

# CHRISTMAS

## **“Hallelujah” Praise! or “Bah Humbug” Paganism!**

**Dwight A. Pryor**

I specifically chose this title to lighten up a very volatile and emotional subject – one rife with charges and countercharges, and in some cases, downright nonsense. This study is being given at the request of the Elders of Church of the Messiah. Within our congregation, given its Hebraic orientation, there are differing views as to how we should handle this classic Christian holiday.

The Christmas festival can be a very emotionally charged issue for believers within the Hebraic Renewal Community. Sometimes quite incredible conclusions are drawn. For example, I remember reading one report about pagan influences behind Christmas, claiming that when you sing “Noel” you actually are declaring that there is “No El” (no *Elohim* or God)! *Noel* of course is simply the French word for the Nativity of God. Further, when you say “Santa”, the author claimed, it actually is the word “Satan” just with the letters transposed!

On the other hand, the traditionalists who treasure the Christmas holiday – and all that it means for the family and for their relationship to God – get highly defensive about such criticisms. They feel that to reject Christmas is tantamount to rejecting Jesus. And so there is a huge amount of polarization going on.

One aspect of this debate strikes me as somewhat humorous. On the one hand, there are those we might call the “Rigorous Rooters” (people who are very serious about the Jewish roots of their faith) who decry Christmas because it is too pagan. On the other hand, what we might term the “Serious Secularists” in our society decry Christmas because it is too religious! So these two opposite camps are in agreement: we should do away with Christmas. The religious see it as too secular, and the secular see it as too religious!

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*Some decry Christmas because it is too pagan.  
Others decry it because it is too religious!*

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In our study this morning I want to address this issue in three categories. First, I want to give you some **Relevant Facts**. Second, I will mention some **Related Factors and Interpretations of the Facts**. And third, I will close with three **Applications or Recommendations** for your prayerful consideration.

## I. RELEVANT FACTS

**Fact 1.** The date of Messiah's birth is not mentioned in the Bible.

**Fact 2.** The date of Messiah's birth is unknown.

Even today, scholars cannot prove when Jesus was born. They are in universal agreement about one thing: that he was *not* born on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Jesus probably was born sometime between the years 4-6 B.C. Herod the Great was alive when he was born, and Herod died in 4 B.C. It also is likely that Jesus was born in the springtime. We know from ancient Jewish literature, for example, that shepherds in ancient Judea brought their flocks in from the fields in early November and did not take them back out into the pastures until early spring, probably March or April.

**Fact 3.** The earliest written records in Christian tradition that speculate about the date of Messiah's birth are to be found in the first part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (i.e., two hundred years after Jesus).

**Fact 4.** Around the year 200, Clement of Alexandria argued that Jesus was born on *Pachon 25* in the Egyptian calendar, which corresponds to May 20 in our calendar.

**Fact 5.** Clement was responding to a view circulated by Basilides, a Gnostic theologian in Alexandria, who claimed that Messiah's *epiphany* (appearance or manifestation) occurred on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January.

The Gnostic view held that the Christ was not fully human. Spirit and matter do not interact. Spirit is pure, matter is corrupt. So Christ took on only the appearance of a man, and this *manifestation* of deity, according to Basilides occurred on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. This date for Epiphany (a term still used today but with different associations) is early and important.

**Fact 6.** Another significant date is March 25<sup>th</sup>. Some leaders in the early church came to the conclusion that Jesus was crucified on this date, corresponding to the spring equinox in the Roman calendar.

It was not uncommon in antiquity to believe that great men died on the same day as their birth. In this case, the conviction developed that the Messiah was both conceived and crucified on March 25<sup>th</sup>. If that were the case, then going forward nine months to his birth, you would get the date of December 25<sup>th</sup>.

**Fact 7.** The first recorded mention of December 25<sup>th</sup> as the Nativity of Christ is not found until the year 336 in what is called the *Philocalian* calendar. (We are now three hundred years out from the death and resurrection of Jesus.)

**Fact 8.** The 25<sup>th</sup> date corresponded in the Roman calendar to the festive pagan celebration of the winter solstice, on which citizens throughout the Roman empire celebrated *Natalis Solis Invicti* – the (re)Birth of the Invincible Sun. The ancient pagan view was that the Sun (god) seemed to be perishing or diminishing through the autumn, coming to its lowest point on December 25<sup>th</sup>, and then in effect was born again and continued to strengthen throughout the spring and summer. So the Invincible or Unconquerable Sun was celebrated with gala and raucous Roman festivities on this date.

