

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 195

Is Christmas a Pagan Holiday?

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There is much discussion online at this time of year as to the presumed pagan origins of Christmas. December 25, we are told, was a date stolen from pagan worship, specifically from the festival of the “Birth of the Unconquered Sun” (Sol Invictus). Should Christians have Christmas trees? Aren’t trees pagan objects of worship? How should Christians think about, and respond to, such questions? Do these questions have any relationship to the content of Scripture? Listen to find out.

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 195: Is Christmas a Pagan Holiday? I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Merry Christmas, Mike!

MH: Yep, Merry Christmas.

TS: Santa Claus... Are you getting ready? Are you going to leave some cookies out? All that good stuff?

MH: [laughs] Yeah, we're a bit beyond doing all that stuff. I don't think we ever did anything with Santa Claus. We were pretty honest with our kids. It's like, “Your Mom and Dad work hard—this is a special day. We think about Jesus' birth, and God's blessed us to get you some cool things.” We didn't do the other.

TS: Well, my kids are still young enough that... I might use the “naughty and nice” lists to my advantage.

MH: [laughs] Yeah, we let them know what some other people do to have a mild threat. [laughs] I think they saw through it pretty quickly.

TS: Do you all do Christmas cards?

MH: No, we haven't done one of those for quite a while. I don't know, we just sort of never get around to it. And this year, you know, we have the... People are separating, and we have the two daughters that live elsewhere. We're going to get together, but nobody's really here very long on the same day. We were going to take a picture, but it rained all day, and they wanted to do an outside one, so that never happened, and there you go.

TS: We're pretty bad, too. Well, Mike, we had planned on having a guest with us on this episode—Dr. Burton—but due to technical difficulties, he wasn't able to join us.

MH: Yeah, that's unfortunate.

TS: Well, Mike, you get an early Christmas present in the fact that you're in the Fantasy Superbowl and I am not. So tear drop.

MH: Yeah, but I have to admit, I'm not feeling real good. It's going to be an interesting weekend, because I'm without my biggest weapon in the Superbowl final here in the podcast Fantasy League, and that's Antonio Brown. I've been riding him the whole year. And he goes and gets hurt just in time for the final game. So it's going to be pretty close.

TS: Switching gears to a serious topic...

MH: That wasn't serious? [laughs]

TS: Not serious enough, I guess. We're about to take it to an 11 right now, in seriousness, because you always hear about Christmas being a pagan holiday. You get a lot of these holidays that us Christians celebrate and people accuse us of, "It's just a pagan holiday," and whatnot, so I'm hoping you can bring clarity and set the record straight once and for all.

MH: Yeah, well, we're going to take our shot at that. But you're kind of right in your observation that the people who are really the most uptight about this are certainly the Hebrew Roots crowd, because they want to dump the whole Christian liturgical year and calendar. So you have that. But I think it's because of Gnostics, especially, and pagans. They like to tweak Christians over the December 25th date and other things, and so that makes Christians uncomfortable. Maybe even the JW's. It used to be the JW's, but now it's more the Gnostics or the pagans who are on this thing. And it makes it uncomfortable for Christians who just want to celebrate the day. And so now you have to think about or deal with all this stuff.

5:00

The way I'm going to approach this episode is really in two areas. We're asking the question, "Is Christmas a pagan holiday?" And I see two area breakdowns. One is the date, and I'm going to telegraph up front that I don't think that the December 25th date is a pagan date or has anything to do with the Sol Invictus/solstice kind of stuff. It is not a date that derives from that. So the date is not a pagan thing. Second category would be the practices—some of the things that are associated with the celebration. Some of those are certainly deriving from pagan practice—what we might think of as pagan practice—but that's actually not a slam dunk kind of issue, because I'm going to suggest when we

get to part 2 (area 2) that you can't really have. Let me put it this way: there's an issue when it comes to, "Are we doing pagan things" (i.e., is this idolatry)? There has to be some awareness—some intent. And there are actually biblical examples where Israelites especially "used" pagan objects and imagery, and it was not an issue theologically. And so I think we need to think a little bit more carefully when it comes to practices. And yet, be honest, some of this stuff we do has no attachment at all to the biblical story of Jesus. They were things that accrued over time. Just like ancient Israel, there were things like this. And so maybe some of that biblical material about the Israelites—when it was not a theological issue—maybe that's a helpful analogy to think about the practices. When we get to that point, I think listeners will better understand what I'm talking about here.

Let's just start with the date—the first area here. The argument is that Christians took December 25th from the pagans, specifically the pagan festival of Sol Invictus, or the Birth of the Unconquered Sun. That's what Sol Invictus means—"unconquered sun." That was instituted by the Roman emperor Aurelian on the 25th of December. The claim is that Christians stole this day from the pagans, so it's an originally pagan day. And so consequently, the celebration of Jesus' birth on December 25th is a pagan celebration just by definition.

Now listeners to this podcast probably know (either from the episode we did on this or maybe something on the blog or something I've said in an interview) that I believe that Jesus was born September 11, 3 B.C. And for those who say, "That's not possible, because Herod died in 4 B.C. and you've got to have one or two years between the birth of Jesus and Herod's death, and so 3 B.C. can't work"—well, you're sorely mistaken. The 4 B.C. death of Herod is one of those great unexamined certainties [laughs] in biblical studies. I've blogged about this and I've directed people to peer-reviewed articles. I have four of them. I don't know, I think that three of them (maybe all four) are in the folder that, if you're subscribed to my newsletter, you get access to the folder of articles—things that I can't just post online. But there are serious, deep problems with the 4 B.C. death date of Herod—serious problems—that scholars who are experts in chronology have collected and they've presented in a coherent fashion in showing that the death of Herod is better dated to late 2 B.C. or 1 B.C. And so the September 11, 3 B.C. date does work. The death of Herod is no obstacle to this. There's a lot that goes into this. If you've read my novel, *The Portent*, this is part of the storyline. I'm actually working on a book about astronomy and its use and abuse in biblical interpretation. So this isn't the last you'll hear from it. But we're going to focus on December 25th here because that's the date that gets debated because that's the date that most Christians—not all Christians... in the East, they don't use December 25. Most Christians that we know of have Christmas on December 25, and so the argument is that was stolen from the pagans.

Now, I blogged recently on this, directing people to an article from *Touchstone Magazine* that appears online by William Tighe, and the article is entitled

“Calculating Christmas: The Story Behind December 25.” The author of that article refers readers to where he gets most of his information. That’s from Thomas J. Talley’s book *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*. That’s a Liturgical Press title. It’s out of print but you can still find it used. That’s where I got my copy. Talley’s book is an academic (a scholarly) presentation of what’s behind December 25th. And it is not a pagan day. So what I’m going to do here in the first part (when we talk about the date) is I’m going to summarize some of Tighe’s article in *Touchstone Magazine*. We’ll have a link to it on the episode page. But I’m going to summarize parts of it and I’m going to quote parts of it, as well, but realize that it’s based on Talley’s book—his much more detailed scholarly book. And specifically, if you get Talley’s book, from basically page 85 onward and specifically page 91 onward, you get a more academic presentation of what we’re going to do here. So let’s just start in with the web article here. It begins this way, summarizing this and partly reading. He writes:

10:00

The idea that the date was taken from the pagans goes back to two scholars from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Paul Ernst Jablonski, a German Protestant, wished to show that the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25th was one of the many “paganizations” of Christianity that the Church of the fourth century embraced, as one of many “degenerations” that transformed pure apostolic Christianity into Catholicism. Dom Jean Hardouin, a Benedictine monk, tried to show that the Catholic Church adopted pagan festivals for Christian purposes without paganizing the gospel.

The author names these two scholars. One is Jablonski, who is a German Protestant, and the other was a Catholic, Dom Jean Hardouin. He was a Benedictine monk. Their work on December 25th is really what’s at the heart of this. Here we go again with 18th and 19th century scholarship that is at the center of so much of what goes on in internet theology—Christian Middle Earth stuff. Folks, we really have learned things since the 18th and 19th centuries—surprise, surprise. But a lot of this goes back to the work of these two individuals.

