



Photo by rawpixel.com from Pexels

WHAT'S BEHIND OUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

While Christmas is a wonderful time of year that is worthy of celebration, some of our “traditions” come from rather questionable practices. Many of you have probably already heard or read articles about these “pagan rituals” from which our own Christmas rituals evolved.

Sometimes even those of us who celebrate Christmas do so with un-Christlike thoughts and motives (merchants *making* money, shoppers *spending* too much money to impress others, etc.), so that our “celebration” begins to approach the same level of unbelief as paganism. If unbelief is too strong a word, then at best taking it all for granted or getting so stressed we don't even take the time to consider what it's all about.

In this article I'm in no way insinuating that we should ignore Christmas simply because of its association with paganism. I personally see nothing wrong with celebrating the season as long as we are adoring and worshiping Jesus Christ in our festivities. As always, you be the judge as you search your own conscience for the reason you celebrate Christmas.

The “Reasoning” Behind the Traditions

Many of the rituals adopted by the later Christians had their origins in occult practices and Roman mythology. This was partly in order to reconcile with the culture of the times, and partly to replace or at least obscure the pagan practices with Christian themes. There are some who believe there were

sinister intentions regarding this “blending” of paganism and Christianity; it’s for this reason that many Christians refuse to celebrate Christmas.

The Magi (Wise Men)

The correct word for the term “wise men” as used in some Bible translations is “magi”, which is derived from the Latin/Greek root “magoi”. Not surprisingly, that’s also the root word for “magic”. Magi were highly esteemed by the ancient Greeks and Romans for their divining abilities, a practice which was forbidden by God (see [Deuteronomy 18:10-12](#)).

Tradition says there were three of them—because of the three gifts they brought—and gives them the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. The Bible doesn’t state how many wise men there were, or their names.

See [Matthew 2:1-12](#) for an account of their visit to Jesus; it’s unknown how long their journey took (probably from Persia), because by the time they arrived Jesus and his parents were in a house, not in the stable where he was born.

Herod, the “current” King of the Jews, was sufficiently concerned by the appearance of this group of powerful and respected officials to pretend an interest in the child, while secretly plotting to kill him ([Matthew 2:13](#)).

“...the sudden appearance of the Magi, probably traveling in force with all imaginable pomp and accompanied by an adequate cavalry escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem.” (Chuck Missler, [khouse.org](#)).

It’s interesting to note that these pagan foreigners were willing to visit and even worship the Christ-child when none of the Jewish leaders were willing to do so, even when they must have suspected that Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of prophecy according to the supernatural events that surrounded it—the mysterious guiding star, the angels appearing to the shepherds, etc.

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were...prophetic, speaking of the Lord’s offices of king, priest and savior. Gold speaks of his kingship, frankincense was a spice used in the priestly duties, and myrrh was an embalming ointment anticipating his death. (Missler, [khouse.org](#)).

Birth Date

The actual date of Jesus' birth is not known; it isn't stated in the Bible nor was it celebrated by the early Christians. It's generally believed that the date was chosen to coincide with the Roman festival called Saturnalia, which honors the god Saturn. This date also involves the winter solstice and the worship of the sun. The celebration lasted from December 17th to the 25th, during which time the Romans decorated their homes with holly and ivy (wreathes); exchanged gifts; and "made merry".

"Giving December 25th Christian significance has been understood (as) an effort to help the pagan world embrace Christianity and trade in their worship of pagan gods for the One True God." (khouse.org e-News, 12/15/14).

Christmas Tree

Although the Christmas Tree has been associated with [pagan traditions](#), its use is considered harmless according to this article: [Do Christmas Trees Have Pagan Roots?](#)

Mistletoe

To the ancient Celts, mistletoe represented life and fertility. Its use as a decoration at Christmas involves the winter solstice, and it was thought to have mystical powers and the ability to ward off evil spirits.

Yule (Yuletide)

"Scholars have connected the month event and Yule time period to the Wild Hunt (a ghostly procession in the winter sky), the god Odin (who is attested in Germanic areas as leading the Wild Hunt and, as mentioned above, bears the name Jólnir), and increased supernatural activity, such as the aforementioned Wild Hunt and the increased activities of draugar—undead beings who walk the earth... In most forms of Wicca, this holiday is celebrated at the winter solstice as the rebirth of the Great horned hunter god, who is viewed as the newborn solstice sun. The method of gathering for this sabbat varies by practitioner. Some have private ceremonies at home, while others do so with their covens." ([Wikipedia](#))

The Yule Log

In mythology, the Babylonian Sun God was "thought to have died during the winter solstice and was memorialized by burning a log in the fireplace...His

‘rebirth’ was celebrated by replacing the log with a trimmed tree the next morning.” (*Missler, khouse.org*).

Wassailing

“The tradition of wassailing falls into two distinct categories: the house-visiting wassail and the orchard-visiting wassail. The house-visiting wassail is the practice of people going door-to-door, singing and offering a drink from the wassail bowl in exchange for gifts; this practice still exists, but has largely been displaced by caroling. The orchard-visiting wassail refers to the ancient custom of visiting orchards in cider-producing regions of England, reciting incantations and singing to the trees to promote a good harvest for the coming year. The purpose of wassailing is to awaken the cider apple trees and to scare away evil spirits to ensure a good harvest of fruit in the autumn.” (*Wikipedia*).