**Fact 9.** Under the influence of the Church at Rome, the Nativity celebration on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December became commonplace in the West only at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, more than 400 years after the actual event in Judea, the celebration of Messiah's birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> became widespread in the Western church.

**Fact 10.** The Nativity festival on December 25<sup>th</sup> spread to the East only gradually. The festival of Epiphany on January 6<sup>th</sup> was a far more important date there. Over time Epiphany became associated with a number of things, including the baptism and the birth of Christ, and even the date of the Magi's visit.

**Fact 11.** It was only by the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century that most Eastern Churches replaced January 6<sup>th</sup> with December 25<sup>th</sup> as the date of the Nativity. The Church in Jerusalem was the last holdout. Not until the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century (549) did the original church shift to the December festival. Some Eastern communities to this day, such as the Armenian Church, still celebrate the birth of Christ on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

**Fact 12.** Our final fact is this: Christmas (from the old English for *Christ's Mass*, a term first used in 1038) is not a biblical festival. The Nativity is biblical; the festival celebrating the Nativity is post-biblical. Matthew and Luke both speak of the Nativity of the Messiah. But the festival commemorating the Nativity is much later – essentially 4<sup>th</sup> century – and therefore post-biblical.

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The Festival of the Nativity was not without controversy from the very beginning. That controversy continued through the centuries, and is ongoing even today.

For example, neither ancient Jewish tradition nor the Bible celebrated birthdays. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Church's first great theologian, Origen, chastised Christians for doing so. He said celebrating birthdays was pagan, noting that the practice was adhered to "by unrighteous men like Pharaoh and Herod the Great" (the only mention of birthdays in the Bible), and thus should not be celebrated by Christians. On the other hand, the powerful preacher, John Chrysostom, at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Antioch urged Christians to keep the Festival of the Nativity.

Only in the Middle Ages did Christmas celebrations gain widespread popular support, and sad to say, often were accompanied by less than sober and virtuous activities. Such immorality was consistently and widely condemned by the Church. The Reformers frowned on Christmas celebrations for this same reason.

Christmas was banned in England for a period of time, only to return to great vigor and popular appeal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due in no small part to the writings of Charles Dickens. The Puritans in our own country denounced Christmas celebrations in early America. The contours and character of Christmas as we know it today really date to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## II. Related Factors and Interpretations of the Facts

**Point 1.** Why does the Bible not mention the date of Jesus' birth? I would urge caution in drawing conclusions from silence – claiming, for instance, that it is not mentioned because God doesn't want us to celebrate Christ's birth. The fact is that the early believers were far more concerned with the death and resurrection of our Lord, which they commemorated in the historical and biblical context of Passover.

**Point 2.** To say that a festival is *post-biblical* is not to say necessarily that it is *anti-biblical*. This is an important distinction. Examples of this principle abound in Jewish tradition and in the New Testament.

For example, nowhere does the Torah (Pentateuch) prescribe that Jews should assemble in a synagogue on Shabbat, a well-established custom within Judaism during the Second Temple period and one that Jesus honors (Lk 4:16). Nor is pronouncing a blessing *before* a meal stipulated anywhere in the Hebrew Bible (*cf.* Dt 8:10), but the Sages of Israel established the custom – and Jesus carried on that tradition.

Here is an example more pertinent to our discussion. Consider the winter festival of Hanukkah, which is post-biblical (to the Hebrew Bible). It commemorates the defeat of the Syrian monarch Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 B.C. by a faithful band of brothers, the Maccabees. We read in John 10:22-23 that Jesus went up to the Temple in Jerusalem for the “Feast of Dedication” or Hanukkah. So the fact that Hanukkah is a post-biblical festival surely does not imply that it is *anti-biblical*.

By the way, the meaning of this festival shifted over time. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the focus of Hanukkah was on the military victory of little Israel against the mighty army of the Syrians. After the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 and following the Second Jewish revolt in 135, the Rabbis began to downplay the military aspects of the revolt and emphasized instead the more spiritual aspects of Hanukkah – the rededication of the Temple and the supernatural light that God provided for the Menorah. This is a good example of how a festival can shift in meaning, given changing historical circumstances and the spiritual needs of a community.

