

The Pagan Roots of Christmas: How December 25 and Roman Midwinter Worship Shaped a Christian Feast

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Abstract

This critical review offers a historically informed and biblically governed examination of the modern “Christmas complex” (date, season, symbols, domestic rituals, and cultural scripts) to clarify why many Christians experience conscience-based concern regarding syncretism. Using a structured secondary-data approach, the article (1) distinguishes the New Testament proclamation of the incarnation from later ecclesial and civic constructions of a fixed midwinter nativity feast, (2) synthesizes major scholarly explanations for the emergence of 25 December in late antique Rome, and (3) traces how widely practiced Christmas elements, including evergreen symbolism, mistletoe customs, gift economies, festive license, and child-focused mythologies such as Santa, function as ritual formations that shape desire and moral imagination. Particular attention is given to the relationship between December 25, Roman solar religion, and the wider midwinter festival cycle, and to the ways these inheritances were re-signified in later Christian practice. The analysis argues that the central ethical question is not merely subjective intent (“*I mean it for Jesus*”) but the moral-theological legitimacy of adopting ritual forms whose provenance is non-apostolic and, in several cases, intertwined with pre-Christian seasonal religion and later processes of Christianization. In this framing, modern Christmas is interpreted less as a New Testament ordinance than as a layered tradition that frequently merges Christ-centered language with inherited symbolic economies that can normalize consumerism and diminish biblically regulated worship instincts. The article contributes a practical evaluative framework for pastoral discernment by integrating biblical categories of idolatry and conscience with historical evidence and contemporary analysis of moral formation. The goal is not to condemn individuals but to equip believers to make informed, Scripture-governed decisions marked by humility, clarity, and fidelity in worship.

Keywords: Christmas pagan origins; December 25; Christian syncretism; Sol Invictus; Saturnalia; Constantinian conversion; Christian conscience

A gentle word before we begin. Many sincere Christians celebrate Christmas with affection for family and a genuine desire to honour Jesus. This article does not aim to belittle that sincerity; it aims to guard it. Scripture shows that God's people can drift into mixture without realising it, especially when cultural emotions run high. My purpose, therefore, is not to "win an argument" but to help ordinary believers test traditions by Scripture and sober historical evidence. Whether you eventually abstain from Christmas or retain some practices, do so with humility, not pride; with clarity, not naivety.

1. Introduction

Christmas is often called "the most wonderful time of the year," but how accurate is this description? While millions worldwide engage in gift-giving, tree decorating, and festive meals during this season, the holiday's history reveals some surprising facts.

Long before such festive nostalgia took hold, the earliest believers met in private households under sustained Roman persecution (cf. Rom 16:3–5; 1 Cor 16:19). Social-historical studies confirm that these "house-churches" fostered a resilient network in which the faith multiplied in spite of hostility (Meeks, 2003, pp. 75-79; Stark, 1996, pp. 3-7). The very fact that Christianity kept expanding confounded an empire intent on suppressing it (Stark, 1996; MacMullen, 1984).

In AD 313–314 Constantine reversed imperial policy, publicised his own conversion, and—through the Edict of Milan—granted legal status to the church (Mutie, 2021). Political theologians argue, however, that this "conversion" functioned less as piety than as statecraft: by absorbing the church into imperial structures Constantine secured ecclesial endorsement for his rule and access to its resources (Drake, 2000, pp. 101-105).

Building on Constantine's legal turn, imperial patronage soon repurposed pagan shrines as basilicas and recast venerable deities as Christian saints, a pattern traceable across the Mediterranean

archaeological record (MacMullen, 1984, pp. 87-93; Garbati & Porzia, 2023). This strategy is read by Mills (2020) as "religio-political realignment" aimed at pacifying both constituencies. In the same vein, older fertility and solar figures were re-branded within a nascent Christian pantheon—Semiramis as the Virgin Mary, Tammuz as Jesus, and the Phoenician sun-god Baal as "God the Father" (Hislop, 1959/1853; Woodrow, 1966, pp. 19-34).

By the mid-fourth century, the feast of Christ's Nativity on 25 December is securely attested at Rome, and the evidence sits alongside the Roman calendrical memory of solar celebration. The *Chronography of 354* preserves the famous notice "*VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae*" (25 December) within its depositions list, while the Philocalian calendar tradition also preserves the 25 December entry "N·INVICTI" (the "birthday of the Unconquered"). These data points have fueled two major scholarly explanations: a "*history-of-religions*" account that reads 25 December as a Christian counter-claim within the symbolic world of Roman solar religion, and a "calculation" account that explains the date through early Christian chronological speculation (Bradshaw, 2020; Hijmans, 2003; Nothaft, 2012; *Chronography of 354*, transcribed in MGH and reproduced at Tertullian.org). Either way, the emergence of a fixed midwinter nativity feast is a late-antique development rather than an apostolic ordinance, and it provides the historical backdrop for evaluating Christmas practices in light of biblical conscience today.

