



ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

1

Why December 25 or January 6?

Neither Matthew nor Luke specify a time of the year for Jesus' birth.

Prophecy of virgin birth from Isaiah (used in Handel's Messiah) relates to political situation after the Babylonian captivity

Translations vary – virgin or young woman

2

Winter Solstice Festivals

Related to Northern Hemisphere

Many cultures associated the lengthening of days with the beginning of a new year. Before the days of food preparation, winter was the time of starvation and hardship. The winter solstice was the last day of feasting until spring began. Livestock herds were thinned out so that meat would be more plentiful.

3

Roman Saturnalia

12 days (later 12 days of Christmas between Jesus' birth and the visit of the Magi)

A feast of dolls and childhood – games, decorations and gifts

Our New Year's Day is the Roman Kalends festival.

4

Other 12 day festivals

Sicily – 12 kinds of fish served

Bulgaria – 12 different meatless dishes served

Wales – taffy candy shared

5

Hopis and Zunis Soyal

**Nine days celebrating the arrival of kachinas
(benevolent spirit beings who bring gifts to children)**

6

Indian Pancha Ganapati

Five-day Hindu festival for elephant headed Ganesh who brings love and harmony to the world. Children open gifts on the fifth day (December 25)

7

Chinese Dongzhi festival

Family get-together when brightly colored balls made from rice flour are served

8

Ancient Persia celebration honoring Mitras, the sun god

Celebration that goes on past midnight including gatherings of family and friends.

Serve watermelon to ensure health, pomegranate to protect against scorpions and garlic to soothe joint pain. Remember the birth of the unconquered son – Persian Mithras, Egyptian Osiris and later Jesus – the son of righteousness

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German and Scandinavia Yule

Yule log, sacrifice of a boar (origin of Christmas ham), singing (origin of some Christmas carols)

10

Saami (Lapp) Beiwe Festival

Sacrifice a white female reindeer to the goddess Beiwe and smear butter on doorposts to provide her with sustenance

11

Jewish Hanukkah

Eight-day festival of lights celebrates the successful Maccabean revolt over the Greek Seleucids about 170 BCE

12

British Boxing Day

Employers give presents to their employees and tradesmen. Tradition probably started with alms boxes for the poor in churches.

Also similar to Black Friday (after Thanksgiving) by retailers in the USA and Canada.

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How did December 25 become Christmas?

Early Christians did not celebrate Christmas or Easter. Roman Catholic officials set the date as early as 200 CE, but Pope Julius 1 made December 25 as Christmas in 336 CE (shortly after Constantine declared Christianity to be the official state religion of the Roman Empire.)

In Eastern Orthodox traditions, Christmas is celebrated on January 6 or 7.

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Ancient Traditions of December 25

Roman Feast of Sol Invictus (Sun god)

Immaculate Conception on March 25 (the date that early church leaders identified as the day of the year when God created the earth and the universe)

15

Jesus was likely born between 4 and 7 BCE

Herod the Great probably died in 4 BCE. If you add the time that Jesus and his family were in Egypt to escape Herod's slaughter of young Jewish babies, Jesus (whose given name was probably Yeshua ben Youssef) could have been born as many as seven years before the start of our modern Christian calendar. Some traditions suggest that Mary (Miriam) and Joseph (Youssef) were teenagers when Jesus (Yeshua) was born while others suggest that Joseph was much older.

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Joseph's profession

The Greek word *tehton* can be translated a mason or a contractor. There was a limited supply of wood in Palestine. Most things were made of stone or clay.

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The Stable

Possibly the entry floor or basement of a home. Living rooms on the second level were not typical birth places. Mary (Miriam) was likely attended by women – not men like Joseph (Youssef.)

18

The Magi and the Star of Bethlehem (probably not a comet or super nova)

Matthew does not specify the number of Magi (probably Zoroastrian astrologists from Persia/Parthia present day Iran). Writing in Syrian Antioch in 85-90 CE, he was trying to appeal to both Jews and gentiles. The Persians had helped the Jews to return to Palestine after the fall of Babylon.

The star of Bethlehem was likely a triangular arrangement of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces

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The actual birth of Jesus might have been in April

Shepherds are not in the fields in December but return there when new lambs are born after the vernal equinox.

To get the peoples of the Empire to accept the new state religion, Constantine wanted Christian holidays to coincide with early Roman pagan festivals (e.g., Christmas substitutes for Saturnalia.)