Jablonski wanted to show that Christ’s birth on December 25th was a paganization of Christianity—that the Church just embraced it, for whatever reason. He thinks of it as a degeneration of Christianity—that doing this was not a good thing. Whereas the Catholic (and Catholics are known for this sort of syncretistic approach) Hardouin tried to show that the Catholic Church adopted pagan festivals for Christian purposes. In other words, as an evangelistic tool, without paganizing the Gospel. Now the author of our internet article is going to object to this. He’s just telling us that, “This idea that Christians stole the date comes from Jablonski and Hardouin, a Protestant and a Catholic, 1700s/1800s and onwards.” So this is where he starts his article. This is where it comes from. He writes elsewhere:

In the Julian calendar, created in 45 B.C. under Julius Caesar, the winter solstice fell on December 25th, and it therefore seemed obvious to Jablonski and Hardouin that the day must have had a pagan significance before it had a Christian one. But in fact, the date had no religious significance in the Roman pagan festal calendar before Aurelian's time, nor did the cult of the sun play a prominent role in Rome before him.

So he talks about Aurelian a little bit. There were two temples of the sun in Rome that were actually supposed to be maintained by the clan that Aurelian was part of, but didn't have a direct December 25th attachment to that cult. Both of those cults of the sun fell into neglect in the second century as a result of some different things going on religiously, specifically connected to Mithraism, that became more popular than these cults of the sun. And back to the article, to quote again, he writes:

As things actually happened, Aurelian, who ruled from 270 until his assassination in 275, was hostile to Christianity and appears to have promoted the establishment of the festival of the "Birth of the Unconquered Sun" as a device to unify the various pagan cults of the Roman Empire around a commemoration of the annual "rebirth" of the sun..

In creating the new feast, he intended the beginning of the lengthening of the daylight, and the arresting of the lengthening of darkness, on December 25th to be a symbol of the hoped-for "rebirth," or perpetual rejuvenation, of the Roman Empire, resulting from the maintenance of the worship of the gods whose tutelage (the Romans thought) had brought Rome to greatness and world-rule. If it co-opted the Christian celebration, so much the better.

So what the author of our article here is going to argue is that it was actually the other way around—that Aurelian stole the date from Christians, not that Christians stole the date from pagans. And there's a good deal of evidence that he marshals that this is indeed the case. This is not a pagan date. It is a date that pagans stole from Christians, and not the other way around, as you often read on internet theology, or in books published by Gnostic publishing societies and whatnot. Consider the context for a lot of that stuff. So his position (and we'll have the link to this article on this) is that Aurelian actually stole an important Christian date.

15:00

So the question arises then, is there evidence before Aurelian that December 25th was an important date to Christians? Is there evidence of that? If so, then it would appear that this is in fact what happened—that December 25th, before Aurelian, was important to Christians associated with the birth of Jesus, and that the pagans stole it from Christians. So it's not a pagan date—at least it wasn't until the pagans stole it from Christians. Now is there evidence for that? The key

paragraph in the online article (he's getting a lot of this from Talley's book) is this... I'm just going to read straight through it here. This is just the easiest way to present it. I'm inviting all of you to go up and read the actual article. He writes:

It is true that the first evidence of Christians celebrating December 25th as the date of the Lord's nativity comes from Rome some years after Aurelian, in A.D. 336...

This is what you're going to here from the pagan sources that want to say that Christians stole the date from pagans.

...but there is evidence from both the Greek East and the Latin West that Christians attempted to figure out the date of Christ's birth long before they began to celebrate it liturgically, even in the second and third centuries. The evidence indicates, in fact, that the attribution of the date of December 25th was a by-product of attempts to determine when to celebrate his death and resurrection.

Now let me stop there—that's important. What he's saying here is that December 25th, even though Christians didn't have it on the calendar before Aurelian as part of the liturgical year, there was a lot of discussion and a lot of Christians believed that the birth of the Messiah was on December 25th long before Aurelian. It just didn't make it into the official holiday. We're going to find out in a moment why (because there was a dispute over it). There was another date that comes into play here. But the date associating December 25th (what we would call December 25th) with the birth of the Messiah predates Aurelian—and it's a by-product. The reason that they figured that date out (and there's another date that there's a controversy here we'll get to in a moment)... but the reason why that date was associated with the birth of Jesus by a large segment of the Church—large population of Christians—was because you could essentially do math. They were really more concerned with what the day of the crucifixion and the resurrection was, so once those were sort of fixed, you could do the math and calculate the birth. So the birth date is a by-product of the effort, which was extreme. There's a mass of scholarship on the "Easter Computus"—the whole idea of when do we date the crucifixion and the resurrection (resurrection specifically). That was a huge deal in the early Church, for obvious reasons. They wanted to celebrate the Resurrection; it's fundamental to Christianity. So in the obsession to find that date, the birth date just sort of developed. People took the time to... "If this is when he rose, can we possibly calculate when he was born?" And so people did that and December 25th was an early date for that effort to try to do it by math. Back to the quotation.

The evidence indicates, in fact, that the attribution of the date of December 25th was a by-product of attempts to determine when to celebrate his death and resurrection.

How did this happen? There is a seeming contradiction between the date of the Lord's death as given in the synoptic Gospels and in John's Gospel. The synoptics would appear to place it on Passover Day (after the Lord had celebrated the Passover Meal on the preceding evening), and John on the Eve of Passover, just when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Jerusalem Temple for the feast that was to ensue after sunset on that day. Solving this problem involves answering the question of whether the Lord's Last Supper was a Passover Meal, or a meal celebrated a day earlier, which we cannot enter into here.

Like I said, there's just a massive amount of scholarship on this.

Suffice it to say that the early Church followed John rather than the synoptics, and thus believed that Christ's death would have taken place on 14 Nisan, according to the Jewish lunar calendar. (Modern scholars agree, by the way, that the death of Christ could have taken place only in A.D. 30 or 33, as those two are the only years of that time when the eve of Passover could have fallen on a Friday, the possibilities being either 7 April 30 or 3 April 33.).

So in other words, what the author of our reference article is suggesting is the effort to situate the death and resurrection of Jesus in real time would naturally have led to some effort to back-dating the birth. But there's more to it than this. Dr. Tighe continues:

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However, as the early Church was forcibly separated from Judaism, it entered into a world with different calendars, and had to devise its own time to celebrate the Lord's Passion, not least so as to be independent of the rabbinic calculations of the date of Passover.

Boy, that was another big deal as well because of the whole lunar calendar. It what he's going to describe here. So back to the quote:

Also, since the Jewish calendar was a lunar calendar consisting of twelve months of thirty days each, every few years a thirteenth month had to be added by a decree of the Sanhedrin to keep the calendar in synchronization with the equinoxes and solstices, as well as to prevent the seasons from "straying" into inappropriate months.

Apart from the difficulty Christians would have had in following—or perhaps even being accurately informed about—the dating of Passover in any given year, to follow a lunar calendar of their own devising would have set them at odds with both Jews and pagans, and very likely embroiled them in endless disputes among themselves...

Elsewhere he writes that:

These difficulties played out in different ways among the Greek Christians in the eastern part of the empire and the Latin Christians in the western part of it. Greek Christians seem to have wanted to find a date equivalent to 14 Nisan in their own solar calendar, and since Nisan was the month in which the spring equinox occurred, they chose the 14th day of Artemision, the month in which the spring equinox invariably fell in their own calendar. Around A.D. 300, the Greek calendar was superseded by the Roman calendar, and since the dates of the beginnings and endings of the months in these two systems did not coincide, 14 Artemision became April 6th.

In contrast, second-century Latin Christians in Rome and North Africa appear to have desired to establish the historical date on which the Lord Jesus died. By the time of Tertullian they had concluded that he died on Friday, 25 March 29.

Tighe has an aside here that basically that's impossible because that wasn't a Friday, and Passover in A.D. 29 did not fall on a Friday. But anyway, this is what they decided. So back to the article:

So in the East we have April 6th, in the West, March 25th [as the day associated with the death of Jesus]. At this point, we have to introduce a belief that seems to have been widespread in Judaism at the time of Christ, but which, as it is nowhere taught in the Bible, has completely fallen from the awareness of Christians. The idea is that of the "integral age" of the great Jewish prophets: the idea that the prophets of Israel died on the same dates as their birth or conception...

