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Is Christmas Lawful?

Kurt Simmons

It's that time of year again, the time when men of good-will are subjected to the complaints of crusty, hard-hearted, Puritanical curmudgeons who would shut out every particle of joy from life; the time of year when we hear stale protests against the most celebrated event in history, the crowning point of the year, when the whole world rejoices at the Savior's birth and the story of the Nativity is told in every language; at that time when we should most rejoice for heaven's salvation and the triumph of Christian faith, we are scolded instead, and told that celebrating Christmas is somehow "unchristian." *"Wicked Christmas-keepers, Repent!"*

Is there anything to these perennial objections? Can we celebrate the Nativity? Can we observe Christmas in our homes and churches? Or is the holiday season "lawful" only if it is secularized and kept free of Christ? Or is even this objectionable? In this article, we look at "anti-Christmasism" and address the question whether it is permitted to commemorate the Savior's birth December 25th.

Spirit of Legalism and Overcorrecting Catholic Excesses

The spirit of "anti-Christmasism" is born of the spirit of severity and legalism. It finds its principle source in Calvinism. Calvinism is a system of belief that views God as an arbitrary and severe Sovereign who savingly loves some men and predestinates them to salvation, but actively hardens others and predestinates them to the eternal flames of hell. The God of Calvin is a God of limited love and limited atonement who has Jesus die, not for the world, but only the select few, a God who whimsically bestows his grace on some, and just as whimsically withholds it from others, a God whose unpredictable grace and grudging gift of saving love seems calculated to expunge all joy from human life and to cause men to treat one another with equal stinginess and severity. John Calvin once said that "babies are born sinners and are unaccepted and hated by God" (Institutes, Bk. IV, Chpt. 16, Sec. 17). Can a system of belief that makes God the hater of babies, that makes

God an austere tyrant who loves some and not others, produce a charitable view of our fellow man? Can it foster generosity, love, and joy in the human heart or make the world a happier place? Will it not rather spawn a cold and crabbed heart like that of very Scrooge himself? History testifies that, given the chance to come to seed and show its innermost self, Calvinism – at least the Calvinism of yesteryear – produces the latter. In Calvin’s Geneva one could be fined and punished for observing Christmas, so also in Scotland, where John Knox, the Presbyterian reformer, held sway. For Knox, Christmas was a piece of popish superstition, an “abomination” to be shunned like the pollution of idols and punished by the civil magistrate.

“By contrary Doctrine, we understand...the superstitious observation of...the Feasts (as they term them) of Apostles, Martyrs, Virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our Lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil Magistrate.”¹

Knox’s views became standard fare among Calvinists. When Cromwell and the Puritans gained power in England during the 1600’s they proceeded to outlaw celebration of Christ’s nativity, requiring that churches be shut and shops and businesses be open. Similar attitudes and attempts to banish Christmas were carried to North America by the Pilgrims of the Plymouth Plantation.

Knox and Scottish Presbyterians viewed the public worship of the church as a type of liturgical ceremony whose ritual is minutely regulated by God, just as it had been in the temple service. To be acceptable, worship must be “authorized.” The least innovation is like the “strange fire” offered by Nadab and Abihu and “invalidates” worship, causing fire to leap out of

the altar and consume the worshiper. The *regulatory rule* of worship (as it came to be known) is best described by Samuel Miller (1769-1850) in his book “The Worship of the Presbyterian Church”:

“The Scriptures being the only infallible rule of faith and practice, no rite or ceremony ought to have a place in the public worship of God, which is not warranted in Scripture, either by direct precept or example, or by good and sufficient inference.”²

Presbyterian influences in the nondenominational churches of Christ (Stone-Campbell Movement) introduced the regulatory rule of worship into that body, together with the spirit of “anti-Christmasism,” where remnants of both exist until this day. It should be pointed out, however, that other Reformers, such as Luther and Beza, took no exception to celebrating the Nativity. It is only in churches coming under the influence of Knox and Calvin that Christmas was shunned.

Freedom to Esteem the Day

The regulatory rule of worship is of purely human origination. There is no requirement in the Bible that the worship of the church be conformed to a particular pattern. In fact, in the churches of Christ, “example, command, and necessary inference” were first used *positively* by Thomas and Alexander Campbell to identify what the church *must* do (meet the first day of the week to observe the Lord’s Supper, etc), not negatively to delimit what alone *may* be done. It was not until second or third generation preachers (e.g., Moses Lard) that the formula was used *negatively* to banish such things as choirs, baptisteries in the building, etc. Negative use of “example, command, and necessary inference” proved horribly destructive, divisive, and legalistic. It unleashed the most astonishing series of divisions within the churches of Christ, as men feared to eat in the church building, have water fountains, hat racks, Sunday school, multiple cups in worship, and even support Christian colleges and orphans’ homes from

¹ *Knox's History*, Vol. 2, p. 281. Cf. John Knox, *Works* (David Laing, ed.; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Vol. ii, p. 190.

² Miller, pp. 65. This same concept would later find its way into the Churches of Christ of the Stone/Campbell movement of the early 19th century through Campbell who was of Presbyterian background.

church funds lest they forfeit salvation by attending a congregation guilty of an unauthorized “act of worship” or “work” of the church. Instead, we believe that positive use of “example, command, and necessary inference” to identify what *should* be done was correct, and that the lawfulness of all other practices must be tested by “principle, precedent, and precept” – if a particular practice does not violate a principle, precedent, or precept of scripture, what objection can there be? However, questions of hermeneutic aside, the scriptures are plain that Christians have *freedom of conscience* to observe special days:

“One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it.” Rom. 14:5, 6

We thus find Paul and the apostles using Christian liberty to keep Jewish feasts like Passover and Pentecost (Acts 18:21; 20:16). Naturally, these were not binding or obligatory and Paul condemned the Galatians for observing Jewish “days, months, times, and years” as if they were required for men to be acceptable with God (Gal. 4:10). However, the point remains: Christians were free to esteem various days and to set them aside in honor of the Lord. Thus, there can be no scriptural objection to Christians setting aside a day to remember the birth of the Savior.

