

Christ's birth Computations of the date

Shepherds near Bethlehem hear the Angels sing: "Glory to God in the highest, and on Earth, peace toward men of good will." So began the events that we observe as Christmas.

All over the world this holiday will be celebrated. It is called Kerst-Masse in Holland, Noel in France, Il Natale in Italy, Weihnachten in Germany and El Natal in Spain. It is the most beloved of religious festivals.

However, a holiday at this time of year is not original with Christians. For many years before Christ's birth, many groups held festivals at this time of the winter solstice connected with the Earth's fertility and the lengthening of the short, cold winter days.

The Romans, for example, observed the lavish Saturnalia, honoring Saturn, their god of agriculture, from the middle of December to the beginning of the new year. They exchanged gifts, indulged in overeating, drinking and visiting. The Persians did the same in honor of their god Mithra, the diety of light.

THE DATE of Christmas has a difficult history but has been established by computation.

Part of the confusion over the exact year of birth we owe to a monk named Dionysius the Less who lived in the sixth century. Pope John I ordered Dionysius to calculate the date of Jesus' birth. The pope wanted to establish a new calendar beginning at Christ's birth.

Dionysius did his work in great detail, so we can follow his reasoning. He began with John the Baptist, who began to preach in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius (Luke 3:1).

Jesus began his preaching about one year after the Baptist, the 16th year of Tiberius or Roman year 784. Luke 3:23 tells us that Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. Thirty from 784 gives you 754. Thus Pope John I pronounced that the Roman year 754 was the year zero on the new calendar.

But Matthew 2:11 and Luke 1:5 say that Christ was born in the days of Herod. Herod died in the spring of the Roman year 750. That means that Dionysius erred by at least four years. So, according to the current calendar, Christ had to be born at least 4 B.C. and most likely 7 or 8 B.C.

If the year is hard to establish, the exact day is much more difficult. Clement of Alexandria, who died in A.D. 215, held it was April 19. Other churchmen and scholars have advanced the dates of April 18, March 28 or 29 and Sept. 19. Shepherds spending the nights in the fields does suggest spring or fall rather than winter.

Dec. 25 actually was arrived at by computation from the date of Easter. The Greek church put the date of the crucifixion on April 6, and Rome put the date as March 25 - this was confirmed by Dionysius, of course.

THE THEOLOGIANS of the time felt



This scene has long been a symbol of the worldwide religious celebration of Christmas

that there could be no fractions in the life of Jesus, or any chronological imperfections, so he had to die on the anniversary of his conception. Add nine months to April 6, and you arrive at Jan. 6, the commonly held birth date of Jesus in eastern tradition. Adding nine months to March 25 produces Dec. 25, the date we observe the birth of Christ.

As a coincidence the Roman calendar

marked Dec. 25 as the winter solstice, a date we now know to be Dec. 21. The Christians may have seen opportunity knocking and appropriated this natural festive day for their own celebration.

So for some 1,800 years, give or take a few, Christians have been celebrating Jesus' birth Dec. 25. The date is secondary to the central significance. To play it safe, keep the spirit of Christmas year-round.



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