

emphasis on Mary. Some turn the occasion into an evangelistic opportunity. They minimize the worldly aspects of it all. They visit the elderly and lonely and welcome them into their homes. Such actions one can only praise, but must they be done in the name of Christmas? If I were in India and felt moved to pray, I would not go to a Hindu temple to do it. If I wanted to hold a Christian meeting I would not normally do it in a mosque.

Other Festivals

So far I have concentrated on Christmas; but it must be obvious that exactly the same principles apply to other church festivals. The name Easter goes back to the goddess Astarte of Nineveh. Hot cross buns and Easter eggs go back to ancient heathen ceremonies.

Once again Arthur Ware and Frank Paine have shown conclusively that Jesus died on Friday 1st of May in 33 AD And rose at midnight between Sunday 3rd and Monday 4th. Easter is always observed well before those dates.

Alexander Hislop in his book “The Two Babylons” gives a wealth of tedious detail illustrating that every festival in the church’s calendar goes back to ancient heathen worship.

Summary

We may then summarise our findings. The festivals of the old covenant were solemnly ordained and commanded by God. They served a temporary purpose in pointing forward to spiritual realities as yet not revealed. The festivals of the new covenant belong to the invisible realm of the spirit. To those born of water and the spirit into the kingdom of God they are substantial and real and vastly superior to anything manmade. They are above the old covenant festivals as heaven is above the earth. The festivals of the organized church were never ordained by God. They are heathen in origin and mainly materialistic in practice (at least in the case of Christmas). They are foreign to the fundamental concepts of the new covenant.

Let me close with the words of Paul from 2 Corinthian 6: 14-18: “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; ... ‘Therefore come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

Christmas

and other

Festivals

in the

Old Covenant, New Covenant

and

Church

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March 2005

The date of Christmas is clearly heathen, but what about its customs? Where do they come from? In fact they come from many different sources all of which are pagan and were gradually added over the centuries. The decorating of homes and giving of presents comes from the Roman Saturnalia. Mistletoe comes from the druids. The Saxons used holly and ivy. The emphasis on lights and fires probably comes from the original sun worship at the darkest time of the year. The Christmas tree appears to be of German origin.

More significant perhaps than these customs, whose origin has largely been forgotten, is the central religious theme of Christmas: the worship of the mother and child. The ancient Babylonians worshipped a goddess mother and her son and this worship appears to have spread throughout the ancient cultures. At Christmas this ancient idolatry appears annually disguised as Mary and Jesus.

In mediaeval times the "merrymaking" aspect became particularly strong. This included eating, drinking, carol singing, dancing and pantomimes. Ceremonies were directed by a man whose official title was the "Lord of Misrule",

Christmas was forbidden in England by act of parliament by the Puritans under Cromwell, but revived with the restoration under King Charles II. In Scotland it has only become a public holiday in the last 30 years.

A minority of Christians, notably among the Brethren, have rejected Christmas in recent times.

Christmas Today

We must bring this study up-to-date by considering modern Christmas. Each year as world poverty increases, some new spending record is made, Presents that might have seemed expensive twenty years ago are nothing today. Children feel deprived if their presents aren't as good as those of their friends. Bigger and better presents compensate for less and less happy families. Each year the police have a special campaign to prevent drunken driving. People wear themselves out with endless hours of buying presents, sending cards, preparing food and decorating the house. The pagan origins of the festival are forgotten and materialism has taken over.

Should we attempt to "put Christ back into Christmas", as an old slogan used to exhort us. Can we encourage people to remember its "true meaning"? I believe we face fundamentally the same problem as the early church and indeed as the modern missionary. Can we take something essentially heathen and make it Christian? Personally I do not believe we can. It is not the way of the Bible or of God.

No doubt there are many people who seek to keep Christmas "in the right spirit". They genuinely seek to remember the birth of Jesus without undue

as large numbers of pilgrims converged on Jerusalem requiring accommodation. In 1 BC the Festival of Tabernacles fell on October 29th and that date is found to harmonise perfectly with an intricate patterns of other dates.