This notion is a key factor in understanding how some early Christians came to believe that December 25th is the date of Christ's birth. The early Christians applied this idea to Jesus, so that March 25th and April 6th were not only the supposed dates of Christ's death, but of his conception or birth as well...

Now let me stop here. This is really going to mess things up, because they're spending all this time trying to associate the death of Jesus (and of course the Resurrection) with the Passover question and specifically the Last Supper question of the Gospel of John. This is what the fight was about. So once they have working dates, then there are people who come along with this notion that maybe these two dates are also the birth and the conception, because of this myth that prophets (and Jesus was certainly a prophet) died and were born or conceived on the same day. It was this folklore-ish kind of thing. So now we've got even more of a mess. It took us long enough to produce two dates—one in the West, one in the East—for the death of Jesus, and now we've got this other idea creeping in. Back to the quotation:

25:00

...the assignment of March 25th as the date of Christ's conception prevailed... Add nine months to March 25th and you get December 25th.

Christmas (December 25th) is a feast of Western Christian origin [the Western part of the Roman Empire]. In Constantinople it appears to have been introduced in 379 or 380. From a sermon of St. John Chrysostom, at the time a renowned ascetic and preacher in his native Antioch, it appears that the feast was first celebrated there on 25 December 386. From these centers it spread throughout the Christian East, being adopted in Alexandria around 432 and in Jerusalem a century or more later. The Armenians, alone among ancient Christian churches, have never adopted it, and to this day celebrate Christ's birth, manifestation to the magi, and baptism on January 6th.

Thus, December 25th as the date of the Christ's birth appears to owe nothing whatsoever to pagan influences upon the practice of the Church during or after Constantine's time... the pagan feast which the Emperor Aurelian instituted on that date in the year 274 was not only an effort to use the winter solstice to make a political statement, but also almost certainly an attempt to give a pagan significance to a date already of importance to Roman Christians.

This... It's math. They were fixated almost from the beginning—first century—with achieving the correct date for the death of the Messiah. And they were going more or less with John's Gospel. We're not here to evaluate whether that's right or wrong and whether they had the right dates or not. (You all know what I think—I don't think that December 25th has anything to do with the actual birthdate of Jesus, or any of these other dates.) You have to factor in more than math here. And a little heads-up here to novel readers of mine and those who are aware that I'm working on this other book with astronomy... When we talk about Jewish calendar here, we're talking about the calendar used in Jerusalem by Pharisees and Sadducees. That was not the only calendar. In fact, that was viewed by the Qumran Essenes as being a human corruption. The Essenes actually attribute the Jerusalem calendar (the calendar of all Judaism that we're talking about here) to the Watchers. [laughs] They think that... they had their own calendar that was perfect, and so they believed that it came from the mind of God.

I'm not going to get into the Qumran calendar, but it was a 364-day calendar. What was perfect about it was that every Sabbath occurs on the same day, every Passover occurs on the same day, all the Feasts are on the same days every calendar year. You have all the numbers from 7 to 12 to 24 to 36—all the numbers, and 70—all these numbers that we see in scripture having apparent special significance are linked back into what the Qumran folks believed was the perfect mathematical calendar that derived from the laws of nature and the mind

of God. You didn't need to invent a 13th month to find the date of Passover. This is actually why they split from the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It was over calendar and liturgy and ritual. They thought that it was human tampering (and ultimately a problem created by the Watchers) to adopt this sort of calendrical tinkering method. I don't want to say too much about that, but what we're talking about here is... What the early Church was wrestling with, because they're trying to deal with what the Jews were doing and what the Synoptics are saying and what John is saying—all this kind of stuff... They try to come up with a date for the death of Jesus that fit into that calendar. And they're doing the best they can. They're trying to situate... They have to make decisions, and they come out with two dates—the one in March and the other one in April. And then you get this idea of, "Oh, well, he would have died on the same day he was born and then let's think about the conception and the birth." There we go—all the stuff that we just read.

They're doing that stuff from the very first century onward because of the concern to know when to celebrate the resurrection. The birth stuff is a spin-off—it's derivative from—the resurrection discussion. So the date itself would have been known. It would have been an article of discussion long before Aurelian. If you want all the academic data for that, don't depend on the internet article—go get Talley's book *The Origins of Liturgical Year*, and you're going to get all the nuts and bolts for it. So this notion that there were Christians in the days of Aurelian looking around like, "We need to celebrate the birth. We'll let's steal that pagan date over there." That's just bunk. It was really the other way around.

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Now back to another question this raises and something we've already touched on: is there ancient evidence that December 25th (or now January 6th, since we have to factor in this other date), the calculations that we've made to this point... Is there ancient evidence that December 25th or January 6th was considered the birth of Jesus prior to Aurelian in textual terms? We know they could have done the math. We know that the topic was of big concern from the very beginning. We know they're noodling this from the first century on. But is there textual data that predates Aurelian to back up this stuff? Let's take December 25th first. We're going to go back to January 6th. There's the text tradition of Hippolytus, specifically his commentary on Daniel. Hippolytus lived A.D. 170 to 240s, so he is before Aurelian. Hippolytus' commentary on Daniel (specifically Daniel 4:23) is one of the earliest witnesses to the December 25th tradition for Christ's birth. He writes this:

For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, eight days before the kalends of January [December 25th], the 4th day of the week [Wednesday], while Augustus was in his forty-second year, [2 or 3BC] but from Adam five thousand and five hundred years...

This quote is situating the advent—the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem—to December 25th, and then they're aligning it with these other things (Augustus's year, years from Adam, all that kind of stuff). So this is Hippolytus. Hippolytus is almost a century before Aurelian. So there you go, you have people discussing it.

What about the January 6th date? This is the one used in the Eastern Church. This is from Beckwith's book *Calendar and Chronology: Jewish and Christians* (Brill title, 2001, pages 72-74). I'm going to read it because not only do we have evidence for a birth of Jesus associated with December 25th prior to Aurelian, we also have textual evidence for the January 6th one in the Eastern Church. So this tells you that Christians in both parts of the empire (pun intended), they've already done the math. They've already been thinking about this long before Aurelian and associating a particular date with the birth of the Messiah. It just happens that the dates differ in the West and the East. So here's Beckwith:

The other date for Christ's nativity, however, can be traced back with greater certainty behind [earlier than] Hippolytus, to Clement of Alexandria, who before the year 200 dates Christ's nativity on January 6th. This is over a century before any festival of the nativity on January 6th is recorded.

Did you catch that line? They had fixed the date of the Nativity (the birth of Jesus) a century before they ever bothered to celebrate it. The same thing is true with December 25th. If you'll remember earlier in the episode, I read something from the internet article about pagans like to point to certain dates as the first textual reference to the *celebration* of Christmas—the *celebration* of December 25 for Christmas. Big whoop. They knew the math before they ever started celebrating it, and the math is much older than Aurelian. December 25th is not a pagan date. Now whether they're deliberately or accidentally doing it (the pagan sources or the Gnostic sources that love to do this, or the Hebrew Roots sources), they are confusing the celebration of the event with the calculation of the date. Those are two different things. The early Church didn't really bother *celebrating* the birth. They were certainly fixed on celebrating the Resurrection. That was the big day. They didn't really bother celebrating the birth, but they knew (or at least they thought they knew) they had calculated—they'd done the work—to figure out when the date of the birth was, long before Aurelian. Let's go back to Beckwith here. This is over the January 6th date—he's talking about the Eastern date now. This is over a century before any festival of the Nativity on January 6 is recorded.

Could Clement's dating, then, be due to a historical tradition that the nativity took place at that time? Clement's evidence (to be found in his *Stromata*, or *Miscellanies*, 1:21:140, 144-46) is not without ambiguity, since he quotes a number of opinions about the dates of Christ's birth and crucifixion...

35:00 They're thinking about it. December 25 didn't just pop into somebody's head while he was watching the festival of Sol Invictus. This notion is false.