Was Christ Born December 25th?

Some object that December 25th was not “really” the day Christ was born; they urge that it would have been too cold for shepherds to encamp in the fields near Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks, and that to honor Christ’s birth in December is therefore to perpetuate a lie. However, there is no substance to this charge. I presently reside in Carlsbad, New Mexico. A look at a world map shows that Carlsbad is almost exactly the same latitude as Jerusalem. We have very mild winters here. One can be outside without a coat most days of the year; temperatures at night in December are relatively mild; most years, there is nothing to prevent one from camping in a tent at night. Therefore, the idea that shepherds could not have been encamped in the field in Bethlehem simply has

no merit; it may fool uncritical minds who suppose December in Bethlehem is bitter cold like New England, but those who stop and consider the matter will see it is purely fallacious.

Was Christ born December 25th? We believe that the evidence of scripture and sacred history show that he was. Daniel said that the Messiah would be “cut off” (crucified) and annul the legal efficacy of the animal sacrifices after a 3 ½ year ministry (Dan. 9:26, 27). Jesus died Nisan 15, AD 33. If we trace back 3 ½ years from Nisan 15, AD 33, we arrive at Heshvan (Nov.) 15th, AD 29 when Christ was baptized. Luke said Jesus was on the threshold of his 30th birthday at his baptism, and that he then took a 40 day fast in the wilderness in preparation for his ministry, after which he began actively teaching (Lk. 2:1, 23; 4:2, 14). Jewish men began their public ministries when they attained 30 years. Jesus’ wilderness fast thus seems likely to have been timed to end at or about his 30th birthday. Nov. 15th + 40 = Dec. 25th. Other evidence of Christ’s winter birth includes reconstruction of the priestly courses from AD 70 to the conception of John the Baptist in the fall (September) of 3 BC and Jesus’ birth fifteen months later. It is also seen in the death of Herod the Great shortly before Passover, 1 BC, several months following Jesus’ birth.³ Scripture, therefore, adequately therefore testifies to Jesus’ December 25th birth.

Pagan Origination?

Some object that Christmas is of pagan origin, that it is a “Christianized” version of the winter solstice and that many of its customs are of pagan origination. However, the scripture plainly teaches that things wholesome or indifferent in themselves do not need to be traced back to their origin to make sure they are pure or free of pagan contamination.

In I Corinthians, Paul addressed the question of meats offered unto idols. Could the Christian partake? Paul answered that an idol is nothing and has no existence in the world. Food offered to an idol cannot change the food or pollute it. Paul instructed the Corinthians to eat whatever

³ For a full discussion and other evidence of Christ’s Dec. 25th birth, see the articles at www.dec25th.info.

was sold in the market stalls, without asking if it was offered to an idol.

“As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one...Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake; for the earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof”(I Cor. 8:4; 10:25, 26).

Here we see that food offered to an idol is unaffected and may be freely eaten. Only where the Christian was told it was offered to an idol was he required to abstain, and this only lest he seem to consent to worship of idols or cause a weak brother to stumble, not because partaking was wrong in itself (I Cor. 8:10; 10:28-30; Rev. 2:20). But whatever association mistletoe, decorating evergreen trees, holly, the Yule log, and the like traditions may once have had with pagan rites or rituals (if indeed they ever did), they are now buried in the sands of time and nobody worships the ancient deities or even knows their names, or associates these festive, holiday trimmings with any idol or pagan god. If it was permissible to eat food offered to idols while most men actively worshipped them and their temples littered the landscape, how much more may we today, when idolatry is dead, decorate our homes with branches of holly, mistletoe, and fragrant evergreens given to men by God for our use and enjoyment? And need we add, that if meat is unaffected by being offered to an idol, a day cannot be polluted either? God is the author and maker of days; all days belong to him (Gen. 1:14-19); Christians should freely enjoy and make wholesome use of everyday God has given them under the sun. And what better use can be made of the day than to honor the Savior and teach our children to rejoice at his birth?

Is Christmas Catholic?

It goes without saying, that if the alleged pagan origin of some traditions offers no objection to celebrating the Nativity of Christ, the asserted Catholic origin of the day can offer no objection either. We agree that there are many things men wrongly introduced into the church, such as the “priesthood,” the “veneration of Mary,” enjoining abstinence from meats and celibacy. But the idea that a day of sacred remembrance,

be it attended by feast or fast, must be divinely instituted to be “authorized” is absurd on its face. The Feast of Dedication, commemorating the cleansing of the temple from Antiochus Epiphanes, was instituted by human authority, as were the days of Purim to commemorate the Jews’ escape from Haman (Esther 9:27, 28). Yet, John records that Jesus himself observed the Feast of Dedication (Jn. 10:22). Thus, the mere fact that men have chosen to commemorate the Savior’s birth Dec. 25th is no more objectionable than commemoration of the temple’s rededication (“Hanukah”), which also was celebrated Dec. 25th (I Macc. 4:41-55).

But is celebration of the nativity of Catholic origin? The answer is, No. The old charge that Catholic authorities decreed the day as a way of turning men from celebration of the winter solstice is totally without historical support. It is a piece of historical revisionism seized upon by the Puritans for which not one whit of evidence exists. No decree from any counsel or church authority instituting the day has once been produced. The fact that Jesus was born in the winter and that pagans celebrated diverse rites at this season is purely coincidental and offers no more proof of the day’s false origination than does pagan celebration at the time of Christ’s resurrection at the vernal equinox falsify that day.⁴ The Nativity and Resurrection have always been celebrated by Christians and always will. What pagans may do or have done is irrelevant and is no evidence that church authorities seized upon these days as a way of “Christianizing” pagan devotions.