We can obtain independent confirmation of an October date if we compare Luke 1:5 with 1 Chronicles 24: 10.. In Luke we see that Zechariah served in the division of Abijah, and in Chronicles we see that the division of Abijah was the eighth division out of 24 divisions in the year. This would place it in the fourth month. If John the Baptist was conceived in the fourth month, he must have been born nine months later in the first month. Jesus, being six months younger, was born in the seventh month in which fell the Festival of Tabernacles.

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law in every aspect. What then could be more suitable than for him to be born at the Festival of Tabernacles and die at the Passover?

History of Christmas

Having surveyed the subject of festivals in Scripture we will briefly consider the origin and story of Christmas observance, I will not go into great detail on this subject as any encyclopaedia will give most of the required information.

The early church, as we have seen, simply did not observe Christmas. Until the 5th century there was no consensus of opinion as to when it should be observed. Jan 6th and March 25th were rival dates. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, December 25th was originally a Mithraic festival, the '*natalis invicti solis*', or birthday of the unconquered sun. The time of the winter solstice was generally a time of pagan festivity.

Before we proceed, we must ask some controversial and radical questions. After the departure of the original apostles did the church steadily grow into maturity, or did it steadily decline into darkness? Was the establishment of Christianity under Constantine as Rome's official religion a triumph or a tragedy? Was the "Christianising" of heathen places of worship and customs a wise and generous compromise, or was it a departure from the truth?

I would submit that Scripture and history unite to testify that the organised church went progressively into darkness rather than light. In general the church steadily lost the spiritual dimension of the new covenant. Then, instead of simply retreating to the truths of the old covenant, its leaders, like Jeroboam of old, produced idols and festivals out of their own hearts to satisfy the people; or perhaps to be more accurate, they turned to paganism for their inspiration! Consequently the period when the church held undisputed sway over all Europe has become known to historians with unbelievable irony as the dark ages.

Introduction

Once a year the vast majority of professing Christians join hands with their fellow inhabitants of the nominally Christian countries to keep the festival of Christmas. Obviously there is variation in the forms of celebration; but there is much common ground between believer and unbeliever in giving presents, sending cards to friends and relations, decorating houses with fir trees, holly and mistletoe and paper garlands, and in eating and drinking special food, particularly on the date of December the 25th. Nearly all Christians have accepted this tradition without question from their earliest childhood and seek to make the occasion a remembrance of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. They have misgivings about the commercialising and overeating that characterise the season, but have never examined the whole subject in the light of scripture to know the mind of the Lord.

In this paper I want to consider the keeping of festivals in scripture, firstly under the old covenant and then under the new. After that I will briefly survey the origins and history of Christmas observance.

Old Testament Festivals

Among the many laws and instructions that God gave Israel through Moses there was an annual calendar of festivals. These are described in Exodus 23:14-17 and in more detail in Leviticus 23 and with other information in Numbers 28 and 29 and Deuteronomy 16. In total God ordained seven festivals, which were divided into three groups.

The first group centred on the Passover (Pesach) and contained also the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the Festival of the First Fruits. This celebrated deliverance from slavery in Egypt and also the beginning of harvest. The Exodus from Egypt and the birth of the nation that took place at the time were events that the Jewish people could never forget and of course they remember them till this day. This group of festivals was celebrated in the first month.

The second group contained only the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) or Pentecost. This fell in the third month, fifty days on from the Passover and celebrated the full grain harvest. Fifty days after the Exodus the Israelites came to Mount Sinai where God gave them the ten commandments. That also was an event they could never forget.

The third group of festivals fell in the seventh month and centred on the Festival of Tabernacles (Succot). It also contained the Blowing of trumpets on the first day of the month, and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) on the tenth. Once again this group of festivals was associated both with Israel's deliverance

from Egypt, and with the produce of the land. The tabernacles reminded the Jews of how they had left their houses in Egypt and dwelt in temporary abodes while they travelled.

These festivals were clearly ordained by God. They were times of great national solidarity. All Jewish males were required to go up to Jerusalem three times a year to appear before God to celebrate. They were times when all work ceased and, apart from the solemn festival of Yom Kippur when all had to fast and afflict their souls, they were times of joy and rejoicing before the Lord.

