

Frederick William Dame

CHRISTMAS



Christmas Nativity Scene

Source: nagygl at <http://morguefile.com/archive/?display=192318&>

Origins

The customs and traditions of Christmas have developed from heathen beginnings to the present day. Christmas as we know it to be the Birthday of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior has been celebrated by Christians only since the fourth century. Before that time Easter was the more important of the two religious celebrations. Christmas, if observed took a second place to Easter, the time to remember and celebrate the death of Christ on the cross and His resurrection into eternal life.

The etymology of the word Christmas is made up of the Old English *Christes messe*, meaning *Christ's feast day, mass*. This occurred about in the first half of the

twelfth century. In Middle High German (c. 1150) there is the phrase *Ze den wihen nahten*, which means *that in the holy night*, which signifies *when Christ was born*. *Wihen nahten* is the source of the German word for Christmas: *Weihnachten*.

There are many explanations concerning why December 25 was chosen as the day to observe the celebration of Christ's birth. Traditionally speaking, March 25 was celebrated as the beginning of spring, the day of creation, and the day of conceiving. Therefore, it was logical that nine months later Christ would be born. Another explanation is that December 25 was the cult celebration of the Feast of the Sun-god – the winter solstice – in Rome. This day was extremely important for other cultures that were part of the Roman Empire. In 217 Hyppolitus of Rome (170-235), considered by Church historians to be the first anti-pope, attempted to replace the cult-oriented Sun-god celebration with the celebration of the *Birth of Christ*. The symbolic behind the attempt was that *Christ is the Light of the World*, and after the winter solstice the days in the northern hemisphere become longer, forcing the defeat of darkness. Furthermore, in the Old Testament Jesus is referred to as the *Sun of Justice*. (Malachi 3:20.)

Eventually only Pope Liberius (Pope from 17 May 352 to 24 September 366) was successful in establishing December 25 as Christmas. At the Second Council of Constantinople in 381 under Emperor Theodosius (346-395, ruled 379-395), the date became official Church policy. By the seventh century the recognized tradition had become well established in Germany. At the Synod of Mainz in 813, December 25 was officially declared to be *festum nativitas Christi*.

The Gospel Accounts

The Gospels of St. Luke and St. Matthew are not interested in biographical presentations of personages, but place their importance on the announcement of Christ's Birth with the accompanying star of Bethlehem and the arrival of the Wise Men. St. Luke uses only a few, but meaningful, detailed words describing Christ's Birth, but a number of sentences to announce the coming of Christ to the shepherds. The importance of notifying the shepherds as the first group of persons to know of Christ's birth is because along with tax collectors and sinners, shepherds belonged to the despised persons among the Jewish people. Thus, Jesus becomes at once their friend. The angels are part of the story of Christ's Birth because they are the final-temporal bringers of the Word. Christmas in this interpretation is at-one-and-the-same time the *Light of Prophecy* and the *Fulfillment of the Apocalypse*.

Myth or Truth?

The question is not easy to answer. A large part of the nativity story is not documented, academic narrative. Yet, this does not automatically mean that everything is a lie or a myth. Indeed, even composed narratives can and do often have truths in them. For the authors of the respective Gospels it was not a question

of writing total, historical accuracy. Their relating of the Birth of Jesus concerned the more important aspect of His incarnation. We sometimes smile when we see pictures of the manger scene or the real enactments of the Birth of Jesus Christ with the animals and the three wise men, Mary and Joseph, and Baby Jesus. Many religious painters have placed donkeys, oxen, and sheep into the nativity scenery, even though in the Gospel accounts there is no indication of these animals. Yet, the placing of them in the cradle scene is not arbitrary. The artists vividly portrayed a portion of Isaiah 1:3, "The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." This brings us to

The Meaning of Christmas

Much ecclesiastical accentuation points to the core of Christian faith. It is the nativity lesson about Jesus Christ. It is important to realize that the second person of the Trinity, the Son of the Father, is of a human nature who has accepted His own reality. Jesus Christ is of both a Divine and a human nature. He is unmixed and not separable from the unifying power of the same Divine Person. No one as a human being appears on earth as God. The Birth of Jesus makes clear that this Child is a true God and a true person in indissoluble union, lighting up God's magnificence. This is what is important and becomes life with the Birth of Baby Jesus. This is why nativity scenes like the one above are re-enacted and made public during the Christmas Season. God becomes visible in the Child. This is the reality that is feared by those who denounce Christmas and nativity scenes. May they know the Truth, for the Truth will set them free!

I pray that God will bless you and watch over you.



Source: <http://www.rayfowler.org/2008/12/10/what-was-the-star-of-bethlehem/>

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