[Clement] quotes a number of opinions about the dates of Christ's birth and crucifixion, commending, perhaps ironically, the precision of those who propound them... By what method these dates were arrived at we do not know, but all of them except May 20th could be dates for the Passover, and March 21st is a date for the spring equinox... If the traditional eastern date of January 6th was known in the church of Alexandria in the last decade of the second century [the 100's], it is as old as any of these speculations, and older than any evidence linking the nativity with the pagan festival on the winter solstice. Moreover, if it was known in Alexandria in the last decade of the second century, it was probably also known there half a century earlier. For in the same passage of Clement, after speaking of dates for the Lord's birth, he says, "And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before it in readings. And they say that it was the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, the 15th day of the month Tybi; and some that it was the 11th of the same month. Basilides likewise belonged to Alexandria, where he taught in the second quarter of the second century, and, though he was a heretic, he would have known the traditions of the Alexandrian church." Tybi 15 and Tybi 11 correspond, in the Julian calendar, to January 10th and January 6th.

Now this seems proof positive for what Tighe in our internet article is arguing (and Talley in his more academic work) specifically that early Christians had calculated or surmised the dates for the birth of Jesus prior to Aurelian, and one of those dates was December 25th. This also means that either December 25th or January 6th predate the beginning of what we now know as the Catholic Church. So the charge that December 25th is a Catholic invention and so deemed sinister for that reason alone is false. This predates that, as well. I'm just going to leave that there.

We're dividing up the topic—the episode—into two categories: one is the date—is the date December 25th for Jesus' birth (even though I don't buy that date)... But is that date pagan? The answer is no. It is not.

Category two (area two): What about the practices and the customs? To me, this is a different story. You've got trees, you've got the gift-giving, you've got Santa Claus—all this kind of stuff. None of these has a direct biblical attachment. There are ways that people have tried to take the Bible and baptize these things as though they were parts of Christian tradition, but there's no evidence for that. So we have to be thinking about how these things accrue to the celebration. We're not talking about the calculation now, we're talking about the celebration—how do these things accrue to the celebration of the birth of the Messiah, and what do we make of that? How should we think about that? We have to be thinking in

terms of analogies and, really, I would also say, what's in a person's mind and in a person's heart? A couple of general observations—general statements here I'll make.

One: Idolatry. Some groups, whether they're pagan or the extreme Hebrew Roots crowd, are going to be looking at what Christians do on December 25th today to celebrate the birth of Jesus. They're going to call it things like idolatry. So idolatry, however... really I would say it requires willful worship—or maybe knowing... You kind of know what you're doing. "I'm doing this thing as an act of worship." Even if you don't really know why you're doing it—the legacy of it, the history of it—if you think that putting that tree in your living room or whatever is somehow an act of worship, then we might have a problem here because of its association. I've never actually met a person who thinks that putting up a Christmas tree is an act of worship. It's just something you do. It's cultural. So there's an issue here. Are we looking at the tree thing or any of these other things as acts of worship? That's one facet of the discussion. There are other ones that we'll get to, obviously.

40:00

So I would be concerned if people were thinking that. I would be concerned if (broadly speaking again) that doing things like putting up a Christmas tree results in you losing (to use the cliché) the reason for the season. That, of course, is the birth of Jesus, and I think that's a problem because of the commercialism and the trappings of it. I actually think that's more serious than any of this "this is pagan" kind of stuff. So that's one thought. This whole idolatry thing... It requires some knowledge, it requires some intent, it requires some linking of it to worship—that sort of thing. When it comes to images or objects, an idea like "there's an evil pagan association" is also subjective, to some degree. That is, a factor in its illegitimacy or permissibility is to some extent dependent on the response of the viewer or the participant. There are some classic examples of this, actually, in the Old Testament of what I'm talking about here. Some are positive. There's at least one negative, but let's just jump into a couple of them. Let's start with the relevant commands in Exodus 20. This is part of the Ten Commandments—it's going to sound familiar. So Exodus 20:3-6:

³"You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Now, "Don't make yourself a graven image or any likeness of anything that's *in heaven above*, earth beneath, or water under the earth." This is the three-tiered

cosmology we've talked about a number of times here—this whole ancient Israelite cosmology. It's here mentioned in Exodus 20. It's outlined: heaven above, earth, then beneath the earth. Now we learned from this passage in Exodus 20... We learn a certain thing here that I think gets missed here. We learn that images alone are not the issue. It's bowing down to them. It's offering to them worship. That's the problem. How do we know that? Well, because God instructed Moses in Israel to make images of heavenly things—and even earthly things—for use in the tabernacle and the temple. God told them to do that after issuing this command. A classic example is the cherubim. The cherubim are clearly drawn artistically (and even the term is etymologically) from pagan culture.

Conceptually, scholars have argued for the Ark of the Covenant being really (and frankly it is) pretty much the spitting image of an Egyptian palanquin. And then they argue that the cherubim are essentially Israelite versions of the winged goddesses Isis and Nephthys. If you know what a palanquin is, it's a box. I hate to say it this way, but it's like the Ark. It's a box with a lid on the sides of it and on the two long edges you'll often find an image of Isis and an image of Nephthys on the other piece—two goddesses. They were protective of the content of the Ark. And Egyptians would often put idols of the deity inside the ark and then they'd carry it around to different locations and do this or that—festivals and whatnot. So there are some scholars who would say, "Well, this is kind of obvious. Moses was in an Egyptian context and he makes this box; he's seen this before." And they don't put idols in it but they put the tablets of stone and Aaron's rod—all that kind of stuff. And it's mobile—you carry it around. It's got the winged cherubim (not on the two sides, but on the top) and they face each other—all this stuff.

Let's just for the sake of argument that something there is relevant to the construction of the Ark, because it's kind of hard to argue that it has nothing to do with it, to be honest. There's some sort of cultural linkage with protective divine beings over the sacred Presence because inside the Ark was supposed to be the Presence of God. When you transported it, that's where the Presence was attached, if you want to use this language. And the cherubim are protective deities. Some would say the Egyptian context is very evident here. I would agree with that. But we also have the issue where in some cases, some would say that *cherubim* is not an Egyptian term. *Cherubim* is an Akkadian term. It comes from Mesopotamia—the *karibu*. These are divine guardians of sacred Presence. It's the same thing. We have a Mesopotamian element and we have an Egyptian element. And this I think gets us into the authorship of the Torah—the editing of the Torah. We're not going to rabbit trail there. But either way, you have two divine beings/objects that come from pagan art, pagan practice, and pagan cultural trappings that are used in Israelite religion, and God is okay with it. God *tells* them to build this.

Now, why is this okay in light of the commandments in Exodus 20? Because you don't bow down to the cherubim. You're not bowing down to the object of the Ark.

You're worshipping in your heart and in your mind the Presence—the God of Israel. The trappings (which incidentally the God of Israel told you to make) are not the issue. They are not objects of worship. You have not violated... God didn't violate his own command when he told them to make this. When the Israelites carry this thing around—when they attach significance to it—they're not violating the commands. Why? Because they're not bowing down to the objects. They're not bowing down to the cherubim. They're worshipping in their heart and in their mind the Presence associated with this thing—the God of Israel himself. It's a heart, thought, and intent issue.

Now I think you can see the point here, at least I hope. Is this analogous to things like Christmas trees? In short, the honest answer is that it could be. If someone's thinking of a tree as representing a pagan deity, it would be easy to say, "Don't use them." And you can have this situation, I'll grant it. People in modern times... Maybe you have a former pagan. Maybe they read lots of Theosophical books or Gnostic books, or whatever, and they just can't help in their heart and in their mind to associate this object with a pagan deity or pagan object. Well, then it's really good for them to not have one in their home. It's really good for them and for other people to have that conversation. Maybe you would want to take down your Christmas tree or not have one if someone who married into your family really has this problem. That's what you do for the weaker brother.

This is a principle of Christian liberty. I don't know how this stuff gets lost (this discussion) but it often does. Paul was willing to give up things that were perfectly fine out of deference and love for a weaker brother—someone for whom this was a struggle. He was perfectly willing to not eat meat—to not do X, Y, or Z—to be a help.

