

Question: Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25?

Answer: Christmas, from the Latin *Cristes Maesse* means the Mass of Christ. It has been celebrated on December 25 since at least the mid 4th century. Yet, December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth is not held with certainty. The difficulty in trying to figure out when Jesus was born is found in the lack of information in the New Testament. In the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, there are no indications or clear insights that would lead one to conclude that Jesus was born in the month of December, let alone on the 25. During the earliest development of the Church from Christ's death until 200 A.D., celebrating the birth of Jesus was not encouraged and in fact looked down upon. The reason for this hesitancy to celebrate Jesus' birth goes back to the attitudes of those still worshipping the gods of the Roman Imperial Cult and other pagan religions. The Romans were very much concerned with the birthdays of their gods. They often worshiped their gods according to their birthdays. Origen (185-232), an early Church father and brilliant theologian commented that honoring Christ like the pagans honored Herod and Pharaoh would be wrong and misguided. (Christianity Today) Origen believed that sinners alone celebrated the birthday of gods, not saints. (New Advent) Not all agreed with Origen. Aside from the date of December 25 in our modern calendars, the first evidence that there was a feast day for the birth of Christ comes from Alexandria, Egypt around the year 200. The date on which it was celebrated was significantly different. According to our modern calendar, the Alexandrians would have celebrated Christ's birth on May 20. (New Advent) Besides the Alexandrians, many more speculations were made by our early Church Fathers as to which date Christ was actually born. Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 155) believed that since according to Genesis God created the sun on the fourth day, so too Jesus must have been born on the fourth day or Wednesday. (Christianity Today)

The date has not only been debated amongst the early Church Fathers. It has also been argued by many modern scholars. The region Jesus would have been born in is not subject to hostile wintery conditions comparable to those we endure in Iowa. With this said, if Jesus was in fact born in the month of December, he and his family could have still potentially been caught amidst hostile weather primarily in the form of rain. The month of December in Israel is part of the rainy season. Heavy rains in an area where rain does not often fall would have made the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem particularly tricky for Mary and Joseph.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph would have been required to travel because of the census that the Roman Emperor Augustus instituted. (Luke 2:1-2). Scholars wonder whether or not the census would have taken place during the rainy season because of the potential treacherous conditions people traveling would have encountered. The decree from the Emperor would have required all those away from their own towns to return. This included Joseph returning to Bethlehem with Mary. The infancy narrative in Luke also talks about shepherds taking watch over their flocks in the fields (Luke 2:8). Experts have debated whether or not shepherds would have risked keeping their flocks of sheep in the fields at night during the rainy season. These facts lead one to conclude that the events Luke gives account of, may not have taken place in the month December. With this said, these issues raise more questions and cannot place with certainty a date for Jesus' birth.

Probably the best reason we celebrate Christmas on December 25 has no historical base as the birth of Christ. Instead, it comes from the Romans and their practice of worshipping other gods. For the first two hundred years or so of the Church, there was no celebration of Christ's birthday. However, in the mid third century, as listed above, many ideas came about as to when the birth of Christ would have been. The speculations on the exact date of Christ's birth, and a date finally being set is probably most attributed to several corresponding feast days of the Romans, one of them being their most popular god of the 3rd and 4th centuries. The Roman cult of the sun god and his birthday *Natalis Invicti* fell on December 25. Another popular feast day also took place on the same day, the birthday of Mithras, "the Sun of Righteousness" who was the god of Mithraism, a very popular cult amongst Roman soldiers in the 3rd century. (Christianity Today) These gods both had a strong relationship to the sun. They were worshipped and celebrated by the Romans on December 25 because the Julian calendar, to which the Romans followed, had the winter solstice fall on December 25 instead of December 21. Thus the Romans believed that they were worshipping their gods on the winter solstice.

To make the transition from pagan gods to Christianity easier, some agreed that it would be acceptable to place Jesus' birth on the most popular pagan holiday of the 3-4th centuries. It was well founded that the transition from the Roman cults to Christianity came easier with assimilation of holidays. (Christianity Today) It is possible that the Emperor Constantine whom converted to Christianity after the Battle of the Milvian Bridge and who made Christianity the official religion of the empire set Jesus' birth on December 25. The reason was because like many others, he previously had a strong devotion to the sun god Sol Invictus whose birthday was also celebrated in the month of December.