It is an established and incontrovertible fact that celebration of the Nativity predates Catholicism by centuries. William Cave (1676), in his history of “Primitive Christianity,” writes:

Epiphany...was of old promiscuously used either for the feast of Christ’s

⁴ Christians celebrated the resurrection long before the Catholic Church existed. Jesus appears to have ordained the custom himself when he said “With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 22:15, 16). Since Christians do not celebrate Passover, it seems likely that Jesus was alluding to the Feast of the Resurrection, which has been celebrated by Christians at the time of Passover for as long as recorded history of the church exists.

Nativity, or for that we now properly call by that name: afterwards the titles became distinct; that of Christ's Birth (or as we call it Christmas -day) was called the Nativity, and Theophania, the appearances of God in the flesh, two names importing the same thing as Nazianzen notes. For the antiquity of it, the first footsteps I find of it are in the Second Century, though I doubt not that it might be celebrated before, mentioned by Theophilus Bishop of Caesarea, about the time of the Emperor Commodus...

However, that it was kept before the times of Constantine, we have this sad instance. That when the persecution raged under Diocletian, who then kept his Court at Nicomedia, amongst other acts of barbarous cruelty done there, finding multitudes of Christians young and old met together in the Temple, upon the day of Christ's Nativity, to celebrate that Festival, he commanded the Church doors to be shut up, and fire to be put to it, which in a short time reduced them and the Church to ashes.

I shall not dispute, whether it was always observed upon the same day that we keep it now the twenty fifth of December; it seems probable that for a long time in the East it was kept in January, under the name, and at the general time of the Epiphania, till receiving more light in the case from the Churches of the West, they changed it to this day; sure I am S. Chrysostom in an homily on purpose about this very thing affirms, that it was not above ten years since in that Church (i. e., Antioch) it began first to be observed upon that day, and there offers several reasons to prove that to be the true day of Christ's Nativity.⁵ (Pg. 194, 195)

⁵ WILLIAM CAVE, D.D. (LONDON - A.D. 1676), *Primitive Christianity, OR THE RELIGION OF THE Ancient Christians In the first ages OF THE GOSPEL*, 194, 195

Here we see that the Nativity predates Catholicism by hundreds of years. That the Catholic Church celebrates Christmas makes it no more Catholic than Communion or baptism, which it also practices and celebrates. No Christian need worry that Christmas is a disguised form of paganism surreptitiously introduced into the church by Catholic authorities, or that in remembering Christ's birth they are guilty of perpetuating error.

Conclusion

Celebration of Christ's Nativity is perfectly lawful and acceptable. No scriptural objection can be advanced against commemoration in church or home of this most wholesome time when the Savior was born and God's work of redemption drew nigh.

Born the King of Angels!



O, Come, Let us Adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Star of Bethlehem or Nazareth?

Kurt Simmons

In this article we look at attempts to identify the star seen by the Magi in the east, and show that the star led them, not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth forty-odd days after Christ's birth.

Johannes Kepler

Attempts to identify the "star of Bethlehem" have come and gone down through the ages. Various phenomena and astrological occurrences have been proposed and served to corroborate the date of Christ's birth. Among the earliest and longest standing attempts was that made by Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). Kepler was one of the great mathematical minds of history. His works on the mathematical laws of planetary motion, showing that planets move in elliptical orbits, have stood the test of centuries and are still used by NASA and astronomers today.⁶

Using his mathematical equations, Kepler believed he could predict the appearance of the night sky, not just for that evening's phenomena, but for any day in history, as seen from any place on earth. In 1604, Kepler witnessed a Jupiter-Saturn-conjunction, followed by a conjunction of Jupiter-Mars. Following the conjunction, Kepler witnessed that a new star as bright as Jupiter appeared, which he observed until it disappeared the following year into the sun's glare. While writing a book about the observation,⁷ Kepler came across a book by Laurence Suslyga of Poland that argued that Christ was born in 4 B.C. Noticing that this was after a triple conjunction in 7 B.C. and a massing of Mars, Jupiter, and

⁶ They are: (1) All planets move about the Sun in elliptical orbits, having the Sun as one of the foci. (2) A radius vector joining any planet to the Sun sweeps out equal areas in equal lengths of time. (3) The squares of the sidereal periods (of revolution) of the planets are directly proportional to the cubes of their mean distances from the Sun.

⁷ *De Stella Nova in Pede Serpentarii*, 1604, (Concerning a New Star in the Foot of the Serpent).

Saturn in 6 B.C., Kepler speculated that just as a nova had appeared in 1604 after a series of conjunctions, the star of Bethlehem might have been a nova which was generated after the conjunctions in 7/6 B.C. Kepler wrote a book embodying his speculations.⁸ No evidence that the conjunctions or massing of B.C. 6/7 produced a nova has ever been produced. Even so, Kepler's speculations served as basis for the Christmas sky shows of planetariums world-wide for many years. However, sky shows featuring Kepler's speculations have now been replaced by the equally insupportable conjectures of Ernest L. Martin.

Ernest L. Martin

Dr. Ernest Martin is a world recognized authority concerning the date of Christ's birth. Beginning with publication of his 1976 article in *Christianity Today*, "The Celestial Pageantry Dating Christ's Birth," Martin has gained attention until he is now perhaps the leading authority in astronomical dating of Christ's birth. Over 600 planetariums world-wide have revised their Christmas programs to correspond with dating theories and data he has advanced. His book, "*The Star that Astonished the World*," is considered *the* authoritative work on the date of Christ's birth based upon astronomical events.⁹

By reconstructing with computers the skies over ancient Jerusalem and the east as they may have looked 2,000 years ago, Martin believes "*historians and astronomers may now be able to discover the very 'star' that led the Wise Men to*

⁸ *De anno natali Christi*, 1614. Cf., John Mosley, *Common Errors in "Star of Bethlehem" Planetarium Shows*, the Planetarian, Third Quarter 1981.