Now the flip side of this is you have people who are professional weaker brothers. And I'm using that term deliberately because I've known a lot of these people in life. I've known a lot of them. They're really not stumbled in their heart; this really isn't something that makes them tremble inside and affects the worship of Jesus in their own hearts. They just don't like something and so they're making it an issue. That's the professional weaker brother. "Oh, what can I be weak at next that I don't like?" That attitude is different internally than the person who is really troubled. You're going to have Christians in Corinth say, "Look, I just can't eat that meat. I just can't do it." Even though Paul said, "Look, if it's sold in the shambles, go ahead. If it comes right off the altar, don't do that, because then you're in fellowship with demons." This is 1 Corinthians 10. You're going to have people who say, "I don't care if Paul says it's OK if it's sold in the shambles" (that's the King James Version of the marketplace), "I don't care, I still can't do it." Paul would say, "We understand and knowing you and your testimony, you're not trying to be divisive. You're not trying to present yourself as superior. We know this troubles you, and we're not going to do it for you, because we love you." That's different than just saying, "You people just aren't as spiritual because you're eating that meat. If you were really spiritual, you wouldn't eat it." That's

different. This is a heart issue. Trust me, I have known many professional weaker brothers. And honestly, they need to be called out. This is not an issue on either side of superior spirituality. This is an issue of the heart. This is an issue of humility, of fear and trembling, in your own relationship with the Lord. If this really genuinely troubles you, you need to tell your brother who can do this (who isn't troubled, who doesn't have these associations)... You need to have that conversation, and that brother should out of love for you do what they can to remove the obstacle.

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But that typically isn't the way things function in church or even in Christian relationships. We want to joust for superior spirituality and we want to forcibly educate the weak. That is not Paul's attitude. Now what Paul did is he made it known to both groups where he was at. He made it very known (because he wrote the first Corinthian epistle) that, "You know what? I can eat the meat. I really can. It doesn't bother me. I'm not worshiping flunkies here. I can do it. But I want you all to know that I will give it up if it's a genuine help to someone who stumbles. That is the right attitude. He doesn't forcibly educate the weak and he doesn't endorse the professional weaker brother.

Now back to our topic here. Sorry for the little sermonistic rabbit trail. But I think some of this is really analogous to what we're looking at here with some of the practices with the celebration of Christmas. Now admittedly, this might be an unlikely circumstance. What if someone says trees shouldn't be part of Christmas for believers in any regard because they were indeed pagan symbols? Well the problem with that thinking is the Old Testament. Although it's an awkward analogy, you have these objects... Let's move away from the Ark and cherubim and talk about trees. Trees were well-known symbols of deities and divine encounters across the board in ancient Near Eastern religion. It's not just Israelite stuff. I've blogged before... Go up to my website and search the website for trees. There are a number of passages where trees served to mark divine encounters with Yahweh. There's also the idea of trees marking the Presence of Yahweh because of the association... It's the cosmic mountain stuff. In this case, it's the cosmic garden—the 70 palm trees at Elim... is that a coincidence? I don't think it's a coincidence. Why? Because trees mark paradise—they mark oases. And in an arid culture, these were wonderful places. Of course we would associate wonderful places with places where God would dwell and God would meet with people. This is why they planted trees. This is why they buried their dead next to trees, because "this is where the Lord is, we want our dead to be with the Lord."

We've talked about these things earlier in the podcast, we've done episodes about sacred trees, and I've blogged about sacred trees. The fact of the matter is, Israel was not alone here. There were other cultures—other religions—that viewed trees as sacred. They could be a symbol of life, a symbol of paradise, a symbol of where the divine world is, marking a divine encounter. That wasn't just Israel, it was other cultures as well.

Now it also had a negative association when Israelites would look at... not trees, like the Canaanites would use, if they're talking about the tree. "OK, we get that. We think your gods are flunkies. We're not worshipping Baal." But we understand the concept. They would outwardly reject, though, fertility rites that would be associated with groves—Asherah poles, Asherah trees. So there's a bit of a neutral and then a very negative thing going on here. But the fact of the matter is (just to focus our attention here) that trees were sacred across the world from the beginning of historical time. They just were. And so that includes the Old Testament. It includes patriarchal religion. The patriarchs were not pagans. Abraham was not a pagan. Isaac and Jacob were not pagans. Joshua wasn't a pagan. But nevertheless, you have this association with their divine encounters with locations that are marked later on by trees.

Now what they also would do is they would erect *masseboth*. These are stone pillars. They would do this, as well. And sometimes there are instances where the stone pillar was a stand-in for a tree, but they would do this. Standing stones are sacred pillars—across the board used in pagan religion. Think of Stonehenge and dolmens and stuff like that for a more modern example, or at least a less ancient example. Across the board, stone pillars were used in pagan religions for religious purposes. But you have the patriarchs doing this. They would build stone pillars—erect stone pillars—at places of divine encounter. Jacob in Genesis 28... You have Exodus 24:4 showing it's okay to have an object mark a divine encounter—you just don't bow down to it. You just don't bow down to it. In Exodus 24:4, Moses erects twelve standing stones, one for each tribe. Why? Because it commemorates the meeting at Sinai with God. Read the passage. Read Exodus 23. Read Exodus 24. This is why he does it. He's not doing it because, "I want to slip in a little paganism here. Nobody's going to notice." No, it's not why they do it. It has everything to do with thought and intent and meaning. There are these passages where Israelites who are faithful worshippers of Yahweh do things with trees. They do things with standing stones, but they don't bow down to the object. They're just there to commemorate something else. They use standing stones and they use trees to commemorate—not to bow down to the object, but to commemorate something else. Let me say it again: *They use standing stones and they use trees to commemorate—not to bow down to the object, but to commemorate something else*. I would suggest to you that it's at least plausible... It should at least be part of the conversation that, "You know what? You bring your Christmas tree in your living room... Don't bow down to it please." I've never known anybody who did. Don't bow down to it. Let it commemorate something, i.e., not the great sale we just had at Kohl's. Let it commemorate—do something for your memory—to help you think about the birth of the Messiah, even though there was no tree in the Bethlehem story. It can still bring this to memory. And in my experience, this is what Christians do.

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I wasn't raised in a Christian home, so we didn't really think about any of this at all. It was just a cultural thing. But even in our house, it was, "It's December 25th—baby Jesus," kind of stuff. Even though my parents were not believers or anything like that, they at least had that cultural Christian sense. And that's better than saying, "We're going to erect this tree now. We're all going to bow down to it. This'll be fun." Nobody's doing that, that I've ever met in my entire life. I guess you can have somebody do that, and if that somebody comes to Christ, well, this is going to be a problem for them. So you need to have that conversation. I guess it's possible, but it's quite foreign. Standing stones and trees were used in patriarchal religion to commemorate theophany (the appearance, divine encounter with Yahweh) and it was okay. It was.

Now in our day, we don't associate Christmas trees with anything specifically biblical, so I'll admit again the analogy is not perfect. But we do learn from biblical usage of pagan symbols or objects that there were at least some of them that were used in limited instances in such a way to commemorate something that Yahweh, the true God, had done. But not to represent him. It wasn't him. We're not making an idol of him. And even when God allowed and commanded certain objects to be made of things in heaven and on Earth (the cherubim, the Ark), you don't bow down to them. That was the point of the command. You don't bow down to them. They are not substitutes for God. A tree would not be a substitute for God, it just marked a divine encounter—a memory device, a location device. It was primitive GPS, whatever. It marked a spot where something sacred happened so that it would draw your mind to the Presence: "This is where Jacob met Yahweh." That would be significant. And "because we believe sacred trees have something to do with the Presence of Yahweh, this tree over here that's been here for a couple hundred years that marks something or somebody else had a divine encounter with Yahweh, and we're going to bury someone we love right there because we want them to be in the Presence of Yahweh."