2. The Emergence of 25 December in Late Antique Rome

Christmas was once banned in Christian countries, including America, as evidenced by a 1659 public notice that stated: The observation of Christmas having been deemed sacrilege, the exchanging of gifts and greetings, dressing in fine clothing, feasting, and similar satanical practices are hereby forbidden, with the offender liable to a fine of five shillings. This historical notice has been documented on

various websites, including Mass Moments (1659). For example, you can find a reprint of the 1672 edition of Massachusetts's laws, with additional historical context provided by Seger (2016) and Bell (2019). This historical law has been verified through multiple sources, including Snopes, 2018 and the Massachusetts public records. What's particularly noteworthy is that this law classified Christmas practices as both satanical and sacrilegious. The Oxford Dictionary defines sacrilege as *"the violation or misuse of what is regarded as sacred,"* while Merriam-Webster describes it as *"a gross irreverence toward a hallowed person, place, or thing."*

Even if scholarly debate over Sol Invictus and 25 December were settled tomorrow, late-antique December would still confront us as a dense festival matrix. Brumalia lengthened the revelry from late November; Saturnalia institutionalised social inversion, lights, and gift-exchange; regional solstice rites mapped agricultural fears and fertility hopes onto the declining sun. The empire's fourth-century patronage merely redirected these scripts rather than erasing them, allowing temples, feasts, and calendar days to be retitled yet ritually unchanged

In England, Christmas was officially banned by Parliament and the Puritan leaders in 1647 (Historic England, 1972; TCA, n.d.). Under Oliver Cromwell's Puritan leadership, all Christmas-related activities were prohibited from 1647 to 1660. In colonial America, the Puritans maintained their own ban on Christmas from 1659 to 1681. It wasn't until the 19th century that American states began to legally recognize Christmas—Alabama was first in 1836, followed by Louisiana and Arkansas in 1838 (Cromwell Museum, n.d.). These historical bans show how what we now celebrate on December 25th was once condemned as both sacrilegious and satanic.

Looking at the etymology of the word "sacrilege," we find it means "stealer of sacred things." Why is this relevant? Because Christmas celebrations predate the birth of the Messiah by thousands of years. Werner

Keller(1983)'s book "The Bible as History" notes that December 25th was first designated as Christmas Day in AD 324 under the Roman Emperor Justinian, becoming an official holiday by the 6th century AD. The date was chosen to align with an ancient Roman festival—Dies Natalis Invictus (also known as Dies Natalis Solis Invicti or Sol Invictus), meaning "birth of the unconquered Sun." This winter solstice celebration coincided with Saturnalia's final day (Westminster, 2021).

Primary Roman sources such as the Calendar of Philocalus (AD 354) list the birthday of Sol Invictus on viii Kal. Ian. (25 Dec.), while the Chronography of 354 records concurrent Christian and solar observances (Pearse, 2006). Steven Hijmans (2003) argues that Christian leaders "re-signified rather than invented" the date, deliberately eclipsing imperial sun-worship. (Pearse, 2006; Hijmans, 2003)

3. Midwinter Festivals and the Question of Syncretism

On December 25th, followers of Mithraism honored Mithras, the sun deity whose haloed image resembles Lady Liberty. The day also belonged to Saturnalia, a festival honoring Saturn, which ran from December 17th to 23rd (Cartwright, 2016; History.com, 2017; Matthews & Matthews, 1998). During this pagan celebration, Romans gathered at the Temple of Saturn and Roman Forum for sacrifices and public feasts. Saturnalia featured private gift-giving, continuous festivities, and carnival revelry that upended Roman social norms. Macrobius (Saturnalia 1.10) records dice-games, role-reversals, and torchlit feasts that "the new Christian feast later echoed in form if not intent. Even gambling was permitted during this time. Recent classical scholarship confirms that Saturnalia and the birthday of Sol Invictus on 25 December framed the Christian choice of date (Hijmans, 2003; Gifford, 2020).

According to Michael Grant's (1978) "History of Rome," Emperor Aurelian later established a grand Temple of the Unconquerable Sun as Rome's primary

religious center, with its deity's birthday set for December 25th—later becoming Christmas. Another winter festival, Brumalia, honored various deities including Saturn, Chronos, Ceres, Demeter, and Bacchus. By the Byzantine era, these celebrations extended from November 24th through Saturnalia (December 23rd), lasting nearly a month and continuing until the 6th century AD. The festivities included feasting, merrymaking, and animal sacrifices.

