

WHEN DID THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS DATE THE BIRTH OF CHRIST AT DECEMBER 25TH ?

Of the major Christian Holy Days, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are the high points in the Historic Church Year. On these Holy Days we celebrate God the Father's gift of His only-begotten Son in the birth of Jesus Christ, we celebrate God the Son's gift of His life, sufferings, death and resurrection at Passover/Easter, and we celebrate God the Holy Spirit's gift of calling us to faith and dwelling in us through Word and Sacrament.

These Holy Days are also one of the main fronts in the battle against Christianity by people who wish to undermine Christianity. Part of undermining Christianity means undermining all the claims of Christianity about what the Bible teaches. The historical liturgical practice of the church has been the focal point of the application of Biblical doctrine to the faith and lives of the saints. By discrediting the liturgical practice of the Church the enemies of Christianity try to distract from biblical teaching for that day and discredit that teaching.

This is not to say that these liturgical practices or holiday traditions should be required in any legalistic way. This is to point out that the efforts of those who try to discredit the authenticity of Christian Holy days and seek to scandalise the traditions associated with those days do so to undermine the biblical doctrine the Church teaches through the observance of these Holy Days. And so any Christian holy day that could be claimed is claimed by the anti-Christian groups.

There are two basic types of claims against each Christian Holy Day: The first type of claim is that the date itself was stolen from pre-Christian or pagan sources, and the second type of claim is that the traditions celebrated on that holy day are purported to be of pre-Christian/pagan origin. date of Christmas celebration. We will look at two early documents from two Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome. Both of these wrote around the year 200 AD. They both put the date for the celebration of Christ's birth at December 25th in our calendar. Some of the following is a bit technical. I apologise for this. But I think it is necessary for us to have access to these resources and the arguments so we can understand what took place and correct the inaccuracies about when Christmas was first celebrated on December 25th. So when did the earliest Christians date the birth of Christ at December 25th?

In these paragraphs we are not trying to establish when the birth of Christ actually took place. We are trying to establish where and when the Church began to associate the birth of Christ with December 25th or January 6th.

The tradition of celebrating the Nativity of Christ on December 25th or January 6th was spread all across Europe, Africa, and Asia in the early Church. And the tradition was consistent. There was a difference between the Eastern Orthodox Christians and the Western Christians on which day should be emphasised. Should the Christian Church primarily celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25th, when His birth was announced to the people of Israel, or on January 6th when the Gentile Wise men, or Magi, visited Him? Both days are celebrated in the Eastern and the Western Church. The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates January 6th as the Baptism of Jesus rather than the visitation of the Wise Men. But both days were based on the early Church figuring from Scripture that Jesus was conceived in the spring of the year at the time of the full moon of Passover.

The early Church emphasised March 25th the Festival of the Annunciation as the Incarnation of Christ. The old Catholic Encyclopaedia is inaccurate in stating: "The present date of the feast (25 March) depends upon the date of the older feast of Christmas." [Holwek 1907] The textual evidence from the early Church Fathers indicates the opposite.

In recent times there have been several helpful articles published on this topic. This article is indebted to Andrew McGowan's article for Biblical Archaeology Review "How December 25 Became Christmas", T. C. Schmidt's wonderful work, and Roger Pearse's work.

So, the question is, how early did the Church recognise December 25th as the Birth of Christ?

Before the year 200 AD writers in the Church had established several possible dates. These dates were based on the

traditional understandings of when the world was created, the biblical texts, and some very complicated calculations involving solar and lunar calendars from different cultures. Clement of Alexandria wrote his “Stromata” during the period 193-215 AD. He wrote, “*From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, altogether, 194 years, 1 month, 13 days. And there are those who have determined our Savior’s genesis not only the year, but even the day, which they say took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus on the 25th of Pachon... And treating of his passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the sixteenth year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth, but others the 25th of Pharmuthi and others say on the 19th of Pharmuthi the Savior suffered. Indeed, others say that he came to be on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi.*” [Stromata 1.21.145-146]

The important line is “our Savior’s genesis.” The month of Pachon in the Egyptian calendar at that time corresponded to March in the Julian Calendar.

Christ’s genesis or conception on the 25th of Pachon was in what our calendar would equate with March 25th. The celebration of Christ’s birth would be nine months later: December 25th, in our calendar.

This first evidence from Clement of Alexandria Egypt strongly suggests that before his writing the Stromata there were people in the Church who had already fixed December 25th as the birth of Christ.

A second example from the same period is Hippolytus of Rome (170 – 235). Between the years 202 and 211 A.D. the Church Father Hippolytus wrote in his Commentary on Daniel (section 4.23.3) about the date of the birth of Christ: “*For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, which happened eight days before the kalends of January [December 25th], on the 4th day of the week [Wednesday], while Augustus was reigning in his forty-second year, but from Adam five thousand and five hundred years. He suffered in the thirty third year, 8 days before the kalends of April [March 25th], the Day of Preparation the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar,*” (The Greek text can be found in volume 9 of Migne’s Patrologia Graecae)

This evidence from Hippolytus of Rome shows that by the end of the 2nd century, the same era as Clement of Alexandria, Christians in Europe as well as Africa recognised December 25th as the date of Christ’s birth.