These are simple thoughts. They're permissible thoughts. They're good theological thoughts in the sense that they don't divide someone's loyalty or deflect someone's loyalty away from the true God. This is Old Testament. It's biblical. Nowadays, after the Cross, we're not thinking in these terms, obviously. Plus not only about the Cross, but also just being so many centuries removed. But culturally, these things do get added to the Christmas story in different cultures. And I'm saying, at least think about, what's in a person's heart? What's in a person's mind? You say, "That's not good enough." Well, I guess you would have been really upset with Jacob or Isaac or Abraham or Joshua. Maybe you would be. I would say though, as well, "Let's do the flip side of this before we conclude that the use of trees should be given no thought." I don't want to say that. I'm actually encouraging us to think about it. Think about it in perhaps a workable analogy—not a perfect one, but a reasonably workable one. We ought to recall that other heavenly objects fashioned for the worship of Yahweh were absolutely condemned. The example here is Ezekiel 8. We covered this in our series in Ezekiel. I'm going to read Ezekiel 8:16-18:

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¹⁶ And [this entity/spirit figure ushering the prophet around] brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east. ¹⁷ Then he said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. ¹⁸ Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”

This thing about their backs to the Temple... Greenburg... I just pulled this in from our Ezekiel podcast on this particular chapter. In Greenburg's commentary on Ezekiel, he comments about where this is situated (I'm trying to look at the ESV) between the porch and the altar. Yeah, it uses the same language here. He says this:

In Joel 2:17, this area is where priests pray to God on a fast day; it appears to have had a special sanctity within the inner court. (*Mishnah Kelim* 1.9 ranks it only less than that of the sanctuary proper, the eighth of ten degrees of sanctity.) [rabbinic tradition] This sacred space is taken by men who give the sanctuary their backs and bow toward the sun; such contempt for YHWH is counted as the climactic abomination.

The abomination here is that they turn their backs to the Temple and they worship the sun. Now the sun is kind of interesting. In our episode in Ezekiel, we had some long quotations from Lipinsky's article on *shemesh* ("sun" in Hebrew) in DDD (*Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*) and there's a lot of material in the Old Testament about associating Yahweh with the sun in certain... There's a bit in Judges. It's never—how can I say this? Some of the associations were sort of more innocent than others. Some of them really cross over into idolatry here—certainly the Ezekiel 8 instance. Let me just read an excerpt:

The horses and of the chariot(s) of the sun (2 Kgs 23:11), as well as Ezekiel's vision of the men prostrating themselves before the rising sun (Ezek 8:16), are somewhat different. In fact, the horses and the chariot(s) were placed at the entrance to the Temple of →Yahweh and the men were practising their cult in the same Temple, facing eastwards, towards the gate by which Yahweh, the God of Israel, has entered the sanctuary (Ezek 43:2, 4; 44:2).

So their backs are to the sanctuary, but they're at least pointing to where he enters it.

These features indicate that the sun's chariot was Yahweh's vehicle and that the men seen by the prophet were not sun-worshippers, but devotees of Yahweh, just as the child-sacrifice performed in the Valley of Ben-Hinnom (2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31) was intended to honour Yahweh himself (Mic 6:7).

Of course God was really ticked with this (with both), but they think they're doing something that's okay. That's the point.

Josiah had abolished this particular form of Yahweh worship, destroying the horses and the sun's chariot placed at the entrance of the Temple (2 Kgs 23:11)

Relics of this ritual practice are found, perhaps, in the Blessing of the Sun, *Birkat hašammâ*, a rabbinic prayer-service in which the sun is blessed in thanksgiving for its creation and its being set in motion in the firmament on the fourth day of the world (Gen 1:16–19). The ceremony is held once every 28 years...

So Lapinsky is saying, even in rabbinic literature, we see a little bit of something like this. He writes about this rabbinic ceremony:

The Blessing starts with Ps 84:12, where the psalmist states blandly that Yahweh is *šemeš ûmāgēn*, “sun and cover”, an antithetic image that suggests the sunlight granted by the LORD and the protection he provides against heat. It contains Ps 19, that preserves a fragment of an old hymn to the sun (Ps 19:5c–7), and ends with Isa 30:26: “The light of the sun (*’ôr hašammâ*) shall be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days”. There can be little doubt that the sun was conceived in biblical times as a vivid symbol of Yahweh's Glory (→Kabod). Yahweh's coming is described already in Deut 33:2 and Hab 3:3–4 as the rising of the sun, and his Glory comes from the East according to Isa 59:19 and Ezek 43:2, 4; 44:2, while Isa 60:19 announces that Yahweh's Glory will replace the sunlight when the new Jerusalem will arise.

It's solar symbolism in Israelite thinking. So what's the point here? The point is that we have Old Testament examples where these things that pagans would use or do are okay, as long as the God of Israel is being honored and not dissed. He is the one to be worshipped, not the object. And in the Ezekiel 8 passage, we certainly see an example of where they're turning their backs to where the Presence actually is, and they're bowing to the sun, where the Presence is not, because the Presence has entered the Temple. So that is abominable worship—bowing to the object instead of bowing to the Presence (the thing that the object is supposed to symbolize, or some attribute that the object is supposed to

symbolize, like the Lord's glory). They're turning their backs on the Lord's glory in Ezekiel 8, and that's why it's abominable. But you still nevertheless have things that we would associate (and the Israelites would associate) with pagan stuff. But the issue very clearly is, "Who are you worshipping?" And a lot of this talk from the Old Testament is foreign to us because we don't necessarily use objects... If you're not in a liturgical church, you're not even really terribly concerned with liturgical calendar through the year. A lot of this stuff is foreign to us, but my whole point in doing this is that there are Old Testament examples (both positive and negative examples) that show us the principle that it isn't the object that matters. What matters is what you're thinking about the object. What matters is, "Are you worshipping the object instead of the thing it's supposed to remind you of that's worthy of worship?" That's a principle. And you can see it in scripture.

What I'm suggesting is that maybe we ought to ask ourselves those kinds of questions before we criticize a Christian who has a Christmas tree. Maybe we ought to be thinking a little more deeply about it and actually look at scriptural examples of this kind of thing and asking ourselves why is it okay here and not okay there? What's the principle there? I've just told you what the principle was. Maybe we should be reading the text and thinking about the text in its own context instead of some theosophical website or instead of some book that was written in the 19th century specifically to shoot at the Catholic church. It's just a suggestion. We might want to try to come up with scriptural content that at least helps us to think about these things. And the issue in scripture in these instances that we've gone through today are not the object. It's, "What is the object of worship?" If you're bowing down to the object—if the object is a substitute for God (or in this case, Jesus)—then you've got a problem. That is a problem. That would be idolatry. But if you're not giving any thought to the object as a thing to be worshipped or as a stand-in/substitute for Jesus the Messiah or the God of Israel, that's something that the Old Testament itself was fine with. So we have to judge our hearts here—not something in our living room, or not in our living room. And it's not a spirituality contest, but that's sort of what it's become here, at least in some respects.

Now there are other questions here. We can go on and on with a lot of this stuff, but I would say there... Let me just throw this out. I might want to throw two more things out here because there's one that I think is really interesting and the other one is just a random thought.

I'll start with the random thought here. I think for people who just go hard and fast that things like Christmas trees, Santa Claus... Honestly, Santa Claus has a sordid history. And I personally don't really like the Santa Claus thing because it's very easy for Santa Claus to displace Jesus. Yes, we can say, "Well, Santa—that's based off this old tradition of Saint Nicholas, who gave gifts to poor kids and is kind of modeled maybe sort-of-kind-of after the wise men who gave gifts to baby Jesus... You can create these connections, but honestly, it's very easy for Santa to displace Jesus. The reason that we have things—that we're able to give

you gifts—is that God has prospered us. God has been faithful to us. We are able to do this for you because God has blessed us. God has made this possible. And Jesus is the Son of God—he’s God in the flesh. It’s because of his sacrifice that we can have a relationship with God. All of that gets drowned out (or substituted for, in many cases) by Santa Claus—Saint Nicholas. So to me, Santa Claus certainly has pagan associations with it. There are other versions of the Santa Claus legend that aren’t too great, where he basically confronts someone... Saint Nicholas confronts someone who just murdered a few kids and put them back together and all that kind of stuff. There’s lots of alternative stories to this. Some of them aren’t things you’d want to read to your kids. But to me that’s all incidental. The real question is, is there a substitution going on here? We want to be careful with that.

