Why Did They Choose December 25th to Celebrate?
Luke 2:1-14

The Bible clearly tells us HOW Jesus was born, even to the point of the miraculous conception of a virgin – something that immediately forces every person to confront a miracle. The Bible also tells us WHERE Jesus was born, even to the point of how Mary & Joseph unexpectedly got there, why the humble birth in a barn and that the earliest visitors were shepherds who were not society’s most well thought of people at the time. BUT the Bible nowhere tells us WHEN Jesus was born in terms of the actual day. We know from Luke 2:1 that it was during the reign of Caesar Augustus and during the first census under Quirinius who was governor of Syria at the time. READ v 1. From Matthew chapter 1 and the visit of the magi, we also know that it was during the rule of Herod the Great – in other words while Herod was still alive, since he tried to have Jesus killed. But we aren’t told the actual day, month or year. So the question we want to look at this week is “Why did they choose December 25th to celebrate the incarnation?” – Why is December 25th the day we celebrate God’s gift of lowering Himself to become a human so He could communicate with us more clearly, establish a new covenant, provide a lasting, just basis for forgiveness of wrongs, train a set of disciples to multiply the church and give us proof over all other religious claims through the resurrection.

PROPOSITION: Although Jesus was probably not born on December 25th, the church has regularly taken efforts to make the wonder of the incarnation the reason for our Christmas celebration.

1. Current claims
   The truth is that we do not know FOR SURE why they made Dec. 25th the official date for Christ’s birth because the church leaders in the 300’s who officially sanctioned this date, didn’t give us any details why. As the Encyclopedia Britannica starts out “The reason why Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25 remains uncertain.” Thus everything that I share with you today is simply a hypothesis – an educated guess – trying to put together the best that I could find for you. As you know I don’t often get involved in the speculative – this is speculative. I do this to simply give you more confidence in dealing with the misleading claims today and more importantly to refocus your minds on the wonder, joy and amazement in Jesus’ coming to this earth. Let’s start with the common claims of our day...

A. Accommodation to Saturnalia (& other pagan practices)
   The most common explanation you will hear today is that Dec 25th was chosen for Christmas to coincide with the Roman festival of Saturnalia. “Saturnalia, the ancient Roman festival in honor of Saturn the god of Agriculture, is perhaps the most important pagan influence on Christmas, in large measure determining the selection of the date and the nature of the celebration.” (http://histclo.hispeed.com/act/holiday/xmas/holxp-sat.html). That leads some Christian leaders to picture Christmas as simply a pagan holiday which true Christians should have no part in. “Keep Christ out of Christmas” one internet article was entitled. Another said that each time we sing about “mother and child” in our song “Si-
lent Night” we are actually glorifying ancient far-east demi-gods like Nimrod. Another says Christmas is the work of satan to lead the world astray.

PERSONALLY for many years I simply accepted this tie between Christmas and Saturnalia without question because I heard it so many times. THEN more than 15 years ago it suddenly dawned on me that the dates for Saturnalia are very different than the date we celebrate Christmas. Saturnalia is on Dec 17th, not the 25th. Even when it is considered a week-long holiday, it goes from Dec 17-23 with Dec 17th being the official or more important day. If the early church leaders simply wanted to give a religious excuse for the pagan holiday of Saturnalia, then they would have chosen Dec 17th to celebrate.

People could go on to say, “well maybe the actual day isn’t the same, but don’t we do the exact same things at Christmas that the pagans did for Saturnalia -- like feasting (that is making special food), decorating the home, giving gifts, celebrating and spending time with the family”. Actually we do a majority of these things at many major US holidays. Plus if you look at those claims you will see a majority go into a quick “bait-&-switch” without explanation to very different Northern European pagan practices like using mistletoe, red berries, evergreen, etc most of which were not done at Saturnalia. What they don’t point out is how DIFFERENT these celebrations are. Saturnalia was a time to really let loose in wild merrymaking where things like gambling, drunkenness, orgies, & cross-dressing were common. “As Roman culture became increasingly licentious, so did Saturnalia. Here we will not go into further detail, but one can well imagine what went on.”

