

# outreach

## The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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### 'Christmas' in the first century

Innovations—in science, politics, sociology, religion—have their small beginnings. A thought, for example, bears fruit in the finished product. A burning match becomes a raging inferno.

Take, for example, the observance of Christmas, which is assumed to originate in the fourth century of our era—but which in fact has its roots in New Testament times..

The birth of Jesus wasn't specifically celebrated by the early Christians, but was noted as part of their observance of the *Festival of Tabernacles* in the autumn. (See p.2, and our article *Feast of the Nativity*). But the celebration was a far cry from what passes today for the celebration of the birth of our Saviour!

#### Christmas Present...

For many believers, of course, December 25 is holy time and observed with due reverence. But Christmas' has become an almost universal celebration observed by individuals of non-Christian faiths—and even by avowed atheists and humanists! For them it is often a time to worship at the altar of the god of consumerism..

The 'spirit of Christmas present' has donned the trappings of 'Christmas past'—the age-old *Saturnalia*. The latter was celebrated with hedonist excess and is reflected today in so many Christmas celebrations—in the office and in family gatherings.

#### ...And Past

The apostle Peter addresses scattered Christians in that Rome-dominated world: '*...You have already lived long enough [ie, before becoming Christian] like people who don't*

*know God. You were immoral and followed your evil desires. You went around drinking and partying and carrying on. In fact, you even worshiped disgusting idols'* (1 Peter 4:3 CEV).

And isn't the covetousness of our gross consumerism a form of idol worship (Colossians 3:5)? Peter's message could almost be this year's post-Xmas newspaper report! Idolatry is a '*work of the flesh*' (Galatians 5:19-21).

The apostle continues, however: '*... Now your former friends wonder why you have stopped running around with them, and they curse you for it. But they will have to answer to God, who judges the living and the dead*' (vv.4-5). Those who had turned to Christ, in other words, had abandoned such festivities, and encountered derision and hostility from family and friends.

#### New Idolatry

Later in the century the apostle John amplifies that 'disgusting idols' comment. Some churches were tolerating such behaviour as outlined by Peter, even inappropriate sexual shenanigans (Revelation 2-3).

Idolatry isn't just erecting some form of idol such as a totem pole, a carved or graven image, a statue. It was accompanied by a form of worship peculiar to the god it represented..

A major factor was over-indulgent feasting—often leading to licentiousness, and at specific times of the year. The Roman *Saturnalia*, for example, in the week ending December 25. Jesus corrects the church in Pergamos for accepting this 'doctrine of Baalam', who encouraged Israel to join this idolatrous feasting (Numbers 25). Fornication' (Gk  *pornos*) was, as with ancient Israel, at that time integral to much heathen worship.

MiniStudy**The Birth of Jesus: *fact and fiction***

‘...unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given’ (Isaiah 9:6)

**Fact and fiction mark the Christian world’s perception of the birth of Jesus, popularly understood to be December 25. The *reality* is hidden in the pages of history and the Bible.**

- Notes Bible commentator Matthew Henry: ‘It is supposed by many that our blessed Saviour was born much about the time of [the *Feast of Tabernacles*]... to tabernacle among us (John 1:14)
- The festival lasts eight days, and is in the autumn. It is the final of three ‘pilgrimage feasts’ when the males came to Jerusalem to worship and to celebrate. The pilgrims built temporary ‘booths’ (tabernacles, Heb *succhoth*) to live in, from branches of trees. These booths crowded the hills and villages around Jerusalem at the time of the festival
- Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist was a priest of the eighth ‘Course of Abijah’, ministering in the Temple in the week Sivan 12-18 (*ie* in the third month of the year on the calendar used in the Bible, our May/June). He received a prophecy of the forthcoming birth of a son, John. He was born around Passover, in early Spring, some forty weeks later
- Jesus, the ‘Light of the world’, was conceived six months later (Luke 1:26-33) in the ninth month, Kislev. This is the time of the eight-day Jew’s Festival of Lights, *Chanukkah*—our late December
- The birth of Jesus, then, would be nine months later in the seventh month—at the Feast of Tabernacles.. The fiction is that Jesus was born December 25. One fact is that Jesus was conceived—became flesh as an embryo—around that time of year: ‘...*the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [Gk skenoo—tabernacled] among us*’ (John 1:14)
- It is likely that Jesus was born on the *first* day of Tabernacles (a holy day, an annual Sabbath), and circumcised on the *eighth* day (also a holy day) (Luke 2:21-32, John 7:22-23)
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a town some five miles from Jerusalem. It was the ancestral home of Judah, and the family—as Jews—were required by the Roman authority to enroll there as part of a census of the whole land of Palestine. *Tabernacles* was chosen because so many gathered for the festival, and the weather was suited for travel (Luke 2:1-8), unlike late December
- The family of Jesus, because of Mary’s pregnancy, sought an inn but had to make do with a booth. The Hebrew word for a ‘stable’ is *succhoth* (Genesis 33:17). The word *manger* (Gk *phatne*) is also rendered *stall* (Luke 13:15). After the festival they moved to a ‘house’ where they were honoured by the Magi (Matthew 2:11) . (The Greek word for *house* may simply refer to any place of residence.)
- King Herod [‘the Great’] sought to assassinate the infant Jesus whom he perceived as a rival to the throne (Matthew 2:16). The family became refugees in Egypt, as advised by an angel (v.13). However, it was essential that Mary return to the Temple within forty days of the birth for her rites of purification, and for the dedication of the infant Jesus (Leviticus 12:1-4, Luke 2:22-24). As it was now deemed safe for them to return to Israel (Matthew 2:19-22) the implication is that Herod had died within that period—as confirmed by the historian Josephus. He calculated Herod’s death in what we know as the autumn of 4BC. They then departed Jerusalem for Nazareth

*Request the free article* **The Feast of the Nativity**

**Christmas ...cont’d**

WE gather from Peter’s observations that those first Christians inhabited a world not unlike our own. They were enveloped by a culture that despised the ‘...*faith once for all delivered to the saints*’ (Jude v.3), a culture which reviled them for their chaste behaviour, their loyalty to the true faith handed down by Jesus through the

apostles, their rejection of idolatrous practices.

Every Bible believer should stand strong on that foundation teaching. Friends and family may be puzzled—or outright angry—at your submission to the Scriptures. In an age when most of us live lives free from serious persecution for our faith, that’s surely a small price to pay. Ω