1:10:00

All of that we could rabbit trail on, but I’d rather ask this question, specifically to the people that don’t really care to give the date any thought or the use of an object any thought. They just want to say it’s all pagan. “I don’t need to think about it. We’re going to do this to be more spiritual than somebody else.” Do those same people use the week names? Names of the week—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday? If those come out of your mouth, then you’re a pagan. I could use your same logic and say, “I’m not going to think about that, either. I’m going to assume that you’re an idolater because you invoke names of pagan deities in the days of the week. You must be following those deities. You must be giving them honor because you’re mentioning their name positively. You use those names every week! You must be really attached to those names. I bet you mention those names more than you say Jesus.” And I could do ridiculous stuff like that to point out the inconsistency. These are cultural trappings.

How about, do you use the month names in the Hebrew Bible for the months? “We use the biblical names. We’re not using Jupiter—we’re not invoking him—Jude or Juno or July or Mars. We’re not doing this thing, associating our month names with the pagan deities. We’re more spiritual. We’re using Nisan and some of these other Jewish names.” Great. They come from Babylon. The Jewish month names are Babylonian. There are just things like this that... It gets silly pretty fast. And you can make it absurd pretty fast if you want to press people for consistency.

But instead of doing that, we need to be thinking about whether you are completely substituting what should be the object of worship for something else. That is a more fundamental question that gets to the heart of these awful buzz words like idolatry. It’s really a matter of the heart—where your heart and your mind is focused. Because what the Old Testament analogies are... They’re using certain objects, they’re doing these things, they are part of the trappings of Israelite worship. God doesn’t condemn them if those objects are not being bowed down to and he is not being removed or disrespected. In other words, he retains the central place—the exclusive place of worship. That’s the better

discussion to have, rather than silliness like this topic often turns into, because I can turn it on its head and go after the paganists and show all sorts of inconsistencies with the way they live their own lives, even down to using Hebrew terms that (in the case of the calendar) have a deep association with Babylon. I could do that and it would be just as silly on my part to do it. Of course they're not idolaters. But these things largely don't even get thought about. Consistency's never really on the radar in what we're doing. It's a spirituality contest.

The last thing I want to mention is an article by Aaron Gleason. Aaron is one of those who've been participating in doing some research for Divine Council stuff and Church Fathers, and he's a writer. He writes online. In this case, it's for *The Federalist* (www.federalist.com). We're going to have this link on the episode page. But he has a really interesting article that's drawn from the research of a scholar whose last name is Murphy. The article is entitled "How Christmas Baptizes Norse Mythology into Powerful Christian Archetypes." I want to read parts of this just to make the point that he's making. The early Church did do syncretistic things and we (because of books like maybe Hysslop—back to the 19th century stuff that really isn't thought through very well) tend to think that the Church is doing this not to evangelize (the Gospel)... Because people would look at the Catholic church and say, "They don't have the Gospel anyway." And there's an argument to be made there. You can win that argument based upon our experience today of how Catholicism tends to articulate its own faith, mixing in lots of works and all this kind of stuff. I get that. But in the early centuries where people were trying to evangelize pagans, they would do syncretistic things and sometimes they worked better than others. Let's just put it this way [laughs]: sometimes this led to disaster—just a real mixture theologically and doctrinally of paganism with Christian stuff. That, I'm never going to approve of. And even in this case, I'm not offering an explicit endorsement, but I just think it's really interesting to see how this worked in the minds of pagans in the Scandinavian world. So I'm going to read a few excerpts from this article. And if you've seen the *Thor* movie, some of this is going to sound familiar. But please don't get distracted by Hollywood because they ruin some of the imagery here. But jumping into Gleason's article here. This is his argument:

1:15:00

The Christmas tree is a perfect symbol of Christian theology. It depicts the complete good news of Christ. But to see this we need to understand what the tree means and where it comes from. Let's look at the tree's origins. That begins with Norse mythology.

Norse mythology centers upon a tree. This is not exactly novel. Trees are sacred in almost every culture and religion to varying degrees...

But the tree at the center of Norse mythology is unique. It is called Yggdrasil. Modern people tend to think of and depict it as a gigantic ash tree where the nine realms of gods, elves, dwarfs, etc. sit in the branches and roots.

If you think back to the original Thor movie (I think it's the first one, but maybe it's the second one), he's explaining where Asgard comes from to his girlfriend there. You get a little bit of this imagery. But we need to think a little bit better than that, as far as what the Norse mythology actually was.

Yggdrasil was existence itself. The world itself was the tree.

By world, I don't mean earth. Earth was a realm—Midgard, or, as J.R.R. Tolkien called it, middle earth. Our realm of Midgard was small within the world of this cosmic tree.

In the middle of all that cosmic tree stuff (all the branches) was the bifrost—what we call the Milky Way. When they looked up, they're thinking of the cosmic tree in terms of the cosmos. The sun goes down, the sky is laid bare, and that's how they're thinking of this thing which connects all the stars—life itself. That's what they're thinking about with this tree.

In the middle of that runs the Milky Way. That was what they called the Bifrost (back to the Thor movie).

We've discovered this white path through the night sky is actually an arm of our spiral galaxy. But to the Norse the Bifrost was a bridge between Asgard and Midgard. Asgard was the home of the Aesir, the greatest Norse gods, Odin of course being their chief.

So what does Yggdrasil mean? It is often translated as "Odin's horse." But that is actually a theological interpretation of the true meaning of the word. The word literally means "The Awesome One's Gallows."

This takes you right into the heart of Norse mythology, and Gleason writes here about Odin:

Odin is a strange god by ancient standards. Tolkien's Gandalf is explicitly patterned after him. The only real difference is that Odin carries a spear and is missing an eye. Aside from that, he looks like Gandalf, from the top of his grey wide-brimmed hat to the bottom of his dirty boots. This visage that could pass for a homeless man disguised the awesome one as he wandered about the earth.

In contrast to other ancient gods, Odin benefited humanity both metaphysically and ethically. He was generally not depicted as a god requiring elaborate

propitiation. In ethical terms, he modeled the humility and cost of gaining wisdom. This is seen through the story of how he sacrificed his eye to gain wisdom, but even more significant is his search for the runes.

Odin is not trying to get wisdom, okay? He sacrifices an eye to this, he's looking for runes.

The Poetic Edda recounts it like this [this is Oden speaking about himself]:

I know that I hung on a windy Tree
nine long nights,
Wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
Myself to myself,
On that tree of which no man knows
From where its roots run.
No bread did they give me nor drink from a horn,
Downwards I peered;
I took up the Runes, screaming I took them,
Then I fell back from there.

To us this seems bizarre and esoteric, but to the north men the finding and the giving of the runes to humanity was equivalent to being made in God's image. Odin wins the runes through his sacrifice of himself, then gives them to humanity.

The relevance to Jesus, to us, is pretty obvious.

The North men saw the obvious parallels between Jesus on the cross and Odin on the tree. And that tree was Yggdrasil: the awesome one's gallows, the place where God was hung. Yggdrasil is the cross.

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And, of course, on the cross is a God who came as a nondescript man.

Before they came to know Jesus, the north men celebrated a holiday called Yule...

So they celebrated Yule by honoring "the mothers" with an all-night vigil on December 25. The mothers were almost certainly the three wise "hags" known as the Norns, who continually refresh the cosmic tree Yggdrasil with the waters from the well of Urd.

One part of the Yule celebration was to bring evergreen trees into homes and halls. The evergreen tree thus came to symbolize Yggdrasil as much as the ash tree does. In fact it's a far more appropriate symbol because the evergreen trees were reminders of two things: first, that winter could be defeated, as evergreens

do it every year; and second, that one day Yggdrasil would defeat Ragnarok, the Norse end of the world...

...Yggdrasil, who suffers the horrors of Ragnarok but survives the cataclysm. Then the great tree opens itself, revealing two children who will repopulate a new earth.

Because of these beliefs, the north men saw in Jesus their own worldview completed. He hung upon the cross, like Odin, for the sake of humanity. By clinging to the cross we can all escape God's wrath in Ragnarok...