This tradition influenced Yule; a modern pagan Wiccan celebration held from December 20th to December 23rd that marks the sun's rebirth. While Germanic peoples originally observed Yule to honor Odin (known as the Germanic god of death, among other titles), it is now one of eight festivals Wiccans celebrate around the Christmas season. The celebration centers not only on honoring the sun's rebirth but also includes magical rituals, bonfires, potluck feasts, and communal gatherings (Chamberlain, 2023; Eldridge, 2025). But what are Christmas's true origins? Did it emerge 2,000 years ago, or does its history stretch back even further into antiquity?

According to the Roman Catholic Church and the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1911, Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church (Martindale, 1908). The encyclopedia states that *"the first evidence of the feast is from Egypt."* What you're about to discover is that Christmas traces its origins back to ancient Babylon. Let's explore some topics commonly associated with Christmas today, starting with Santa Claus.

4. Cultural Accretions: Saints, Folklore, and Commercial Mythologies

Santa Claus is actually derived from St. Nicholas, a Roman Catholic Bishop from the 5th century AD. According to Encyclopedia Britannica (Volume 19, pages 648-649) and Masjid Tucson's Special Publications (2008), St. Nikolaus, Bishop of Myra, was honored by both Greeks and Latins on December

6th (Amstrong, 2008). The encyclopedia notes that a legend of his secret gift-giving to three daughters of an impoverished citizen originated the custom of giving presents on St. Nikolaus Eve (December 6th). This tradition was later transferred to Christmas Day, establishing the connection between Christmas and Santa Claus (Amstrong, 1970; Tyehimba, 2004; Britanica, 2024). English (2020) traces how German and Dutch folklore fused St Nicholas with Odin-like imagery, creating the secular Santa exported to America.

Whatever its linguistic playfulness, *"Santa/Satan"* wordplay does not constitute historical evidence. A more substantial question is how a bishop-saint tradition (St Nicholas) was reshaped through European folklore and then modern commercial culture into a child-centered mythos that can function quasi-religiously within the household (English, 2020). Let's examine the Christmas tree's origins, which differ significantly from common belief. The Christmas tree tradition began in Germany but traces its roots through Rome, Egypt, and ultimately to Babylon. This practice is even referenced in Scripture, specifically in Jeremiah 10:1-4, which warns against cutting down trees from the forest, decorating them with silver and gold, and fastening them with nails and hammers.

Recent ritual-theory studies show that for many children the December figure of Santa functions as an omniscient moral arbiter—"he knows if you've been bad or good"—who rewards merit and punishes fault. Such traits replicate divine categories while diverting affection from Christ. Even when parents insist it is "just fun," Scripture's prohibition of falsehood (Eph 4:25) and charge to nurture children "in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4) argue against annual deception. English traces the post-Reformation layering of bishop-saint legend, Odin-like folklore, and nineteenth-century commercial myth to show how the Santa system ultimately *displaces* rather than complements gospel catechesis.

5. Evergreens, Decorations, and the Ritualization of Nature

What is the true purpose of the Christmas tree? According to William Walsh's *Curiosities of Popular Customs* (1898, page 242); Pack (2009) and Caswell (2021), an old Babylonian fable tells of an evergreen tree sprouting from a dead tree stump. The old stump symbolized the dead Nimrod, while the new evergreen tree represented Nimrod's rebirth through Tammuz among the Druids. Different cultures had their sacred trees: the Egyptians revered the palm, while in Rome, the fir was decorated with red berries during Saturnalia.

Evergreen greens as symbolic continuity. Pre-Christian winter use of holly, ivy, and wreaths was not mere decoration; it was frequently apotropaic—meant to ward off misfortune in the year's darkest weeks. That history means the pastoral issue is not whether greenery is *physically* evil, but whether churches may uncritically adopt symbols whose original logic invoked protective magic

The Christmas tree carries additional symbolic meaning according to Walsh (1898). Both the obelisk and the Christmas tree are considered phallic symbols associated with Nimrod. Babylonian tradition tells that after Nimrod's death (who was known as Horus in Egyptian tradition), his wife Semiramis (called Isis in Egypt) collected all his body parts except for his reproductive organ. This missing part became symbolized by the obelisk and later the Christmas tree. Through this symbolism, Christmas celebrations inadvertently honor Nimrod, who was worshipped as a sun deity. We'll examine this connection in more detail as we continue.