Note this point: Hanukkah commemorates an historic event in the life of God's people, and subsequently was established as a festival in order to remember the event. This principle, I suggest, can be applied to the birth (and the resurrection) of the Messiah. The Nativity of Jesus was a biblical event that literally changed history. Now, how we wish to commemorate it is open to question and discussion and to creative consideration.

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**Point 3.** Many pagan practices in antiquity are parallel to – and in some cases seem to be the antecedents for – some of our Christian customs surrounding Christmas. The

evidence here is tricky, causality is not always clear, and alternative explanations are possible.

For example, the weeklong Roman festival of *Saturnalia* celebrating the war god, Saturn, began on 17 December and culminated on 25 December. During this enormously popular festival all boundaries of morality were thrown off; drunkenness, lewdness and licentiousness were the order of the day. Caroling was a popular feature of *Saturnalia* – caroling through the streets in an inebriated and often undressed state. Lights, parties and erotic action were the order of the day. All of this was done in the context of the Roman winter solstice on December 25<sup>th</sup> – a day of festive celebration and invocation of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquerable Sun.

The Church Fathers consistently railed against the idolatry and immorality of *Saturnalia*. They consistently condemned the paganism and idolatry of the festival, and yet *Saturnalia* proved tenaciously persistent and pervasive throughout the ancient Roman world.

**Point 4.** Eventually, church leaders substituted the Festival of the Nativity commemorating Christ's birth for the pagan Roman celebration of *Sol Invictus*. That is clear. What is not so clear, especially to some critics of Christmas, is why. *Why* did the Church Fathers do this? Three factors are important to consider.

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***Why did the Church Fathers  
substitute the Festival of the Nativity  
for the pagan Roman celebration of Sol Invictus?***

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**A.** The date of December 25<sup>th</sup> already was under consideration as a possible candidate for the birth of Christ. The three key dates from this period – January 6<sup>th</sup>, March 25<sup>th</sup> and December 25<sup>th</sup> – all circulated widely and were considered relevant to the Nativity of Jesus.

**B.** The Church Fathers probably chose December 25<sup>th</sup> as the Nativity Festival in order to *counter* paganism, not to utilize it or join into it. They wanted to turn attention away from the “Invincible Sun” toward the “Sun of Righteousness.” One of the oft-cited and favorite texts of the early church was Malachi 4:2: “*But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings*” (KJV). The Church Fathers wanted to shift allegiance away from the common Roman affirmation, “Caesar is Lord,” to the true revelation that “Jesus is Lord.” They wanted to shift peoples’ activities from immoral conduct to holy consecration.

**C.** The fact that the Festival of the Nativity of Christ came to prominence and widespread celebration in the 4<sup>th</sup> century is not a coincidence.

The greatest theological-spiritual battle that the Church combated in the early centuries was the heresy of Arianism, which nearly carried the day. What was the core issue with Arianism? The divinity of Jesus as the Son of God. Was he of the *same* substance

as God or was he only of a *similar* substance? Was he co-eternal with God or was he the first-created of all created beings?

Church councils concluded that the Incarnation – the revelation of the Word en-fleshed – was the decisive, distinctive and defining doctrine of the New Testament. For them, the festival of the Nativity reinforced the centrality of this preeminent truth in the minds of the people. The fact that the Festival of the Nativity came to prominence in the 4<sup>th</sup> century therefore is directly related to the emphasis the Church Fathers placed on the Incarnation – that in Jesus of Nazareth God was incarnate, come for our salvation.

In addition they battled the insidious but influential Gnostic view (as with Basilides, for example). Church leaders insisted, contra Gnosticism, that Jesus was in fact born of a woman and was fully man, not just the appearance of one. Drawing attention to his Nativity was a way of emphasizing that truth.

The Church in the early centuries, therefore, had to counter the mere “appearance of Christ,” which was the Gnostic view, and the “semi-deity of Christ,” which was the Arian view. Their Orthodox view was reinforced in the minds of the populace by the celebrating the Festival of the Nativity, and for that reason it became a Christian festival of paramount importance.

**Point 5.** What about Christmas trees? Many insist that they are pagan in origin – that they can be traced back to the pagan religions that worshipped the Earth goddess and Nature, including trees. So pagan celebrants would cut them down, bring them into their homes and decorate them as part of their idolatry.