⁹ ASK Publications, 1996

the infant Jesus at Bethlehem."¹⁰ Indeed, Martin is convinced that the so-called star of Bethlehem has been identified. The astronomical events Martin believes account for the Star of the Magi occurred in the years 3/2 BC:

- 1) May-Aug. 3 BC - A series of conjunctions between the planets Venus and Mars, Venus and Saturn, and Venus and Jupiter, the latter as a pre-dawn morning star configuration.
- 2) Sept. 3 BC – May 2 BC – A series of three conjunctions between the planet Jupiter and the star “Regulus.”
- 3) June 17, 2 BC – The conjunction of Jupiter and Venus as a “double star” in the constellation of Leo at the time of the full moon.
- 4) Aug. 27, 2 BC – The massing of Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and Mercury in close longitudinal relationship
- 5) Dec. 25, 2 BC – The “hesitation” of the planet Jupiter over Bethlehem in the course of its annual migration as it began its annual retrogression

Martin maintains that these celestial events would have been interpreted by astrologers and astronomers of the first century as indications of great world events, including the dawn of a new age and the birth of a new king. Martin urges that these celestial events drew the Magi to Jerusalem to do homage to the Christ-child, whom he maintains was born September 11, 3 B.C. There has been no shortage of astronomers willing to endorse Martin’s claims.¹¹ However, not only is there no evidence these events were actually witnessed or were interpreted as Martin claims, there are other major difficulties with Martin’s hypothesis.

¹⁰ Ibid, *Introduction*

¹¹ Craig Chester, President, Monterey Institute for Research in Astronomy, *The Star of Bethlehem*, IMPRIMIS (Hillsdale College) December 1993; John Mosley, Program Supervisor, Griffith Observatory, *Common Errors in "Star of Bethlehem" Planetarium Shows*, The Planetarian, Third Quarter 1981.

Non-conformity with Gospel Record

First, the series of events described by Martin in no way conforms to the gospel narrative. The Magi were undoubtedly expert astronomers who probably came from the area of Chaldea; indeed, Martin affirms as much. Yet, Matthew is very clear that the Magi referred to the phenomenon that drew them to Jerusalem as a “star.” The Greek term Matthew employed is “aster” (singular). The term for multiple stars is the plural “asters,” which nowhere occurs in the passage. The term for a group of planets or stars is “asteron” (Rev. 12:1). The Greek term for planet is “planēs aster” and the plural is “planētes.” If the Magi saw a series of planetary conjunctions similar to those proposed by Martin, we would expect them to have used language reasonably calculated to communicate as much. The fact that they described a single star, and not a planet, or a series of conjunctions of stars or planets, argues against Martin’s suggestion. Indeed, it completely contradicts it. There is simply no justification for substituting Matthew’s “star” for the series of conjunctions suggested by Martin.

Dating Tiberius’ Reign

Second, Luke is very explicit that Jesus was on the threshold of his 30th birthday when he was baptized in the 15th of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1, 21). Augustus died in A.D. 14. Thus, the 15th year of Tiberius’ reign would be A.D. 29-30. Finegan, the world leader in Biblical chronology, discusses the matter at length in his book and notes that Roman historians reckoned the reign of emperors from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31st and concludes Luke would have done likewise:

“Now as for the date of the fifteenth year of Tiberius in Luke 3:1, we have judged that Luke, as a historian like others in the Roman empire, would count the regnal years from Tiberius’s succession to Augustus; and, since Roman historians of the time (Tacitus, Suetonius) generally date the first regnal year of a ruler from Jan 1 of the year following the date of accession (i.e., following the accession-year system), we judge that Luke would do likewise. So Tiberius’s fifteenth factual year was from Aug. 19, AD 28 to Aug. 18, AD 29, but his fifteenth regnal year

counted as Julian calendar years according to the accession system was Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, AD 29.”¹²

All scholars and historians date regnal years as given by Finegan, above. Josephus dated Herod’s reign according to the prevailing Roman method.¹³ If Josephus dated a Judean king’s reign by the western, Roman method, is it reasonable to argue that Luke dated a Roman emperor’s reign by what Martin alleges (but does not prove) was the Jewish method? Luke wrote to Greek and Latin speaking peoples of the larger Roman world. Who but Jews would know or anticipate something as obscure as Luke dating Tiberius’ reign by eastern customs? Surely, a historian would adopt a dating system known and anticipated by his intended audience. Anything else would only veil his work in mystery. Indeed, the only reason Martin attempts to date Tiberius’ reign as he does is that he is forced to it by his theory, which otherwise collapses upon itself. Finegan, based upon Thiele, reports that, with the exception of a short period from Jehoram to Joash, the accession years system is what generally obtained in Judah.¹⁴ Thus, Martin is virtually alone in reckoning Tiberius’ reign inclusive of A.D. 14. Hence, we are well advised not to follow him there. Instead, we adhere to the accepted method of reckoning, which makes the 15th of Tiberius equal A.D. 29-30. This means Jesus was born in 2 B.C. and turned 30 years old soon after his baptism, before Dec. 31st, A.D. 29.

Arrival of Magi

Third, Martin places the Magi at Bethlehem Dec. 25th, 2 B.C., where they allegedly found the Christ-child, who has been there since September 11, 3 B.C., a period of not less than *15 months*. This is contradicted by Luke, who reports that the holy family returned to Nazareth soon after Christ’s birth, having first gone to Jerusalem to accomplish the rituals required by the law:

And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present [him] to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons... And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth. Lk. 2:22-39

Leviticus indicates that the period for a woman’s purification following birth of a male-child was 40 days (Lv. 12:1-8). Thus, the holy family remained at Bethlehem approximately 40 days, traveled five miles to Jerusalem, performed the requirements of the law, then returned home to Nazareth. Thus, there is no basis for placing the holy family in Bethlehem December 25th, 2 B.C., unless that is when Christ was born (as indeed we believe he was). However, under Martin’s hypothesis, Jesus was born September 11, 3 B.C., and therefore could not have been there 15 months later when the Magi allegedly arrived.

Thus, Martin’s model is at odds with history and scripture at every turn and must be rejected. Indeed, we believe that all attempts to identify the Star of the Magi by reference to natural phenomena are doomed to failure, for Matthew’s narrative makes clear that the star was unlike anything in nature.

A Natural Phenomenon?