The modern opposition to the celebration Christmas by some Christians actually goes back to the Puritans. Their hostility to this holiday was not because they didn’t want anyone to have fun. While they disagreed with what the Catholic church of the middle-ages had done to Christmas, the primary reason for opposition was summed up well by the Encyclopedia Britannica. “Puritans also hated the way Christmas was celebrated in England. The holiday, which like today cast its shadow over the surrounding weeks, was marked by the sort of drunken debauchery we normally associate with Mardi Gras or frat parties. People drank and ate heavily, ridiculed authority and engaged in rather forceful begging – to the point of promising harm if their pleas were ignored. Since the Puritans believed people’s behavior and outward appearance was evidence of their connection with God, they must have seen these revelries as godless indeed.” In other words, the Puritans’ opposition was precisely because Christmas had become just like Saturnalia – a religious excuse to “act immorally.” We may get to that point in America where the materialism, selfishness & utter disregard for Christ become so great that we, like the Puritans, need to abandon X-mas – but I don’t see it yet.
I personally rejoice that so many things in our cultural Christmas celebration still point to Jesus. Christmas carols are beloved by many and have incredibly clear Christian messages, IN FACT they are one of the few clear Christian witnesses allowed in some public schools. You can’t get a better message than Handel’s “Messiah”. We send out Christmas cards to many and have the unopposed opportunity to send the truth of Christ in those cards to anyone. Many times if you start to share the gospel of Christ with a group, someone will get upset – but very few will get angry at you inviting them to a candle-light Christmas Eve service – they will just say “No thanks” or “I’m already doing something then”. Even the crass materialism that has crept into our modern day celebration of Christmas creates a vacuum where people start feeling this desire to find some kind of meaning for the season. Christmas continues to be an amazing time for advancing the work of Jesus in our land.

Lastly consider that very early on Christians developed a month long spiritual preparation for Christmas which we now call “Advent”. When I researched this I found early sermons in the 400’s (2 by Maximus of Turin and another by Ambrose & Augustine) which challenge people to rightly prepare for the spiritual significance of the Incarnation – God becoming a man. In the History of the Franks, Gregory of Tours records that church leader Perpetuus decreed a fast 3 times a week to prepare for Christmas starting 43 days preceding Christmas (at the feast of St. Martin). This was officially established in 567AD at the Council of Tours, but dropped after 1100 AD. In short, it is clear from the beginning that the early church leaders were consciously fighting pagan influence, not giving in to it.

B. Iranian mystery god Mithra
What then was celebrated in ancient Rome on Dec 25th? It was the birth date of the Iranian mystery god Mithra – who was consider their god of light. A cult group grew up worshipping this god. It was secretive group, only open to men, that had 7 different levels of initiation & held all of its ceremonies underground. Other than the fact Mithra was considered “the invincible sun” and Christians sometimes say Jesus is the “invincible Son” you won’t find sufficient reasons or connections to say this Mithra celebration is the prime reason for making the celebration of Jesus’ coming to earth on Dec 25th. There were actually 4 major festivals held in December by the Romans, so it would be hard to have anything happen in December without a similarity. Saturnalia with its wild celebrations, Sigillaria or festival of the dolls, where gifts were given to children, Brumalia, or the Birthday of the Unconquered (or invincible) Sun; Kalende Januarii or New Year’s Day where people exchanged gifts and aligned with this Juvenilia or special festival of childhood and youth.

C. Problems that began to bother me
1. Inexact date
2. Excesses absent early on
3. Inconsistency with other celebrations
4. Advent preparation
D. Reasons given for Dec 25th (including Hanukkah – 25th of Kislev)
II. Earliest references

As we look back into history we find that the birth date of Jesus was discussed long before the church leaders made it an official celebration in the 300’s.