This last point simply is not true. They did consider the Earth sacred, especially trees, but they did not cut them down. That’s the whole point: the trees are sacred. You don’t chop one down and bring it into your house! Pagans often did use evergreen boughs, however, in the context of their winter solstice celebrations. And because of these pagan associations the Church in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century expressly prohibited Christians from using evergreens as decorations for the Nativity.

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***Wow, Jeremiah is talking about Christmas trees!  
Or so it seems to some.***

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Other critics of Christmas would take us to Jeremiah 10 to prove that the Bible expressly forbids Christmas trees. Consider the text, verses 1-4:

*Hear the word which the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false. A tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move...*

Wow, Jeremiah is talking about Christmas trees! Or so it seems to some. In fact he is not talking about Christmas trees but about idols – crafted wooden idols that were

adorned with silver or sometimes overlaid with silver and gold. This becomes clear if you keep reading (verses 5ff):

*Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good ... They [the pagans] are both stupid and foolish; the instruction given by idols is no better than wood! Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the artisan and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is blue and purple; they are all the product of skilled workers. (NRSV)*

Christmas trees actually came into popularity only in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, drawing upon a German custom dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. So they are of relatively modern origin in the Christmas context.

Now using a Christmas tree is not one of the ways that Keren and I choose to commemorate the Nativity. The festival of Hanukkah for us, overlapping as it does with the Christmas season, has become an increasingly meaningful way to remember the Messiah. Lighting the Menorah candles each night reminds us of the One who is the Light of the World (Jn 8:12) and of his ever increasing illumination. In Jewish tradition the menorah is said to emblemize the Tree of Life, and when it is filled with the oil of the Holy Spirit it burns supernaturally. The nine branches of the Hanukkah menorah even correspond to the nine fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)! So this festival that Jesus himself celebrated reminds us to (re)dedicate ourselves as part of a community that bears his name and is called to holiness unto the Lord.

On the other hand I have a longtime friend in the Hebraic Renewal Movement who finds it very meaningful to use a Christmas tree to commemorate the Nativity of the Lord. The tree reminds him that Messiah alludes to himself as “The Green Tree” (Lk 23:31; cf. Ezk 20:47) – a Messianic title referring to the Righteous One. And the star atop the tree is a symbol for him of the “star that shall come out of Jacob” (Nu 24:17), a prophetic reference to the Messiah, and of the “Bright Morning Star” of Jesus’ own self-description (Rev 22:16).

**Point Six.** Symbols are powerful and important, but they are not magical. We must not confuse the *power* of a symbol for some kind of *magical force*. Symbols do not have some kind of absolute, unchanging significance. Their meaning is related to context and to intentionality.

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The Bible, including the Torah, is full of symbols and images. God specified images to be woven into the curtains in front of the Holy of Holies; the very Ark of the Tabernacle had *Cherubim* – creatures apparently with human faces. God is not opposed to the use of images. He is opposed to idolatry or “graven images”. He utilizes images for divine

purposes. You cannot attend a Passover Seder, for example, and not be struck by the symbolism of virtually every element in it. Or come to the Table of the Lord and not be moved by the powerful images of Messiah's shed blood and broken body.

Symbols help define reality for us. They are powerful and important, and convey great truths. But the key to their meaning is always context and *kavannah* (intention). Thus the same symbol can convey a radically different reality for one person than for another.

Consider the cross as an example. What does it mean to Christians? What does it mean to Jews? For us it is a powerful symbol of the incredible love of God and the sacrifice of His Son on our behalf. For Jews, however, the cross is a terrible reminder of the Crusaders who bore the image upon their shields and their tunics, as they burnt synagogues and slaughtered innocent Jewish men, women and children. It is a symbol of centuries of Christian persecution, in the name of Christ, of his Jewish brethren. Same symbol, radically different meanings.

How about the *Magen David*, the Star of David? Books have been written claiming that it is an occult symbol – i.e., demonic. Israel it is claimed is under a curse because the six-pointed star of intersecting triangles is on the national flag. It is true that the six-pointed star is an ancient Hindu symbol with occult connotations. Does that mean that because the image is on the flag of Israel that demonic forces are thereby loosed? Satanists use the pentagram or five-pointed star in their magical invocations. Does that mean because the United States has fifty five-pointed stars on the flag that we are under the occult influence of Satan when it is displayed?

Symbols are powerful, but they are not magical in and of themselves. Their meaning and power are related to context and the intentionality of the user. The Bible does not hold to a magical worldview, whereby certain signs or secret words automatically manipulate reality.