Attempts like Kepler’s and Martin’s to identify the star proceed upon the assumption that it was a regularly occurring and verifiable phenomenon of nature. However, we feel this is contradicted by Matthew’s narrative.

First, although Martin claims the star “astonished the world” and made ancient newspaper headlines, there is no evidence to support this. Just the opposite, so far as can be shown from scripture or history, nobody but the Magi witnessed the star. The annals of ancient history are completely silent about the appearance of a star that “astonished the world.” Matthew says that Magi arrived in Jerusalem asking “where is he that was born king of the Jews? For we have

¹² Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Hendrickson, 1998 ed), p. 340 § 583.

¹³ W. E. Filmer, *The Chronology of Herod’s Reign*, JTS 1966.

¹⁴ Finegan, §§ 420, 421, pp. 245-248.

seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2). When report of the Magi reached Herod, they were secretly called before him (v.7). Herod then inquired when the star first appeared. We are not told the Magi’s response. However, since Herod ordered the slaughter of male children two and under “according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men” (v. 16), we infer that the star was first seen some two years earlier. Based upon the gospel narrative, it is clear that neither Herod, his court, nor the Jews were so much as aware there was a star, otherwise they would not have to ask when it first appeared.

Second, unlike other stars or planets that are visible during the whole course of their movement across the sky, the star the Magi saw appeared at irregular intervals. In fact, so far as can be ascertained from scripture, it appeared first while they were still in the east (Matt. 2:2); disappeared, then reappeared two years later shortly after Jesus’ birth, to lead the Magi to the Christ-child. Matthew says that when the Magi departed from Herod “they saw the star,” and “rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (v. 10). This indicates that there was a long period during which the star was not visible, and shows that it was not a normal phenomenon of nature. Stars do not normally vanish for up to two years, only to appear again suddenly at the very moment necessary to direct the Magi to the Christ-child. Rather, we believe the better view is that it was a divine apparition, and that God prophetically revealed to the Magi its meaning and significance, and directed them to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see the Christ-child. The fact that God communicated with the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod (v. 12) tends to corroborate the view that the Magi did not journey to Jerusalem based upon human interpretation of heavenly signs, but that they received a divine revelation. How else could they know that it was king of the *Jews* that was born, as distinguished from all earth’s other peoples? God’s purpose in the star and pilgrimage of the Magi was to announce the birth of the Messiah. Were they mere astrologers or prognosticators whose interpretation of the star rested upon human wisdom, their arrival in Jerusalem would be greatly diminished. This was a very superstitious period in history and astrologers were constantly making predictions of political changes. But if the Magi received a divine revelation about the meaning of the star, then their appearance would indeed provoke great

consternation among the Jews and the court of Herod. Other events God ordained to announce the coming and birth of the Messiah include the circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and the angelic proclamation to the Bethlehem shepherds.

When Did the Magi Arrive, and Where did the Star lead Them?

As noted above, the holy family returned to Nazareth approximately 40 days after the birth of Christ. Did the Magi arrive while they were still in Bethlehem, or at Nazareth? Matthew states that when they found the young child, he was in a “house with his mother” (Matt. 2:11), not the manger where he had been born. This makes clear that the Magi were not present the night of Christ’s birth. Further, since they were in a house, not an inn, the natural inference is that the Magi found them at the family home. The term used by Matthew to describe Christ when the Magi arrived is “young child” (Gk. *ton paidion*) and is sometimes thought to suggest an older child as distinguished from a babe (Matt. 2:8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 19, 21). However, the same term is used by Luke of the babe the night of his birth (Lk. 2:17) and eight days old at his circumcision (Lk. 2:21), and therefore does not imply he was two, or otherwise provide a reliable indication of his age when the Magi arrived.

Matthew tells us that the holy family fled to Egypt immediately after the Magi departed and remained there until Herod’s death (Matt. 2:19). However, Luke’s narrative allows no room for flight to Egypt in the period between Christ’s birth and performing the necessary offerings at the temple some 40 days later. Based upon a Dec. 25th birth, this works out to February 2nd, 1, B.C. on the Julian calendar (Shebat 6 on the Jewish calendar). Since the holy family returned home to Nazareth after performing the offerings, it seems clear that their flight to Egypt was from Nazareth, not Bethlehem and that it was here the Magi found them. This is why the star was necessary to reveal where Christ dwelt when the Magi arrived. Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem. Herod, having learned from the scribes where Christ would be born, sent the Magi to Bethlehem to find him (Matt. 2:8). However, Matthew relates that the Magi, having departed from Herod, saw the star and that it “went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was” (Matt. 2:9). Since

Herod had directed them to Bethlehem, the Magi plainly did not need the star to lead them there. Rather, the better view is that the star re-directed the Magi 70 miles north, to Nazareth, the holy family by this time having arrived home.

The Magi appear to have traveled to and arrived at Nazareth by night, following the star (Matt. 2:9, 10). This would have helped conceal the arrival of the Magi and thus protect the holy family from discovery by Herod's tracing where the Magi went when they departed from Jerusalem. This is also why they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and thus returned home another way. However, Herod, perceiving he was mocked, sent and slew the male children in Bethlehem two years old and under (Matt. 2:16-18). Herod probably soon learned that the Magi never went to Bethlehem at all. Moreover, realizing that the Christ-child may not have remained in Bethlehem for two years in any event, Herod would likely have attempted to expand his search. The angel's warning that Herod would "seek the young child" (Matt. 2:13) confirms as much. Roman records of the census, which had been recently concluded if it was not still underway, would have recorded the presence of Joseph and Mary

in Bethlehem and the birth of their child, and would have indicated that Nazareth was where they made their home. This required Joseph flee Herod's jurisdiction entirely, lest he find the babe. The holy family therefore fled to Egypt, where they remained until Herod's death. Herod most likely died sometime before Passover 1 B.C., following the Magi's departure in early to mid February.



