded as "a perfectly feasible theory" in academia.⁹ Jesus was thought to have been conceived on March 25 since he died on March 25, which was calculated to have coincided with 14 Nisan. It was a customary Jewish belief that great men were born and died on the same day, thus lived a whole number of years, without fractions.¹⁰ The nativity is commemorated on December 25 according to a verse in Hippolytus of Rome's Commentary on the Prophet Daniel (204). Generally speaking, this paragraph is regarded as a late insertion. However, the manuscript also has another paragraph that, if authentic, places the passion on March 25.¹¹

Concept of Christmas in early Christians

Christmas is a major festival in the Christian world, but interestingly, it is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible. The biography of Jesus (peace be upon him) in the four Gospels, while after his ascension, the preaching journeys and activities of his disciples are available to us in the form of the book "Acts of the Apostles" included in the modern Testament but in these two types of books, there is no teaching about celebrating this festival. Jesus Christ did not celebrate this festival during his entire ministry on earth, nor did his disciples after him celebrate it, nor did he celebrate it. Even in the letters of Mr. Paul, a controversial figure among the early Christians and

a Muslim figure of the later Christians, there is no teaching about celebrating it. Saint Clement wrote about it that,

“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 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar] ... And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21].”¹²

Another Christian scholar wrote that,

“It is not known exactly whether the early churches observed a high day or not. However, since its inception, it has become very popular. Although some rituals that were not Christian were attributed to Christmas, they have now taken on a Christian color. For example, the Christmas tree. Hence it is taken to mean that it points to God and reminds of His blessings. It should be remembered that no one knows the exact birth date of Christ. In the 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria suggested that it be celebrated on May 20, but December 25 was originally set in Rome to replace the then pagan festival of Saturn called "Saturnalia," which took place on Ras al-Jadi. So the birthday of Lord Christ should be celebrated instead.”¹³

Christian scriptures and Christmas

Early Christian groups not only disagreed about the celebration of this festival and the date of Jesus' birth, but they did not even attribute any belief to the birth of Jesus. During this period, only the teachings, miracles and resurrection of Jesus were considered valuable, so those people celebrated remembrances of these days. Celebrating the birthday of Jesus was not included in their beliefs, so Mark and John, the author of the first and last gospels, did not consider it necessary to include such an apparently important matter as the birth of Jesus in his writings. Even if Matthew and Luke included it, they wrote with many such incidental contradictions for which no reasonable explanation can be drawn. Both evangelists Luke and Matthew also narrate various events regarding the date of birth, but they do not provide any information about the date of birth.

The apocryphal writings of the second century AD contain somewhat detailed material regarding the birth of Christ. In this regard, the Gospel of the Infancy of Thomas, the Gospel of

the Infancy of Jacob and the Gospel of the Infancy of Matthew are famous, which describe the events before and around the birth of Christ with complete clarity but even these texts are unable to tell the final date of Christ's birth.

Church fathers and Christmas

The date of the birth of Jesus Christ (AS) remained unknown for a long time, so the celebration of the birth of Christ (AS) as a festival began after a long time. According to the bishop of Alexandria Father Clement of the second century AD, there were many Christian groups that partially celebrated the birthday of Christ on different days, but none of them were convinced of the birth day on December 25. Elder Clement writes that there are many who have not only discovered the year of our Lord's birth, but also they claim to know the day of His birth. These people say that he was born in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus and on the 25th of the (Egyptian month) Pachon (May 20), while some people also say that he was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi (April 20-21).¹⁴

Saint Clement himself nowhere mentions the 25th of December. Even the various small Christian groups who celebrated this heresy faced strong opposition from the churches, because the early Christian groups considered celebrating the birth dates of elders and Christian martyrs to be clear shirk, so they celebrated the birthday of Jesus Christ. Celebrating was also considered as unveiled blasphemy. In the beginning, very few people followed this heresy, but they were also severely criticized and rebuked by the Church Fathers, because according to ancient Christian scholars, a martyred saint is truly honored on the day of his martyrdom. According to the martyrdom day of these saints is their real "birthday".¹⁵

Apart from Bishop Clement of Alexandria, other church fathers were also opposed to innovations like Christmas. Saint Irenaeus and Saint Tertullian published a list of recognized Christian festivals, but Christmas was not even mentioned in this list along with other Christian worship festivals.¹⁶ Both Saint Origen and Saint Arnobius, famous scholars of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, in their writings severely criticized the pagans and rebuked them for celebrating the birth of the gods. This shows that even these saints did not believe in Christmas.¹⁷

Origin of Christmas & its evaluation

It is not clear when the celebration of December 25 as the day of the birth of Christ began because the modern testament does not provide any information about it. In the writing of Sextus Julius Africanus' writings, it had been mentioned about Christmas but Sextus Julius was not such an influential writer that he could explore the true date of Christ's birth.¹⁸ Apart from this, he has also severely criticized the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew and Luke.¹⁹