A. Clement – Nov 17, 3 BC

The earliest mention of the birth date of Jesus is in the early 100’s. Somewhere between 127 & 137 AD Bishop Telesphorus, the first bishop of Rome to be martyred for his faith, had established a festival of nativity for the churches in Rome to celebrate. “Nativity” refers to the place and circumstances of one’s birth. There is also a story of Christians being massacred in the catacombs on the day of Nativity between 161 & 180 AD but the exact year is not known. To tie this festival to a date, some sources claim “Theophilus, who was Bishop of Caesarea during this same period, urged that ‘the observance or celebration of the birthday of our Lord [be held] on what day soever the 25 of December shall happen’” That would make the earliest reference to Christmas being celebrated on December 25th appearing in Antioch around 150 AD The problem is that the source of this final quote has been very much disputed & believed to come from after the 300’s.

However when we move to the end of the 100’s we have clear, indisputable evidences that the actual date of Jesus’ birth had been sought & discussed by believers. Clement of Alexander, born in 155 AD and who is considered the Christianity’s first scholar, actually mentions 5 different possible dates of Christ’s birth that were held by people in his day. These are in three different months. One of the most unusual claims you will read is that Clement believed Jesus was born November 17th, 3 BC. His actual words translated were "From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus [the Roman emperor who died on 31 December A.D. 192] are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days" If one assumes that Clement is using the Roman calendar, that works out to Nov 17, 3 BC. But that is highly doubtful since no one else in ancient literature uses this date. However when one uses the Egyptian calendar where Clement lived & work backwards from Commodus’ death that works out to Jan 6, 2 BC.

Other dates he lists for Jesus’ birth are the 25th of Pachon – which would be May 20th to us and 24 or 25th of Pharmuthi (these are Egyptian months by the way) which is April 19th or 20th to us. What is very clear by this and other early mentions of Jesus’ birth is that there was a very, very strong tradition and belief early on that Jesus was born on the 25th – they just disagreed on the month and the year. So we definitely know a strong influence on the church leaders in the 300’s who picked a date, would be this ancient tradition that it happened on the 25th not some pagan source. In fact, Hanukkah which is on the 25th of Jewish month of Kislev is far more likely to have influenced the early church leaders than the birthdate of Mithra. The 25th of Kislev translates to our Dec 25th date but because the Jewish calendar is lunar (each month is 29-30 days) and the Roman calendar is solar (365 days to a year) these are at different times. Every 15 years Hanukkah starts on either Christmas Eve or Christmas.
B. Epiphany on Jan. 6th – 200’s

Meanwhile in the 200’s, some churches in the Eastern part of the Roman empire (Turkey, Israel & Syria) began to celebrate Jan. 6th as the Epiphany. Epiphany means the revealing of Jesus as Messiah or the Christ. This started as a celebration of Jesus’ baptism where God publicly confirmed Jesus as the Christ. As a lesser influence they also celebrated incarnation – when God became a man. The association seems to have been theological at first rather than a statement of their belief on what day Jesus was actually born. Later church leaders would use Luke 3:23’s statement that Jesus was “about 30 years old” when He started His ministry to say that Jesus’ baptism was close in date to His birthday. Biblical language does not necessitate that, but neither does it deny that possibility. So you don’t get confused about Epiphany, in the Western part of the Roman empire (Rome, Greece and Spain), Jan 6th is the celebration of the coming of the magi or wise men.

C. Other pre-fourth century references

Additionally, we have several manuscripts of Hippolytus’ Commentary on Daniel written in the early 200’s. He states “For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem eight days before the Kalends of January [25 December], on the fourth day [Wednesday], under Emperor Augustus, in the year 5500.” Again this would seem to settle the matter of where the Dec. 25th date came from, except there are some scholars (actually many I’m told), who believe this was a later correction by copyists of the original date of Hippolytus. The original date they believe was April 2nd.