God's Richest
Blessings to You &
Yours as you
Celebrate Christ's
Nativity, *Anno
Domini 2009*

All Public Displays of Christianity Could End with Italian Crucifix Ruling: Legal Expert

By Hilary White

ROME, November 9, 2009 (LifeSiteNews.com) - The recent decision by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) condemning the display of crucifixes in Italian public schools could result in the removal of all public displays of a Christian origin in all public buildings of Europe under the newly passed Lisbon Treaty, a British legal expert has warned.

Given the intimate connections between the ECHR, the Lisbon Treaty and the European Convention on Human Rights, UK barrister and anti-discrimination law expert Neil Addison told LifeSiteNews.com (LSN), "unless the European Court of Human Rights overrules itself on appeal, Italy, and indeed the rest of Europe, has a serious problem."



Addison, the author of the legal textbook, "Religious Discrimination and Hatred Law," said that the only way out, if an appeal by the Italian government to the same ECHR fails, would be for Italy to withdraw entirely from the EU, an option that he said is unlikely.

The ECHR decision came last week in response to a single suit brought by an Italian citizen of Finnish origin who has been campaigning for eight years to have crucifixes removed from schools. The court ruled that the display of crucifixes in public schools restricted religious freedoms. "The compulsory display of a symbol of a given confession in premises used by the public authorities ... restricted the right of parents to educate their children in conformity with their convictions," the court said.

While the ECHR, as a body of the Council of Europe, did not have the power to order the removal of crucifixes, "what it does do is find a violation of the Convention. The Italian government now has to report back to the Council of Europe exactly what it proposes to do in order to implement the ruling, which in this case will mean removing crucifixes from the classrooms, courts public buildings etc," Addison said.

He explained that if the ECHR judgment is not overturned on appeal then Italy cannot simply ignore the ruling. The effects will be profound, he said, since the Lisbon Treaty "in effect incorporates European Convention on Human Rights into EU law," which is now binding on Italy, and all other 26 member states.

Addison called the decision "an extraordinarily wide decision which could be used, for example, to prevent state schools putting on nativity plays." He cited the examples of Greek and Cypriot schools where it is common to see icons displayed. If the Italian crucifix ruling stands, he said,

"those icons will have to be removed and, arguably so will displays of Christianity from all public buildings throughout Europe."

He said what is perhaps "most surprising" is that ECHR did not apply "its own concept of 'Margin of Appreciation and recognise that this type of question should be left to individual countries to decide."

Addison commented, "I do wonder if perhaps this judgment may, in time, come to be seen as European 'Dredd Scott' case, a moment when the implications of a court ruling are so significant and so contrary to public opinion that they lead to a public backlash."

The recently passed Lisbon Treaty gives the European Court of Justice (ECJ), a body of the European Union, the power to force the overturning of any law put in place in Italy or any other EU country the court interprets as being in violation of the Convention. The Lisbon Treaty's Declaration 17 says clearly that the EU would have primacy over the laws of member states: "The Conference recalls that, in accordance with well settled case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, the Treaties and the law adopted by the Union on the basis of the Treaties have primacy over the law of Member States, under the conditions laid down by the said case law."

The ruling [was greeted](#) with furious defiance from the majority of Italian politicians of all parties who condemned it as an example of gross interference with and hostility towards the history, culture and religious traditions of Italy.

Editorials in European newspapers are beginning to note the irony, as Europe commemorates the fall of the Berlin Wall and prepares to celebrate (in the words of Italian government advertisements), "venti di liberta" ("twenty years of freedom"), that the Lisbon Treaty has significantly jeopardised democracy in the EU.

An editorial in the UK's Daily Telegraph said, "On Monday, Gordon Brown will stand alongside other European leaders to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He will be doing so at a moment when British democracy is under great strain. Will he notice the irony of the situation? Indeed, will other national leaders recognise that they face a similar democratic crisis?"

"Italian Catholics feel just as strongly about the banning of crucifixes in their classrooms as (to cite a small but telling example) Britain's sea anglers feel about the EU's absurd demand that they report every fish they catch ... Discontent is growing with the undemocratic aspects of European institutions generally, though it surfaces in different ways across the Continent."

Read related LifeSiteNews.com coverage:

Italian Politicians Furious over Anti-Crucifix Decision by European Human Rights Court
<http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2009/nov/09110406.html>

Gun Rights and States Rights

By Pastor Chuck Baldwin

Another State Introduces Firearms Freedom Act

(Lest this article seem anomalous with the spirit of Christmas, let us recall that the federal government has made itself the enemy of Christ and the gospel, and is working to banish all show of Christmas and other tokens of Christianity from public display. I have come to believe that secession may one day become the only remaining option for the people of States wishing to maintain a Christian culture and institutions. If so, we may be called upon to defend ourselves by meeting force with force. It is with such extraordinary circumstances in view that the 2nd Amendment was enacted, and Christians ought to sit up and take note of it before it is too late.)

According to a report published on the Tenth Amendment Center's web site, "Introduced in the Ohio House on October 16, 2009, the 'Firearms Freedom Act' (HB-315) seeks 'To enact section 2923.26 of the Revised Code to provide that ammunition, firearms, and firearm accessories that are manufactured and remain in Ohio are not subject to federal laws and regulations derived under Congress' authority to regulate interstate commerce and to require the words "Made in Ohio" be stamped on a central metallic part of any firearm manufactured and sold in Ohio."

The report went on to say, "While the HB315's title focuses on federal gun regulations, it has far more to do with the 10th Amendment's limit on the power of the federal government. It specifically states:

"The regulation of intrastate commerce is vested in the states under the Ninth and Tenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, particularly if not expressly preempted by federal law. The congress of the United States has not expressly preempted state regulation of intrastate commerce pertaining to the manufacture on an intrastate basis of firearms, firearm accessories, and ammunition."

"Some supporters of the legislation say that a successful application of such a state-law would set a strong precedent and open the door for states to take their own positions on a wide range of activities that they see as not being authorized to the Federal Government by the Constitution."

Two states have already passed their own Firearms Freedom Acts: Montana and Tennessee. And, along with Ohio, at least 7 other states have introduced similar bills. Those states are Alaska, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas.