Some time after Joshua the observance of these festivals declined, and they were not observed regularly during most of the period of the monarchy. They were restored by the kings Hezekiah and Josiah with much repentance, and later by Ezra after the exile in Babylon. In New Testament times we find much direct and indirect reference to the festivals and indeed their observance among Jews has continued down till the present day.

We have a further festival described in 1 Kings 12: 31, 32. After the division of the kingdom between Solomon's son Rehoboam in the south and Jeroboam in the north Jeroboam felt it necessary to set up a rival religion to keep his subjects from going up to Jerusalem to worship. He set up golden calves at Bethel and Dan and instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, Scripture describes this as a date which he had "devised in his own heart". As we read on through the pages of Israel's history we find repeated references to him as "Jeroboam the son of Nebat who caused Israel to sin".

When we turn to the New Testament, as I have said we find the Jewish people still observing the Old Testament festivals. As the revelation of the new covenant progresses, however, we begin to see an altogether new dimension. The deliverance from Egypt, which the Passover remembers annually, is seen to be a picture of a far greater spiritual deliverance. Jesus is the new Moses who leads a new people out of a much more serious slavery. He sets them free from sin and Satan. The festival of Weeks, or Pentecost to give it its Greek name, becomes the glorious baptism with the Holy Spirit, a transforming vitalising experience as described in the book of Acts. It is no longer the first fruits of the natural harvest. Rather it is the first fruits of a vastly superior and more important spiritual harvest. The Festival of Tabernacles speaks of a greater spiritual harvest yet to come. God's purposes are not yet complete. There remains a glorious ingathering of fruit of which Pentecost is only a foretaste. Before we may enjoy it we must hear the trumpets sound and then pass through a spiritual Yom Kippur when we afflict our souls and utterly put off the works of the flesh. Then we can pass forward into the **great inheritance reserved for us in heavenly places and ready to be revealed in the last days** (1 Peter 1: 4, 5).

So we see that the two-dimensional shadows of the old covenant become three-dimensional realities in the new. We find a revolutionary teaching that all the sacrifices and ceremonies that God had most solemnly commanded Moses are of no value in themselves but point to infinitely greater spiritual truth. We are not seeing a new religion or a changed religion, but a mind-shaking development. The flat square has become a solid and substantial cube, the circle has become a sphere, the empty foundation has become the finished building, the dead has become alive.

We find therefore no question or suggestion of replacing Jewish festivals with new and different Christian celebrations. Rather the outward ceremony is superseded by the inward reality. From sacrificial lambs we do not move sideways to goats or cows, but forwards and upwards to Jesus the Lamb of God. We do not transfer across from the sacred Jewish temple to magnificent churches and cathedrals, but we progress to spiritual temples of living stones. Similarly then we do not exchange the Passover for Easter, but for a living spiritual experience of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ. Pentecost becomes the glorious baptism with the Holy Spirit. Tabernacles speaks of further experiences still largely future for the people of God.

Paul spells these things out to the Colossians in ch 2 verses 16 and 17: "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink; or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day - things which are a shadow of what is to come; but the substance is of Christ." To the Galatians (4: 9 - 11) he writes: "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have laboured over you in vain."

The Testimony of Chronology

We may view our theme from another aspect - that of Bible Chronology. My sources of information here are the writings of Arthur Ware and Frank Paine who gave their whole lives to the study of this subject and built on the foundations laid by Sir Edward Denny and Gratton Guinness. In their works they show conclusively that Jesus was born on October 29th in the year 1 BC. Their proof is based on the discovery of perfect time pattern connecting all the major events of Scripture and, also of this present century - notably when related to Israel. They assume (as others have done) that Jesus was born at the Festival of Tabernacles. John 1: 14 says: "The word was made flesh and tabernacled among us." This would explain why both Joseph and Mary went up to Bethlehem. Mary would have gone for a festival, but not just for taxation. It would also explain why the inn was full,