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Christmas in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages, Christmas became a raucous occasion including dancing, heavy drinking and rowdy behavior as well as the crowning of a “king of the holiday” – much like today’s Mardi Gras in New Orleans

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Christmas in the USA

During the mid to late 1600s, Puritans and Scots-Irish Presbyterians spurned the idea of Christmas because of its pagan connections. The city of Boston fined Christians for celebrating Christmas. But this was not the case in the Virginia colony.

It became a holiday for Federal employees in 1870 and a national holiday in 1894.

22

St. Nicholas Day – December 6

This holiday remembers the death of Bishop Nicholas of Myra (in today's Turkey) between 345 and 353 CE. He had participated in the Council of Nicea in 325 CE where the wording of the Nicene Creed was approved. He was later sainted by the church and became the patron saint of sailors, merchants and the Russian people.

23

The Nicholas Legend

A poor noble could not afford doweries for his three daughters. Nicholas left sacks of gold by the noble's front door for the first two but dropped the sack of gold for the third down the noble's chimney and it fell into a stocking that had been hung up to dry.

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St. Nicholas Day is celebrated today

In the Netherlands, he arrives on horseback and leaves either straw or candies in children's shoes.

In the Czech Republic, groups of young children dress as St. Nicholas, the devil (Knecht Rupurt) and an angel.

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Other Christmas Visitors

Germany – the Christ Child (Krist Kind or Kris Kringle)

France – Pere Noel

England – Father Christmas (same as Dickens' Ghost of Christmas Present with a wreath around his head and wearing a long green cloak)

Russia – babushka – an old lady

Spain – the Three Kings

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St. Nicholas comes to North America

The Dutch brought St. Nicholas (Sint Niklas) to New Amsterdam (New York City) where he remained a local symbol between the 1600s and 1800s.

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The Reindeer

William B. Gilley (1821) and Clement Moore (1822) invented the eight reindeer pulling a flying sleigh. Earlier accounts placed St. Nicholas in a flying wagon. Santa also arrives on a boat in Hawaii and a surfboard in California.

Reindeer cannot live at the North Pole (where there is no land or vegetation) but they do live in Scandinavia, Russia and Canada (where they are named caribou.)

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Why the chimney was accessible

Some ancient people lived underground and entered through a hole that also served as an opening for smoke from the cooking fire.

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Evolution of the Santa image

Moore described him as an elf clothed in fur. Moore's daughter dressed him in green.

Thomas Nast drew cartoons of him between 1863 and 1886 wearing brown fur. He also popularized the concept of the North Pole and Santa's elves.

George Walker illustrated Moore's poem in 1870 and dressed St. Nick in red.

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Further Evolution of Santa

Mrs. Santa was created in 1899 by Katherine Lee Bates (the author of *America, the Beautiful*)

A store in Brockton, MA introduced the first department store Santa in 1890. Were you taught about Santa Claus' helpers?

Santa grew from an elf to full size in paintings by Norman Rockwell (1920) and Archie Lee (1931) for which retired salesman Lou Prentice served as a model for Coca Cola advertisements.

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First Generation of Santa Believers?

Who were our first ancestors who believed in the arrival of Santa on Christmas Eve?

Our great grandparents, our grandparents or our parents?

What are the expectations of our youngest grand children?

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Rudolf, the red nosed reindeer

Created in 1939 by Robert L. May, a creative designer at Montgomery Ward as a Christmas promotion tool.

Johnny Marks wrote the song in 1948 that was popularized the following year by Gene Autry.

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Christmas Shopping

US retailers started pre-Christmas promotions during a recession of 1839 and 1840. Christmas gift promotion spread to other Christian majority countries. Today pre-Christmas commercialization exists in non-Christian countries like Japan and Singapore. Christmas tree sales are brisk in Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Christmas trees and decorations

Saturnalia house decorations

Celtic Druid Yule logs in English manor homes

Fruits and greens as decorations in American colonial homes

German and Latvian *Tannenbaum* brought to Buckingham and Windsor Palaces by Prince Albert in the 1840s and to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania by Moravian immigrants in the 1850s

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Christmas cards

First commercialized in England in 1843

Are e cards taking over today?

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In summary

Christmas and winter solstice festivals in other faith traditions share a universal message of peace on earth, hope, brotherly love and sharing.