As you might suspect, the federal government doesn't take too kindly to these State laws. In fact, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) sent an open letter to all Montana and Tennessee firearms dealers denouncing the State laws. ATF assistant director Carson Carroll wrote that "Federal law supersedes the Act."

The Tenth Amendment Center quotes constitutional historian Kevin Gutzman as correctly stating, "Their [ATF's] view is that the states exist for the administrative convenience of the Federal government, and so of course any conflict between state and federal policy must be resolved in favor of the latter.

"This is another way of saying that the Tenth Amendment is not binding on the Federal Government. Of course, that amounts to saying that federal officials have decided to ignore the Constitution when it doesn't suit them."

Ah! But that's just the problem: the federal government has been ignoring the Constitution for decades--so much so that if there is going to be any restoration of genuine liberty in the country, the states are going to have to stand up to this out-of-control national leviathan and say, "No." And they are going to have to say it loudly enough for Washington to get the message. And I cannot think of a freedom issue that is better to "draw a line in the sand" for than the issue of the right of the people to keep and bear arms.

At the end of the day, the Second Amendment was never about hunting or target shooting. It has always been about protecting the people and states against federal tyranny.

The Second Amendment itself states, "A well regulated Militia, BEING NECESSARY TO

THE SECURITY OF A FREE STATE, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed." (Emphasis added.) Note that the purpose of the right to keep and bear arms was to insure "the security of a FREE STATE." (Emphasis added.) "Free from what?" you ask. Free from federal tyranny. Free from an overbearing, encroaching, heavy-handed, would-be national government.

The founders--even the Centralists of the day--all acknowledged that the right to keep and bear arms was, first of all, for the protection of the people against government tyranny. Observe:

"[I]f circumstances should at any time oblige the government to form an army of any magnitude that army can never be formidable to the liberties of the people while there is a large body of citizens, little, if at all, inferior to them in discipline and the use of arms, who stand ready to defend their own rights and those of their fellow-citizens." (Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist Papers, Number 29)

"While the people have property, arms in their hands, and only a spark of noble spirit, the most corrupt Congress must be mad to form any project of tyranny." (Rev. Nicholas Collin, Fayetteville [NC] Gazette, October 12, 1789)

"The strongest reason for the people to retain the right to keep and bear arms is, as a last resort, to protect themselves against tyranny in government." (Thomas Jefferson)

"Who are the militia? Are they not ourselves? . . . Congress has no power to disarm the militia. Their swords, and every other terrible implement of the soldier, are the birthright of an American . . . [T]he unlimited power of the sword is not in the hands of either the federal or state governments, but, where I trust in God it will ever remain, in the hands of the people." (Tench Coxe, ally of James Madison and member of the Continental Congress, Freeman's Journal, February 20, 1778)

Coxe also said, "As civil rulers, not having their duty to the people duly before them, may attempt to tyrannize, and as the military forces which must be occasionally raised to defend our country, might pervert their power to the injury of their fellow-citizens, the people are confirmed by the next article [the Second Amendment] in their right to keep and bear their private arms." (Remarks on the First Part of the Amendments to

the Federal Constitution, Philadelphia Federal Gazette, June 18, 1789) So, for now, 10 states have proposed--and 2 have passed--a Firearms Freedom Act, properly declaring that federal authority granted in the Constitution regarding interstate commerce cannot apply to products (firearms, in this case) that are manufactured and sold within the territory of each respective State. In other words, 10 States are serving notice to Washington, D.C., that they are going to insist that the federal government stop ignoring the Constitution of the United States.

In the same vein, Tennessee State legislator Susan Lynn recently sent an open letter to the State legislative bodies of the other 49 states stating: "On June 23, 2009, House Joint Resolution 108, the State Sovereignty Resolution, was signed by Governor Phil Bredesen. The Resolution created a committee which has as its charge to: *Communicate the resolution to the legislatures of the several states, *Assure them that this State continues in the same esteem of their friendship, *Call for a joint working group between the states to enumerate the abuses of authority by the federal government, and *Seek repeal of the assumption of the powers and the imposed mandates."

In the body of her letter, Rep. Lynn states, "The role of our American government has been blurred, bent, and breached. The rights endowed to us by our creator must be restored."

The Tennessee State representative continued by saying, "The Constitution does not include a congressional power to override state laws. It does not give the judicial branch unlimited jurisdiction over all matters. It does not provide Congress with the power to legislate over everything. This is verified by the simple fact that attempts to make these principles part of the Constitution were soundly rejected by its signers.

"With this in mind, any federal attempt to legislate beyond the Constitutional limits of Congress' authority is a usurpation of state sovereignty--and unconstitutional."

This is a battle that is just beginning to heat up, but promises to get red-hot in the not-too-distant future. As for me and my house, we believe this showdown is long overdue. To quote Patrick Henry, "Let it come! I repeat it, Sir, let it come!"

Questions from our Readers

Question: What makes one man choose Christ and another not choose Christ?

Answer: I reject the idea that God overcomes the will of the individual and causes some to obey, while actively hardening others. I believe Romans 9 is about national election, not individual selection. God chose Israel ("Jacob") as a nation to do a specific work in redemption, but it was always open for anyone who wanted to join the covenant community. Likewise, God used Egypt ("Pharaoh") for a particular purpose, but individual Egyptians could leave their nation and join themselves to Israel, as in fact many apparently did.