Moving from calendar to custom, present-giving traditions trace back to Saturnalia, which honored Saturn, the deity of agriculture. The ornaments we see on Christmas trees also have ancient origins. Romans decorated their trees during Saturnalia to honor Bacchus, the god of fertility, placing 12 candles on them to honor their sun god. The Greeks

worshipped Adonis, who was said to be resurrected by the serpent Asclepius—another reference to the theme of rebirth. Germans traditionally attached fruit and candles to their trees to honor Woden, from whom we get the name "Wednesday" (History.com, 2025).

According to the Philadelphia Church of God and The Herb Society, Christmas tree decorations have pagan origins and symbolism (Heerma, 2012; Anthony, 2019). The lights and ornaments are connected to ancient sun worship practices, while the star commonly placed on top is linked to various pagan deities. These decorative elements were adapted from pre-Christian traditions that honored nature deities rather than having any biblical foundation.

Even reindeer carry deeper symbolic meaning. In pagan tradition, reindeer are associated with Cernunnos, the horned god of Celtic mythology who resembles the Baphomet. Cernunnos was considered the deity of fertility, animals, wealth, and the underworld. According to *Spirit Animal Mysteries* (n.d.) and *Think Differently About Sheep* (n.d.), reindeer symbolism is deeply rooted in shamanic traditions, where they were seen as spirit guides between worlds. Norse mythology adds another layer, featuring Sleipnir, Odin's eight-legged horse—a helping spirit who travels through different worlds in Norse tales. This connection suggests that Satan, not Santa, guides these mythological reindeer through Christmas night.

The bows of holly represent fertility symbols, similar to rabbits and Easter eggs, while also paying homage to Isis, the fertility goddess commonly known as Easter. As for wreaths, mistletoe, and the Yule log, the *Encyclopedia Americana* notes that these are all relics of pre-Christian times (Hillerbrand, 2025). Frederick J. Haskin's 1926 book *"Answers to Questions"* explains that Christmas wreaths can be traced to pagan customs of decorating buildings and places of worship during winter festivals.

The Yule log represents the Scandinavian fertility god and the rebirth of the sun god Lu, carrying phallic symbolism. It held a central role in Teutonic nature worship rituals. According to Wildwood Pagan (2016) and the Encyclopedia Britannica (2024), mistletoe was deeply significant in Druid ceremonies and remains prominent in folklore. Its Christmas associations began during Anglo-Saxon times. Mistletoe, which grows parasitically on oak trees, held special importance because Druids conducted their worship in oak groves. Fergus (2017) notes that Druids viewed mistletoe as an "all-healer" in Celtic tradition, believing it possessed magical healing powers and using it as a fertility aid for animals. They gathered it during special ceremonies. Holly berries, like mistletoe, were sacred to the sun god. The original sun log evolved into the Yule Log—with "Yule" meaning "wheel," a longstanding pagan symbol for the sun.

You might think Christmas is simply a celebration of the Messiah mentioned in the New Testament, honoring his supposed birth on December 25th. However, historical evidence shows he wasn't born on or near December 25th. The Messiah of the New Testament, whose name is Jesus Christ, was likely born during the fall feasts (September-October), as supported by both biblical and historical evidence. According to Messianic Bible(n.d.) and as Rab Davis (n.d.) explains this further, the timing of Jesus's birth aligns with the Fall Feasts, particularly during Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles), based on the priestly service schedule of Zechariah (John the Baptist's father) and other biblical chronological markers. Talley (1991) and Bradshaw (2020) note that early Christian writers proposed several dates—March 25, April 2, and January 6—before December 25 prevailed under imperial influence.

December 25th was already celebrated as the birth date of numerous deities in various mythologies, including Nimrod, Horus (Egypt), Mithras (Persia), Tammuz (Babylon), and others. According to Nehemia Gordon's research (2021) and Muslim Converts (n.d.), each of these deities was depicted

with sun symbolism, which helps explain the prevalence of sun imagery in ancient cultures and modern religious practices.

The specific choice of December 25th relates to the winter solstice. This date falls near the solstice—the shortest day and longest night of the year—when daylight begins to increase, symbolizing rebirth. Historical evidence suggests this was associated with the worship of various deities including Tammuz, as documented in ancient Mesopotamian sources and confirmed by Islamic historical records.