These are just some excerpts from Gleason's article. So what I wanted to do here was illustrate how the missionaries back in these early centuries who become familiar with the religion (in this case the Norsemen) see points of the Nordic theology that are very easy parallels. And here's the question (this goes back to our episode with Jared McDermott about the worship of other gods): Was God planting truth amidst this punishment situation where he had divorced the nations of the Earth from himself to assign them to other gods (Deuteronomy 32 Worldview)? Is God planting truth among them to capitalize on it on some day? Are there messages of truth about the true God that survived, and God is going to capitalize on that some day? That's a discussion the early Church Fathers had. And this is just another illustration of the same discussion. Are these elements in Nordic religion vestiges of ideas that God knew would mean something to them in a foundational way—really in an evangelistic way—sometime in the future? That was a discussion that academics have today. It was a discussion early Church missionaries and early Church writers had. It's a discussion that missionaries to the Nordic people had, as well. And they saw in these things opportunity to bridge to truth.

So they weren't looking for opportunities to take truth and become more pagan. It wasn't always an issue of palatability. In some cases, there were real bridges—there were real analogies to build on here to get people to believe, and specifically to believe that, "You know that thing that you believe about Odin hanging on a tree? Well, that actually happened in real time. There was a God-man who actually hung on a tree and died for you. And we're here to tell you that this happened in this place called Jerusalem that you may have never heard of. And centuries ago... We have our message because it was taught to us over the generations from eyewitnesses to this event. And the man was Jesus of Nazareth. He was God-man and he came to Earth, hung on a tree so that you could have salvation from the end of the world. You can have eternal life."

So I bring up the example, not only because it's really interesting (it's really fascinating) but also to make the point that these things should not be caricatured. It's very easy to construct what we think of and what at the time would have been known as the Catholic Church... It's an easy villain. It's an easy

thing to villainize if you're Protestant. Protestants have done this for a long time, and Evangelicals and whatnot. I have a number of disagreements with Catholic theology where I think it's not biblically based (in other words, it's not text-driven—it's theology by analogy), and sometimes the analogies are kind of strange. And I have fundamental disagreements there. But I think it's unwarranted to make the Catholic Church the villain for everything we don't like and use the easy villain—the easy target—to refuse to think about why some of these things were done. And why did some of these things seem to work really effectively, as far as getting people to convert from paganism to Christianity? And we could sit here and say, "That wasn't real Christianity because look at all those wars that started and all that bad stuff. I watched *Vikings* on HBO (or whatever channel it's on)... Boy, they were awful. It's just syncretism; it's gobbledygook." You could say that about Luther's Reformation and it would be unwarranted. Yeah, Luther's Reformation led to lots of wars in Europe—decades of wars, and they were bad, and it was politicized. But foundationally, Luther took people back to a really important truth—salvation by grace through faith not linked to a specific church or a specific set of works.

The point is that we need to be a little more careful in our thinking here. We can't just throw the baby out with the bathwater, because we could throw basically practically everything. Everything we have in the Christian world is going to be abused—it's going to be manipulated, it's going to be politicized. This is why on Naked Bible we try to get people to go back to the text. I'm not concerned with trying to separate the wheat from chaff in modern Christendom, or even ancient Christendom. We want to go back to the text, and the Nordic stuff here is just an illustration of how maybe everything didn't have a bad motive. Maybe it's just a little... It's too much of a reflex to just say, "Having a tree—that's just all pagan and the people who did this wanted to become more pagan. They certainly didn't want to try to be fostering truth and actually telling people about Jesus." Well, that's not true. It's a mixed bag. But what we ought to really have our focus on regarding this topic (and really any other topic) is, how can we look at scripture and think better about the topic?

And so in this episode, to wrap up, we've tried to approach the question of whether Christmas is a pagan holiday in two ways. One was the date. The calculation of the date and the date itself (December 25th)... Even though I don't think that that's when Jesus was born, that is not a pagan date. It is a date that was arrived at through various mathematical extrapolations—specifically as a by-product to remember/commemorate something explicitly scriptural. And that is the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. Fixing the commemoration of that event in real time was an obsession in the early Church, and the date for the birth was derived there from at least a hundred years earlier than Aurelian. So the date is not pagan.

The practices... I think this is an issue of Christian liberty. This ought to be an issue of conscience and not a spirituality contest. Those are two entirely different

things. Old Testament Israelites used... Even at God's command, they used symbols and objects that were part of pagan traditions, and it wasn't bad theology. It wasn't idolatry; it wasn't a violation of anything, per se. The issue was, is it a substitute for Yahweh? That's evil. And are you worshiping the object itself instead of Yahweh? That's evil.

And so, these are the kind of ways that we need to look at scripture and try to come up with ways to think about what we're doing. I would say if you want to divorce yourself from the Christian calendar and follow the Jewish calendar, but you're not making it a spirituality contest (it's an issue of conscience, it just connects you more to the Old Testament), by all means do that. Go ahead and do that. But don't judge someone else for not making the same decision, because then you've just turned it into a spirituality contest. Paul is very clear in the epistles about how it doesn't matter about dates, foods, and feasts, and all this kind of stuff. What matters is Christ, and he let everybody know that I have the freedom to do this or not do this. But he also (on the flip side of the coin) let everybody know, "I love the weaker brother." If I need to give up something that I could do for the sake of others, I'll do it. I don't even have to think about it. I'll do it. But I don't want to rehearse the territory we've been over in the episode.

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So that's how I would look at this whole thing: is Christmas a pagan holiday? No, it's not. It can be made that. It can certainly be twisted and turned into that. And in our culture more and more, it's about not thinking about Jesus. But that's more easily done with commercialism. But these things that we criticize... Certainly the date is not pagan. The practices... We need to evaluate our consciences. We need to evaluate the practices on the basis of our own consciences and the conscience of others (other Christians, other believers), but do not make it a spirituality contest.

TS: Mike, can you subconsciously be guilty of idolatry, though? For example, you're not explicitly saying out loud, "I have replaced God with money," but if you are completely consumed with your job or anything else like that, can you be guilty of idolatry subconsciously?

MH: I think... The short answer is yeah, I think that can happen. Subconsciously, you'd have to... Every person has to evaluate what's going on on the inside. You could say... Could there be a person that... a situation where nobody even thinks about it, they're just doing it? That's what you're talking about with the subconscious thing. And yeah, it may take someone from the outside—a family member or somebody else—to just ask a question like, "Is your job the source of your happiness? Is this really what your faith is in? You attach the reason why you have these things or why you are what you are—your station in life—exclusively to your job, and the Lord doesn't even pop into your head. Then you've got a problem. But there are a lot of people who... It could be anything—the question's not even going to occur to them. And this is why I think we need to be immersed in scripture. We need to be having conversations with other

believers to at least help us to think thoughts that we can use to evaluate our own hearts. I'm all in favor of that. That's community. It's trying to attach our beliefs and how we think to scripture. That's what we should be doing. What oftentimes these things turn into is they turn into opportunities for us to look at somebody else and not look at ourselves. But for us to look at somebody else and either think in our hearts that we're better—we're more spiritual... Or we say something, not to get them to ask themselves a question that they really need to ask... In other words, not out of sincerity or concern for the other person, but it becomes a dig—it becomes something that we're saying this to the other person because we want them to get the message that, "You've got problems, Dude, and I don't." [laughs] So these things can happen. So my short answer would be yeah, I could see scenarios where that would be the case, but this is why we need honest people in our lives. We need community. We need to be conscious every day of trying to live life in light of scripture, in the light of the Lord and of who he is and what he's done—all those things we might talk about on Sunday. We need to be thinking about them every day.

TS: Alright, Mike, that's going to be another good Christmas special and I'm glad to know that my Christmas tree and wreath and everything else isn't going to get me in trouble.

MH: Just don't bow down to them.

TS: OK.

[laughter]

MH: Don't assign any spiritual importance to them. Let them just be a reminder.

TS: Absolutely. Well, there you have it. Alright, well, we will wish everybody a Merry Christmas this year, and I want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.