What causes one individual to obey and another not? I believe that God is at work in every man's life drawing him and appealing to his sense of conscience and mortality, attempting to get us to see our need of God in our lives and to solve the problem of sin and death. However, through various tricks and mechanisms of the mind, we shut God out. Romans says that men "do not like to retain God in their knowledge" (Rom. 1:28). That is, knowledge of God is uncomfortable to those that want to obey their own pleasure. Who wants God bossing them around? Jesus said that men "loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (Jn. 3:19). That is, our love of evil causes us to reject the gospel of light. Thus, it is our sinful, carnal minds that cause us to choose a world and consciousness where God is not part. However, our childhood upbringing and training can implant a sense of God in our hearts that make us open to receive the word of the gospel. Also, unhappiness in life of all sorts, including health, depression, guilt, prison, death, marital problems, challenges of child-rearing, job loss, etc, can all contribute to our looking for solutions to life's problems and unhappiness. That was my story. I was raised in the Episcopal Church, pretty much a total zero, but enough probably to sow at least some seeds. Then, lots of very bad choices as a young man led to a life of sin and dissipation and to the unhappiness and ruin that goes with it. I needed answers and spent many years looking, searching. Finally, I was open to hear the truth, but not before I was willing to accept the consequence and choices it entailed. I didn't

want to repent and as long as I fought repentance I could not, would not hear the gospel, but searched elsewhere. Once sin made me so unhappy and I was finally willing to live without it, the gospel was there waiting all the time.

I only know that I had to make the choice, even though God drew me and others taught me. He did not overcome my will, he persuaded me. He did not coerce me, he drew me and waited patiently for my stubborn pride and rebellion to make me so miserable and unhappy that I had to obey or perish in my sin and rebellion.

Hope that helps. Write again if you would like to discuss it more.

Question: I'm confused about the language Jesus chose to use because he referred to the people of Noah's day and that they carried on as usual and they were all caught off guard because there were no signs when the flood overtook them. When the Romans laid siege this would be a warning sign. How can Jesus say there will be signs and then tell them it will come upon them unexpectedly?

Answer: The Christians would know when to flee based upon the warning in Matt. 24 and special revelation from the apostles and prophets as the time drew near, but the Jews would NOT know because they were not paying attention to Jesus' and the Old Testament prophets' warning and in fact believed that God was actually on their side. So, they would be taken aware or by surprise, but the Christians would escape unharmed.

Question: I am surprised and dismayed at your advertisement. But on the other hand, it clearly reflects what "Christmas" is all about, doesn't it? You don't "celebrate" it as the birth of Christ any more than millions of others who profess Christ as Lord.

I hope that you will reconsider your allegiance to this pagan holiday and all that it stands for.

I choose to remember the birth of Christ in fulfillment of one of the feasts of the LORD,

not a pagan holy day. Though scripture doesn't clearly state it, there are sufficient hints to lead me to believe that Jesus was in fact born on the feast of Tabernacles. As John declares,

(YLT) "And the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of an only begotten of a father, full of grace and truth." (Jn 1:14)

Be that as it may, for sure He did not come on December 25th and for sure, it is also self evident that this event is not glorifying to Him.

I hope that you will investigate this as much as you have many other issues of the faith. May the Lord bless you as you seek Him.

By His Grace,

Answer: I too was taught that Christmas was a Christianized version of pagan holiday. However, even if this were true (it's not) I never saw this as a reason to avoid Christmas, there being nothing otherwise objectionable in celebrating the Savior's birth. The objection that Jesus probably was not actually born Dec. 25th never impressed me as a reason to avoid celebrating Christmas either. If we do not know the actual date, is it wrong to assign one of our own or accept the one received by tradition? It seems to me that celebrating the Nativity is what matters most; the day we do it seems secondary. However, I do believe that the received date is correct and that Jesus was in fact probably born Dec. 25th, 2 BC.

During research for my commentary on Daniel, I realized that Jesus was to have a 3 ½ ministry. Daniel said the Messiah would be cut off in the "midst of the week" after 3 1/2 years (Dan. 9:26m 27). Reckoning backward from Nisan 15, AD 33, when Christ was crucified, to his baptism brings us to November (Heshvan) 15th, AD 29, the 15th Year of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1). Luke said Jesus was on the very threshold of his 30th birthday when baptized (Lk. 3L:23). A person born in 2 BC will turn 30 on or before Dec. 31st AD 29. Thus, Jesus' 30th birthday followed his November 15th baptism, but preceded Dec. 31st, AD 29.

The next step was the realization that following his Nov. 15th Baptism, Jesus took a 40 day fast in preparation for his teaching ministry. Nov. 15th + 40 days = Dec. 25th. This seemed too much to be mere coincidence, or if it was coincidence, it was a very great one! Further research revealed that by reconstructing the priestly courses from AD 70 back to 3 BC when John the Baptist was conceived also produces a late December birth for Christ, who was almost 6 months younger than John. Thus, two scriptural sources peg a December birth.

Then, there is the Death of Herod the Great. Finegan, Filmer, and the world's other leading Biblical chronologists place Herod's death shortly before Passover, 1 BC. Since Jesus' birth preceded Herod's death by several months, a December birth again becomes a distinct probability. If we then take the earliest sources that testify to the celebration of Christ's birth, we find that its earliest traces are in the 2nd century, long before Constantine's time, and these unanimously place Christ's birth at the winter solstice, which then fell on or about Dec. 25th. We do not even hear this disputed or questioned until the Reformation when John Knox, the Scottish Presbyterian, objected to it as a piece of Catholic superstition. Luther and the other reformers, however, did not object to the Feast of the Nativity. The Puritans got into power in England in the 1600's and proceeded to outlaw Christmas. Most of the arguments against Christmas that circulate today are of Puritan or Presbyterian origin and are little more than unsubstantiated accusations and revisionist history with no factual evidence to support or sustain them. No decree of a Bishop or counsel of the church has ever been produced showing that the Feast of the Nativity was ordained to Christianize the pagan solstice.

Santa and the elf stuff have grown up for sake of children's fun and enjoyment, who, being sinless, cannot appreciate the true meaning of the Savior's birth. And while we definitely play down the whole Santa/elf thing in our home, we do not obsess over it either. Childhood is filled with make believe of all sorts. Santa and Frosty are part of Christmas tradition, but I do not see them as a threat to Jesus, nor do their stories invalidate celebration of Christ's birth, which for us is deeply spiritual and a time of our greatest joy. (For articles and charts demonstrating Christ's Dec. 25th birth, go to www.dec25th.info.)