After having separated his way as independent standing from Judaism, the early Christian church began to celebrate the monumental of prophet Jesus on 14 Nisan because Jewish festival Passover was also celebrated on this date. According to church traditions, the cross was allegedly given to Christ on the same day, which is also mentioned in the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians.²⁰ Saint Tartalian (220 AD) also tried to calculate the birth date of Jesus by making Easter as a basis. According to his calculations, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ happened on March 25, so he celebrated Jesus on March 25 in accordance with the day of crucifixion. It was declared as the birthday of Christ.²¹ In the background of this approach of Saint Tartalian was Jewish thought because according to the traditional Jewish belief, the day of birth and day of death of great people are on the same day. Later, when the date of December 25 was invented, it was clarified about the words of Saint Tartalian that surely March 25 is the day of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, but March 25 is not his birthday, but on this date Holy Mary was conceived and rightly Nine months later he was born.²²

December 25 was celebrated in ancient Rome as the day of the birth of the undefeated sun god. It was a very famous festival of the Roman Empire, which was celebrated every year with great enthusiasm at the regular official level.²³ When The Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the same festival was celebrated as Christmas in the name of the birthday of Christ (a), and the priests began to offer different religious explanations by combining the birth of the sun and the birth anniversary of the Son of God. In this regard, various passages of the Old Testament were interpreted in such way that they seemingly support the Christian doctrine. It has been argued by scripture of Prophet Malachi, On the basis of this verse, Jesus (a) was likened to the sun god by declaring him to be the sun god.

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.²⁴

After the Christian scholars likened Jesus Christ to the Sun God based on the Old Testament, the proselyte who came to Christianity from the idolatrous nations gladly accepted it. The problem, however, was that the early Church did not adopt any kind of polytheistic doctrine and for a long time strictly distanced itself from the beliefs and actions of the idolaters.²⁵

To declare December 25 as the date of jesus' birth, a Christian view is also put forward that the middle of spring is March 25, which is considered to be the fourth day of the creation of the world because on that day the light was created according to the book of Genesis. Therefore, the Christian scholars declared this day as the day of incarnation of "the light of the world".²⁶ Scholars explained that on the same day, Jesus entered into the womb of holy Mary and exactly nine months after this date, he was born on 25th December. However, this theory is not as old

as it seems because this theory was first presented in 1889 by a French Christian scholar "Louis Duchesne". January 6 was celebrated at the ecclesiastical level by envisioning the day.²⁷

Pope Julius I was the first to choose the birthday of Jesus on December 25, and thus the first Christmas was partially celebrated in the Roman Empire on December 25, 336 AD.²⁸ Until the 3rd century AD, the date of birth of Jesus was unknown, but later it was thought to be 25th December, although for the last two centuries this date was unknown and the Christians were not aware of it. In 432 AD, the influence of the Christmas ritual reached Egypt, and at the end of the 6th century AD, this ceremony began in England.²⁹

Widespread celebration of Christmas in the church began in the ninth century AD, but until then it did not have the status of a central religious festival, rather than Christmas, Good Friday or Easter rituals were given more importance. The Catholic Church used to start Christmas celebrations at midnight, but when the Protestant movement came into being, they remained against Christmas in Catholic opposition for a while, but with the passage of time, they also started celebrating Christmas, but despite this, they were against Catholics. They used to start their Christmas celebrations by lighting candles on the evening of 24 December.³⁰

Christmas in the Middle Ages

December 25 was actually a pagan festival that was celebrated by the Roman pagans in commemoration of the sun god "Sol Invictus". The same pagan festival was designated by the church as the birthday of Jesus after three centuries. However, it had been opposed for hundreds of years. This is also supported by the document of Jacob Bar-Salibi, a bishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church of the twelfth century AD, in which he writes that "celebrating the sun god's day on December 25th was from the beginning among the idolaters. On this occasion, they used to light fire candles. Gradually, Christians also started participating in these color rallies, so the idea arose that Christians also have a similar festival, therefore, they held a council and resolved the insoluble problem of the day of the birth of Christ that the date of the birth of Christ should be declared on this day."³¹

In the early centuries AD, instead of the festival of the sun god "Christmas", the birth of Christ was celebrated as a day of joy, which was not December 25, but the day when the Eastern Magi came to visit Jesus Christ. This day is considered to be January 6th, so for a long time, many Christians celebrated this day, but by the middle ages, there was a significant change in it. During this period, forty days before Christmas, the "Forty Days of St. Martin" began to be celebrated before Christmas, starting on November 11. In the twelfth century, when the prevailing Christmas date of January 6 was moved to December 25, this tradition changed to the Twelve Days of Christmas, which began to be celebrated from December 25 to January 5. In ecclesiastical

calendars it was known as the Twelve Holy Days. However, even today, the Modern American Church and the Armenian Church celebrate Christmas on January 6.³²

the spread of Christianity has been increased through political influence rather than its teachings, so the same happened in the case of Christmas, and the popularity of this festival increased greatly when the French emperor Charles the Great (Charles the Great) in 800 AD. was crowned on Christmas Day. This did not last only to Charles the Great, but then in 855 AD. King Edmund and King William I of England were crowned on Christmas' Eve in 1066. The result of these royal events was that in 1377, King Richard II (King Richard II) organized a magnificent royal banquet on December 25, in which 28 oxen and 300 sheep were slaughtered and various types of food were cooked. Over time, many such royal events were given the color of a Christmas party.³³