D. Earliest recorded date – 336 AD (“25 Dec.: natus Christus in Betleem Judaea”)

The earliest known celebration of Christmas on December 25th that is recorded for us is in 336 AD. It simply said, “December 25th, Christ born in Bethlehem, Judaea” It is found in an old list of Roman bishops that was compiled in 354 AD, so this is the first record of the actual celebration of Dec 25th as Christmas.
(source Christian History Institute “What Happened This Day in Church History? ” 12-25-02)

E. Widespread official date – 354 AD

By 354 AD the date of Christmas as December 25th, was officially pronounced and universally held in the Western part of the Roman Empire – although it was slower to be universally accepted in the Eastern part of Roman empire, and Jerusalem was one of the last. But by 400 AD, all areas chose Dec 25th as the date to celebrate the incarnation with the exception of the Armenian church which never did. So it is clear that the church leaders of the 300’s didn’t just randomly pick Dec 25th as a way to “baptize” pagan beliefs into the church. Nor did the early church ever the question of the date of Jesus’ birth! As best I can tell there were three strong influences – (1) the long standing Christian tradition the birth was on the 25th of some month, (2) a strong tie to the Jewish celebration of Hannukah and (3) the specific desire to counter-act the many pagan Roman festivals that were actually losing popularity at the time.
III. John the Baptist’s birth date

While it is a perfectly fine day to celebrate God’s coming to this world, there is almost no chance that Jesus was actually born on December 25th. So do we have any idea what day of the year Jesus might have been born on? Most people through history have said that Jesus was born either in the spring or the fall because that is when the shepherds would be out with their flocks at night. **READ** v 8. But the other birth descriptions don’t seem to narrow it down more precisely. So let’s do a little detective work to see if we can come closer. Remember I am now speculating. We’ll start with John the Baptist’s birthday since we know BOTH Jesus & John were in their mother’s womb at that same time. **Turn back to Luke 1.**

A. Division of Abijah

**Luke 1:5, 8**

**READ** Luke 1:5. John the Baptist’s father was a priest. It tells us that he was in the priestly division of Abijah. Now in Luke 1:8 it tells us that there was an assigned time for that division to be on duty. **READ** v 8. **Turn back in the OT to I Chronicles 24.** This chapter tells us that there were 24 divisions of priests which are to serve in the temple of God. It also gives us the order in which they were to serve.

B. Eighth course

I Chron. 24:10

Look at v 10. **READ.** So we see that the priestly division of Abijah was the eighth division. Now each division was to work 2 weeks a year, but they were not consecutive. So the beginning of the religious year was the first of Nissan (about 2 weeks before Passover). The 1st course would do the first week, second course the second week, plus they would all need to be there for the major weeks of Passover, Pentecost, etc. So, John’s Dad would have been ministering 10 weeks after the beginning of the Jewish month of Nissan – 8th course & 2 joint weeks of Passover and Pentecost. His course would have started in the beginning of June and that is when the angel would have appeared to him.

C. Conceived in mid-June, born in March

So Zechariah would have gone home after the week’s service and John’s mother would conceive somewhere around the middle of June. With normal gestation, John the Baptist would have been born in March around the time of Passover. What’s fascinating is that for centuries the Jewish people have set a place for Elijah at the Passover meal. This was because the OT prophesized that Elijah would come to announce the coming of Messiah. Even today the door is left open and a child sent to check if Elijah has come. Jesus told us that John the Baptist was that Elijah – so if I was going to pick an exact day when John came I would choose that time of that year.

D. Coordination with Elijah & Passover

IV. Jesus’ birth date

A. Six months after John born

**Luke 1:26, 36**

As good detectives we now go back to Luke 1. In v 26, we see that Gabriel came to Mary in the 6th month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. **READ** v 26. This is confirmed in v...
36. **READ.** So Jesus will be born **6 months after John,** which means Jesus is probably born the second half of September.

