

# CHRISTMAS 2000 Years Before Christ

by Clayton Steep

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How did customs, celebrated long before the birth of Jesus, come to be called "Christmas"?

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**I**T WAS that festive season again. The little children were filled with anticipation and excitement.

The whole family was busily involved in putting up decorations. Boughs of holly and evergreen were assembled and placed about the house. The mistletoe was hung. A tree was chosen and decorated with trinkets and ornaments.

It was a season of giving and receiving presents, a time to sing songs, admire all the pretty lights and burn the yule log. There were to be parades with special floats, sumptuous meals and merry-making.

A modern Christmas celebration?

Not at all!

At the end of December and the beginning of January all these festive celebrations were taking place in various nations of Europe centuries before Jesus was born!

## An "Old-Fashioned" Christmas

Where Christmas customs came from is really no secret. You can read the origins of Christmas customs in encyclopedias and ready-reference works. The *Encyclopædia Britannica*, for example, draws the reader's attention to these facts: "Christmas customs are an evolution from times that long antedate the Christian period—a descent from seasonal, pagan, religious and

national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition" (15th ed., art. "Christmas").

In ancient times, many of the earth's inhabitants, realizing their dependence upon the sun for light, heat and the growing of crops, watched the sun's yearly course through the heavens with deep interest. At different seasons, feasts and celebrations were held to help, it was thought, the solar orb on its way.

The end of December was an especially significant time in the northern hemisphere. The days were short. The sun was at its lowest point. Special festivals of thanksgiving and encouragement to the sun were held. When, at the winter solstice, the days began to lengthen, there was great celebration lasting into the first part of January. The sun—the light of the world—had been (re)born!

Such festivities, once meant to honor the sun and its god, were freely adopted by the spreading and increasingly popular "Christian" religion. Why not, in the same way, honor Jesus—the real light of the world (even though He was not actually born in December!)?

Through the centuries different combinations of customs developed in different nations. But the fundamental origin of the celebrations go back at least 4,000 years.

## Trees and Candles

The modern Christmas tree is supposed to have originated in German

lands in the Middle Ages. But long before that, their ancestors customarily decorated their homes with lights and greenery at the winter festival.

Since evergreens were green throughout the dead of winter, the ancient Germans looked upon them as especially imbued with life. It was in honor of the tree spirit or the spirit of growth and fertility that greenery was a prominent part of ancient pagan winter celebrations.

The Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and toys at that time of the year. The Druids tied gilded apples to tree branches. It is difficult to trace back exactly where the legend first gained popularity, but to certain peoples an evergreen decorated with orbs and other fruit-like objects symbolized the tree of life in the garden in Eden.

Branches of holly and mistletoe were likewise revered. Not only did these plants remain green through the winter months, but they actually bore fruit at that time, once again honoring the "spirits" of fertility. Still today, catching someone under a branch of mistletoe can serve as a convenient springboard for romantic activity. Few people stop to wonder what in the world such strange customs have to do with the birth of Jesus!

The ancients lit festive fires in the last part of December to encourage the sun just as Christmas bonfires, candles and other lights burn today at the same time

of the year. Use of the “yule log,” part of the “yuletide” season, harkens back to the ritual burning of a carefully chosen log by the Druids. The word *yule* comes from the old Anglo-Saxon word *hweol*, meaning wheel, a round wheel being an appropriate symbol for the sun.

#### **Holiday Cheer?**

You thought the Christmas shopping spree was a 20th century phenomenon?

Listen to how 4th century writer Libanius described end-of-the-year gift-giving and partying in the ancient non-Christian Roman Empire: “Everywhere may be seen . . . well-laden tables. . . . The impulse to spend seizes everyone. He who through the whole year has taken pleasure in saving . . . becomes suddenly extravagant. . . . A stream of presents pours itself out on all sides” (as quoted in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*).

Of all times in the year, it was indeed the season to be jolly. Then, as now, in a constant round of partying, it was common—yes, expected—to seek the “spirit” of the season in whatever intoxicating drink was at hand. Drunkenness was widespread. Fortunately, however, the modes of transportation in those days did not lend themselves to the high rate of drunken-driver-induced traffic fatalities that are part of the Christmas season in many nations today.

#### **And Santa Claus?**

An important part of the pagan harvest festivities—beginning in October-November with what has become Halloween—involved good and bad spirits. In many lands, visitors—usually bringers of good or evil—made their appearance in the winter season. Through blending pagan legends with traditions about saints, certain figures emerged, with similar personalities. We recognize them today in different nations as Santa Claus, Father Christmas, St. Nicholas, St. Martin, the Weihnachtsmann, Père Noël. Whatever name is used, all these winter visitors fulfill a similar role.

These fictional persons—“Christianizations” of the pagan Germanic deities—clearly perpetuate cer-

tain folk-ritual themes wherein varying degrees of rewards and punishments were dealt out to the celebrants. Through the centuries these customs came to be centered around children.

It is not too hard to see a connection between Santa using the chimney, the shoes and stockings hung by the fireplace and the ancient superstitions about hearth spirits. The fireplace served as the natural entrance and exit of the gods of fire and solar gods when they visited homes. For thousands of years, especially among the Chinese, it was customary to sweep and scour the house in preparation for the visit of the hearth spirit. Each year, dressed in a pointed fiery red cap and red jacket, this fire-god traveled from the distant heavens to visit homes and distribute favors or punishments. Today he is welcomed in the Western world each Christmas season.

Popular Christmas customs as we can see, plainly reflect non-Christian legends and practices. Since Jesus was not even born in December to begin with, the logical question to ask is: What is there that is *Christian* about Christmas? Did you know, for example, that some of the very Christmas customs observed today were once banned by the Catholic Council of Rome, the English Parliament and the Puritans of New England?

More important, what does the Bible say about Christmas? Should a Christian have anything to do with such holidays? For the surprising answers write for your free copy of the booklet *The Plain Truth about Christmas*. □