Protestant Church and Christmas

The Protestant churches gradually gained a lot of influence in Europe with the passage of time. There were many Christian denominations that strongly opposed Christmas and called it an invention of the Catholic Church. In Europe, people used to drink a lot on Christmas night and then get drunk, riot and attack women, so the Protestant Church banned the celebration of Christmas in England in the 17th century AD.³⁴ However, Charles II removed this ban in 1660, but still for a period of time, the issue of Christmas remained a source of controversy among the people and caused many quarrels among the people. Despite the restoration of Christmas in England, it remained banned in Scotland. In 1618, Jacob IV issued an official order to celebrate it, but despite this, the number of people celebrating it in the church was very small. In 1640, the Parliament of Scotland officially declared the end of all Christmas celebrations, saying that the church was now cleansed of all heretical practices.³⁵ Christmas was banned in Scotland for several centuries until it was reinstated in 1958 and officially celebrated once again in the 21st century.³⁶ In addition to Scotland and England, Christmas was considered a polytheist festival in other European countries and this ritual was strongly opposed. Regarding Christmas in 1743, a German Protestant scholar, Father Paul Ernst, presented the theory that Christmas is a festival of idolaters and that the Catholic Church, by starting the tradition of celebrating it on December 25, has certainly mixed with the true Church of Jesus.³⁷

References:

¹ "Christmas | Origin, Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica," accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christmas>.

² "Yule | Search Online Etymology Dictionary," accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=yule>.

- ³ “Nativity | Search Online Etymology Dictionary,” accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=nativity>.
- ⁴ Susan Roll, *Towards the Origin of Christmas* (Kok Pharos Publishing, 1995), 88–90.
- ⁵ *The NIV Study Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000) Luke 1:26.
- ⁶ Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Liturgical Press, 1998), 114.
- ⁷ “Annunciation,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Catholic University of America Press, 2003).
- ⁸ Roll, *Towards the Origin of Christmas*, 87.
- ⁹ Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Peeters Publishers, 1995), 88.
- ¹⁰ William J. Collinge, *Historical Dictionary of Catholicism* (Scarecrow Press, 2012), 99.
- ¹¹ Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas*, 87.
- ¹² Clement, *Stromateis* 1.21.145.
- ¹³ F. S. Khairullah, *Qamoos-Ul-Kitab* (Lahore: Masihi Ishaat Khana, 2011), 147–48.
- ¹⁴ “How December 25 Became Christmas - Biblical Archaeology Society,” accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/how-december-25-became-christmas/#end02>.
- ¹⁵ “Christmas | Origin, Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica.”
- ¹⁶ Cyril Charless Martindale, “Christmas,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Robert Appleton Company, New York, 1908) vol 3.
- ¹⁷ George McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca, the Case Against the Pagans*, n.d. vol II, p 83.
- ¹⁸ Joseph Francis Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas* (Liturgical Press, 2004), 60.
- ¹⁹ “Sextus Julius Africanus | Britannica.Com,” accessed January 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sextus-Julius-Africanus>.
- ²⁰ *The NIV Study Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000) I Corinthians 5:7-8.
- ²¹ Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Peeters Publishers, 1995), 87.
- ²² William J. Collinge, *Historical Dictionary of Catholicism* (Scarecrow Press, 2012), 99.
- ²³ Hale Bradt, *Astronomical Methods*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, 2004), 69.
- ²⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*, Malachi 4:2.
- ²⁵ “Christmas | Origin, Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica.”
- ²⁶ Paul F. Bradshaw, *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2002), 88–90.
- ²⁷ “How December 25 Became Christmas - Biblical Archaeology Society.”
- ²⁸ “Christmas and Its Cycle,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Catholic University of America Press, 2002), vol III, p 550–57.
- ²⁹ “History of Christmas - HISTORY,” accessed January 12, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas>.
- ³⁰ “Christmas | Origin, Definition, History, & Facts | Britannica.”
- ³¹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (Yale University Press, 1997), 155.
- ³² “How December 25 Became Christmas - Biblical Archaeology Society.”
- ³³ Alexander Murry, “Medieval Christmas,” *History Today* 36, no. 12, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/medieval-christmas>.
- ³⁴ Chris Durston, “Lords of Misrule: The Puritan War on Christmas 1642–60,” *History Today* 35, no. 12 (n.d.): 7–14.
- ³⁵ Robert Chambers, *Domestic Annals of Scotland*, 1885, 211.
- ³⁶ R. A. (Robert Allan) Houston, *Scotland: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 172.
- ³⁷ “Christmas - MSN Encarta,” accessed January 12, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20090831160612/http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761556859_1____4/Christmas.html#s4.