A case in point is found in Acts 17, where the Apostle Paul is in Athens. He uses a pagan idol to the “Unknown God” as a prop for his spiritual message about the true God. Then he even quotes a secular Greek poet—“in him we live and move and have our being” (17:28)—to convey a profound spiritual truth. So is the Apostle Paul invoking demonic forces by quoting a pagan poet or using a pagan idol? I think not.

My point is simply this: Having a Christmas tree in your house does not necessarily make you a pagan. Unless of course you are bowing down to it! I would even suggest that you are far more likely to get caught up in idolatry and indulge in paganism at the Temples of Mammon (also known as “shopping malls”) than you are sitting in your home enjoying the lights on a Christmas tree that reminds you of the Green-Tree Messiah who is altogether righteous.

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### III. Applications and Recommendations

**First:** It will be helpful in your thinking to distinguish between the *Nativity*, which is biblical, and the *Festival of the Nativity*, which is post-biblical. By all means, celebrate the Nativity of our Lord. Rejoice with the angels at the birth of the Messiah. Reflect on the profound significance of the Incarnation, and resolve in your own life to live more ‘incarnationally’ – for it is the Spirit of Messiah who indwells you and wants to transform your life to the glory of the Father.

The problem it seems to me is not so much that we celebrate Christmas, but that we don't celebrate it well. In other words, the problem is not *that* we celebrate, but *how* we celebrate – because our culture and unchecked consumerism tend to dominate our customs. I would urge you this year to find creative ways to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord in spirit and truth.

The merrymaking of our society during this season is much more akin to Saturnalia than the things of the Spirit. Let's be honest. During the Christmas season our homes, sad to say, are more often noted for the *presents* that are there than for the *Presence* who is there. The spirit of Santa Claus is a more notable feature of our celebrations than the Spirit of Christ!

I wish I had time to tell you about *Santa Claus*; that's quite an interesting story. I can only give you this personal aside: From my point of view, Santa Claus is about as relevant to Christ's birth as rabbits are to his resurrection!

To summarize my first recommendation: *Make the Nativity the focus of the season, not the Festival.*

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**Second:** *Consider simplifying and sanctifying the Nativity season this year.*

Simplify in the spirit of the original Nativity, as opposed to being submerged by consumerism in the service of Mammon. Be redemptive with your giving – buy less and give more. Why not take a portion of your planned gift money and give it to the poor? Why not redeem your money this year? Give more to charitable causes than you ever have before.

Let us make every effort to focus on Jesus the Messiah – his incarnation, his life, and the joy of his Spirit. Let's be more concerned about Christ showing up Christmas morning than Santa Claus! May our homes be known for the sweet spirit of Messiah permeating the festivities rather than for the frantic profusion of gifts, foods and merry-making. Christmas actually is one of the most impressive ways we can bear witness of our Lord to friends and family, and even to our society. So let's redeem the time.

**Third:** *Be more informed about this holiday and be more respectful of differing points of view.*

Let us listen to one another's concerns, and let us benefit by one another's cautions. Be very careful about judgmental attitudes towards those whose views or practices differ from yours. Judgmentalism and condescension do not honor the Messiah. Be a little more self-reflective: judge yourself.

This reminds me of a story told by a friend from Israel. He was on a ministry trip to Florida, and while there visited the impressive (and expensive) new home of a Christian couple. The husband took my friend to the garage to show off his brand-new boat, parked next to some beautiful cars. As they were talking, something was said about Christmas. "Oh," said the man, "we don't celebrate Christmas. It is too pagan!" What's wrong with this picture?

Let us examine our own lives this season of the Nativity. For the sake of Messiah and the edifying of our community of faith, let us all reassess the Nativity holiday and celebrate the Incarnation with focus and with great joy, together.

In other words, what I am saying to you is this: To some aspects of this holiday, we need to say "Hallelujah!" To other aspects of this holiday we need to say "Bah Humbug!" If you agree, say "Amen".

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**At the request of the Elders of Church of the Messiah in Dayton, Ohio, Dwight A. Pryor taught on the subject of Christmas on 2 December 2006. The article above is a reduced and edited transcript of that message. For additional articles or downloads of lectures and teaching series by Dr. Pryor, please visit [www.jcstudies.com](http://www.jcstudies.com).**