Santa Claus

Maybe the most controversial of our Christmas traditions: “Santa Claus, also known as Saint Nicholas, Kris Kringle, Father Christmas, or simply Santa, is a legendary figure originating in Western Christian culture who is said to bring gifts to the homes of well-behaved ("good" or "nice") children on Christmas Eve (24 December) and the early morning hours of Christmas Day (25 December). The modern Santa Claus grew out of traditions surrounding the historical Saint Nicholas (a fourth-century Greek bishop and gift-giver of Myra), the British figure of Father Christmas and the Dutch figure of Sinterklaas (himself also based on Saint Nicholas). Some maintain Santa Claus also absorbed elements of the Germanic god Wodin, who was associated with the pagan midwinter event of Yule and led the Wild Hunt, a ghostly procession through the sky. (*Wikipedia*).

The tradition of hanging stockings on the mantle, bedpost, or elsewhere, is part of the Santa Claus legend. Supposedly Santa left bags of gold in the stockings which later came to be symbolized by oranges.

Conclusion

In my research, most Biblical commentators agree that celebrating Christmas (as long as we keep Christ in Christmas) need not be considered a forbidden practice. There are some who cannot get beyond the pagan origins; they might or might not celebrate Christmas in their own way without adhering to the common Christmas traditions. I’m ending with two additional quotes from *khouse.org* e-News, 12/8 and 12/15/14.

“The celebration of Christmas has nearly wiped out even the memory of these pagan gods...rather than fearing the pagan history of this time of year, let’s take advantage of the current cultural opportunity to worship and bring glory to Christ at a time when our neighbors are most open to His position as the ‘reason for the season’.”

“It is a time of year when people can speak more freely of Jesus the Savior—when even the faithless are willing to attend a Christmas Eve service. **It is truly a precious slot of time God has given us during which to spread the Good News of His Son. Glory to God in the highest!**”

Sources

<https://www.khouse.org/articles/2004/555/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Claus#Origins

Appendix I

One of my favorite stories/movies is ***A Christmas Carol*** by Charles Dickens. Below I’ve placed an interesting take on the book and its worldwide influence.

“There is no doubt that *A Christmas Carol* is first and foremost a story concerned with the Christian gospel of liberation by the grace of God...The popularity of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* played a significant part in the changing consciousness of Christmas and the way in which it was celebrated. The popularity of his public readings of the story is an indication of how much it resonated with the contemporary mood, and contributed to the increasing place of the Christmas celebration in both secular and religious ways that was firmly established by the end of the nineteenth century.” (Rowell, Geoffrey (December 1993). [*"Dickens and the Construction of Christmas"*](#). *History Today*. 43 (12).

Appendix II

Here are some insights regarding children and the legend of ***Santa Claus*** (taken from the online encyclopedia, [*Wikipedia*](#)):

“The controversy about deceiving children

Various psychologists and researchers have wrestled with the ways that parents collude to convince young children of the existence of Santa Claus, and have wondered whether children's abilities to critically weigh real-world

evidence may be undermined by their belief in this or other imaginary figures. For example, University of Texas psychology professor Jacqueline Woolley helped conduct a study that found, to the contrary, that children seemed competent in their use of logic, evidence, and comparative reasoning even though they might conclude that Santa Claus or other fanciful creatures were real:

The adults they count on to provide reliable information about the world introduce them to Santa. Then his existence is affirmed by friends, books, TV and movies. It is also validated by hard evidence: the half-eaten cookies and empty milk glasses by the tree on Christmas morning. In other words, children do a great job of scientifically evaluating Santa. And adults do a great job of duping them. — Jacqueline Wooley

Woolley posited that it is perhaps “kinship with the adult world” that causes children not to be angry that they were lied to for so long. However, the criticism about this deception is not that it is a simple lie, but a complicated series of very large lies. Objections include that it is unethical for parents to lie to children without good cause, and that it discourages healthy skepticism in children. With no greater good at the heart of the lie, some have charged that it is more about the parents than it is about the children. For instance, writer Austin Cline posed the question: “Is it not possible that kids would find at least as much pleasure in knowing that parents are responsible for Christmas, not a supernatural stranger?”

Others, however, see no harm in the belief in Santa Claus. Psychologist Tamar Murachver said that because it is a cultural, not parental, lie, it does not undermine parental trust. The New Zealand Skeptics also see no harm in parents telling their children that Santa is real. Spokesperson Vicki Hyde said, “It would be a hard-hearted parent indeed who frowned upon the innocent joys of our children's cultural heritage. We save our bah humbugs for the things that exploit the vulnerable.”

Dr. John Condry of Cornell University interviewed more than 500 children for a study of the issue and found that not a single child was angry at his or her parents for telling them Santa Claus was real. According to Dr. Condry: *The most common response to finding out the truth was that they felt older and more mature. They now knew something that the younger kids did not.*

See the related Bible Study: “Why Christmas Means You’re Special”.