B. **Roman census**

   **Luke 2:1-2**
   
   In Luke 2:1-2 we are told a Roman census was being taken. **READ v 1-2.** Roman censuses at this time were almost always taken between August and October. They wouldn’t do one in December because of the colder weather & other things.

C. **Shepherds in their fields**

   **Luke 2:8**
   
   Still got your detective eyes on? In Luke 2:8 the shepherds were out in the fields with their sheep. This also would not happen in December as it was too cold – but would be true of the spring and the fall.

D. **Michaelmass**

   So that leaves us with a strong case for later September. Out of Biblical clues, we now consider clues from early church history or the overall plan of God. Remember this is speculation – it is just a hypothesis. In history we have something called Michaelmass day – which signifies the time the angel Michael came. **It is on Sept 29**^\textsuperscript{th} in the Roman calendar. While I tried to trace the history of this day on the Internet, I simply ran out of time, so I just quote from **Dr. Bill Jones** "Those who trace Michaelmas day believe that Michael was the archangel who accompanied the heavenly host that made the announcement of the birth of Jesus to the shepherds who were in their field at night." Sept 29\textsuperscript{th} corresponds to Tishrei 15 in the Jewish calendar — **that is the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles.** As John 1 says, Jesus came to tabernacle amongst us. This would also explain how the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem, which is close to Jerusalem, could be said to spread the good news around at night since many extra people would have come to Jerusalem & would be camping out over the whole area. **READ v 17-18.** This would also mean that Jesus would have been circumcised and presented on the 8\textsuperscript{th} day of the Feast of Tabernacles which is the great and final day of the feast.

V. **What does that make December 25^\textsuperscript{th} then?**

   If indeed September 29\textsuperscript{th} or some similar day in September is Jesus’ birth, what does that make December 25\textsuperscript{th}? Does it have any relationship or significance to the young life of Jesus? Or is it just a meaningless day without any meaning. Well here is an intriguing thought – remember we are in speculation. I’m told the ideal time of pregnancy, or human gestation, is 278 days. If we start at September 29\textsuperscript{th} as the birth date of Jesus in the manger and go back 278 days in the Roman calendar, Dr. Bill Jones tells me we get to December 25\textsuperscript{th}. Wow! In other words, the true miracle of Christmas was not the birth, but the special virgin conception of Mary by the Holy Spirit. It was at that moment that the eternal Son of God lowered Himself to become human. Now I can’t prove this, but what we are really probably celebrating on Dec. 25\textsuperscript{th} is the incredible moment when God lowered Himself to become a man – at the moment of conception.
I don’t know about you, but this gives me chills of amazement. It overwhelms me with the real wonder of the incarnation – God coming to earth. Wouldn’t that be just like God that in all of our stumbling around through the centuries, He would make sure the most important date of the start of our Lord’s earthly life – which is the conception where the actual incarnation first takes place – wouldn’t it be just like God to quietly guide us to remember this miracle which no human knew the exact time because it was a virgin conception as this time of major praise, celebration and worship by the church. And while we are rightfully remembering the humble beginnings that the Almighty God of the Universe passed through so He could come down to this earth to fully open heaven, forgiveness and a personal relationship to God for all through repentance and faith – we may actually be celebrating something far more profound – the very day that God became a man – and it was as a tiny embryo in mother Mary’s womb. Sort of takes your breath away doesn’t it! Christmas is simply the celebration of God becoming a man – all He did through that and all He gave up to do that. And all the fun, joyful things we do are both a response to God’s gift to us AND an encouragement to be joyful at this time even when dark, cold, fights, frustrations, etc. may be around us.

Now remember, I am not saying this is for sure what happened. The Bible does not directly give the actual birth date. But it does speak of the incredible wonder of God becoming a man. So celebrate, enjoy, marvel at the greatness of God this next week for that’s the real meaning of Christmas.