Notably, Scripture never commands the observance of birthdays. The only birthday celebrations mentioned in Scripture are those of Pharaoh (Genesis 40:20-23) and Herod (Matthew 14:6), both instances marked by tragic events - the execution of Pharaoh's chief baker and the beheading of John the Baptist. Neither our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us to celebrate His birthday, nor does our Father command us to observe Christmas. Scripture reveals that the Messiah was not born during the time we now celebrate as Christmas. We know this because Luke 2:8 describes shepherds watching their flocks in the fields at night when the Messiah was born. This could not have occurred in Judea in December, as shepherds brought their flocks from the mountainsides no later than October 15th to protect them from the cold rainy season. Both Song of Solomon 2:11 and Ezra 10:9 confirm that winter was a rainy season when shepherds could not stay in the open fields at night.

According to Adam Clarke's Commentary (1997, Vol5, p.370) of the New York edition, Hebrew shepherds would traditionally take their sheep to the fields and deserts around Passover in early spring and bring them home with the first autumn rains, long before winter began. Additionally, Luke 1 indicates that the Messiah was conceived six months after John the Baptist, which means He was born six months after John during the fall feasts.

Scripture explicitly warns against celebrating Christmas. In Jeremiah 10:1-4, our Father warns us to

"learn not the way of the heathen" and describes practices similar to Christmas customs that pagans observed centuries before the Messiah's birth. In Amos 5:21-22, our God declares, "I hate, I despise your feast days and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them, neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts."

The Torah demonstrates how Christmas observance breaks divine commandments. Exodus 20:1-17 shows it violates the first, second, and third commandments. Deuteronomy 12:29-31 forbids involvement in pagan practices, while Deuteronomy 12:1-4 prohibits graven or carved images. Additionally, Exodus 34:13, Deuteronomy 7:5, and Deuteronomy 16:21 specifically forbid Asherah poles or trees, which would include Christmas trees, as confirmed in Jeremiah 2:20. The New Testament reinforces these principles in passages like 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, which warns against mixing light with darkness and calls believers to separate from unclean practices. 1 John 2:15-17 further advises against loving worldly customs, while Colossians 2:8 cautions against being deceived by traditions of men rather than following Christ.

This raises several crucial questions we must consider: Are we following truth or Babylonian customs? Are we honoring the true God while participating in ancient pagan rituals? What message do we send our children when we mix biblical truth with pagan traditions? As Alexander Hislop (1916) notes in "The Two Babylons," long before the Christian era, heathens celebrated a festival at this same time of year honoring the son of the Babylonian Queen of Heaven. The Roman Church later adopted this festival, merely giving it Christ's name to accommodate pagan converts.

6. Biblical Conscience, Idolatry, and Pastoral Discernment

Before participating in Christmas celebrations, especially knowing its roots in paganism and

Babylonian traditions, we must consider how to ensure our worship remains pure and undefiled. We must ask ourselves: Are we following truth or tradition? Could decorating trees, exchanging gifts, and using these ancient pagan symbols compromise our spiritual integrity? How can we justify incorporating practices that God specifically commanded the Israelites to destroy? Are we unknowingly inviting spiritual forces into our homes through these ritualistic practices? Just as the Israelites were warned about adopting pagan customs, should we be concerned about the spiritual doorways we might be opening?

Consider carefully: When we display symbols with documented connections to ancient deity worship, could we be creating spiritual bridges to forces we don't fully understand? What spiritual implications might arise from teaching our children to believe in and welcome Santa Claus - a figure with documented ties to ancient spirits and deities? If God explicitly warned against adopting the practices of other nations, how can we rationalize incorporating these same elements into our worship today? What would Jesus say about using His holy name to justify celebrations centered around material excess, feasting, and worldly entertainment? When we claim to honor His birth while indulging in festivities that often lead to overindulgence, materialism, and distraction from true spiritual reflection, are we not misusing His name for our own pleasure?

To maintain pure and undefiled worship, we must examine whether participating in these practices aligns with biblical principles of spiritual protection and holiness. What would the apostles say about our willingness to incorporate practices they specifically warned against? As the Day of the Lord draws near, these questions become increasingly urgent. We must be especially vigilant in these last days to ensure our worship is pure and pleasing to God. As always, we encourage you to pray earnestly and seek the Holy Spirit's guidance in discerning these matters, focusing on worship that glorifies God alone without compromise.

Drawing these strands together, pastors and household leaders can employ a three-step discernment grid: (a) historical provenance—does the practice originate in idolatry? (b) theological coherence—does it obscure or contradict core gospel truths? and (c) formative power—does it cultivate desires aligned with the fruit of the Spirit?

To label the Christmas amalgam “satanic” need not be sensationalism; Scripture itself locates idolatry behind false worship in “*the things which the nations sacrifice*” (1 Cor 10:20). Naming the darkness clarifies the believer’s call to resist it

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