

Text: Mt 1.18

We have just one afternoon service for the rest of December, so I decided to wait to conclude our fasting study in January.

Instead, I want to talk about a question no one raised with me, but is often asked:

Why December 25?

I subscribe to a magazine called *Biblical Archaeological Review*. It is an extremely liberal magazine, but once in a while they come up with something useful and they have all the cool archaeological pictures.

In the latest issue, they published an article by T. C. Schmidt, *Calculating Christmas*. The author is a Southern Baptist, even though he has a Ph.D. from Yale. I had a brief correspondence with him yesterday as I was preparing this message.

Here is how he opened his article,

MANY READERS WILL BE FAMILIAR with the common refrain that December 25, Christmas, was originally a pagan holiday, perhaps corresponding to the Roman festival of Saturnalia or the feast of the sun god Sol. As the chorus goes, the date was chosen for the birth of Jesus to make Christianity chime with a polytheistic society already attuned to December 25 revelry. But is the old song true?

I myself used to sing this kind of anti-carol, but then, while translating a treatise of Hippolytus of Rome, I came across a passage stating that Jesus was born on December 25.¹

What he is saying is that his research caused him to change his mind about the “lore” surrounding a December date for Christmas.

One might wonder why this matters ... after all, the most important aspects of Christmas teaching are the virgin birth and the “hypostatic union” or “incarnation” (*i.e.*, the union of the divine and human in one person).

Even more important is the purpose of the incarnation, the redemption of men from sin.

¹ T. C. Schmidt, “Calculating Christmas: Hippolytus and December 25th,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Winter 2022, 50.

However, the reason December 25th is important is that unbelievers use the date as a way to attack Christianity as somehow ignorant and a kind of cheap imitator of paganism as Christianity took the ascendancy over the pagans.

The rationale: “They couldn’t beat them, so they joined them.”

Our text is Matthew 1.18

Mt 1.18 ¶ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

The key word here is “birth” — the Gk is γένεσις [genesis].

The verse will have a role to play in our study, but we will work our way towards it.

Proposition: Christmas is about Christ; it is not a cheap substitute for pagan festivities.

I. The witness of Hippolytus

A. Who is Hippolytus?

1. Lived AD c. 170-235
2. Location uncertain, but called “Hippolytus of Rome”
3. Apparently was critical of the man who became bishop of Rome in his day
 - a. Criticized the practice of relaxing church discipline to accommodate the influx of pagans at that time
 - b. Late in life he patched up his differences with the Roman bishops, but was known for spiritual rigor though his life

“Hippolytus was a champion of the Logos doctrine, which distinguished the persons of the Trinity, as opposed to modalism, which believed the persons of the Trinity to be simply different manifestations of the same person.”²

² H. W. House, “Hippolytus” in J. D. ; Comfort Douglas, *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1997), 322.

4. Wrote several works that survive to this day including a commentary on Daniel and a work called *Chronicon* (a calculation of biblical dates)
5. Died as a martyr under persecution of Maximinus Thrax (AD 235)

B. The Commentary on Daniel

1. T. C. Schmidt gives us this translation of a passage in this commentary:

For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, was December 25th, Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, but from Adam, five thousand and five hundred years.³

2. A couple of significant footnotes:

- a. Hippolytus didn't say "December 25th," but actually, "Eight days before the Kalends of January"⁴
- b. He also didn't say Wednesday, but actually, "the fourth day," meaning "the fourth day of the week"⁵

Of passing interest, Hippolytus sees the earth as being 5500 yrs old, writing in the 200s. This shows his view, which is interesting, even if it is slightly inaccurate (it would be Adam at about 5300 BC, or about 8300 years ago).

C. The *Chronicon*

1. In this book, Hippolytus calculates that Jesus was born 9 months after March 25, *i.e.*, Dec 25
2. March 25 was the Spring Equinox for the Romans, Dec 25 the Winter Solstice (they were off by a few days)

We will come back to this calculation in a moment.

³ Hippolytus, *Hippolytus of Rome's Commentary on Daniel*, trans. T. C. Schmidt, Gorgias Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics 79 (Piscataway, NJ, USA: Gorgias Press, 2022), 140.

⁴ Hippolytus, 140 n. 3.

⁵ Hippolytus, 140 n. 4.

D. The statue in the Vatican

1. There is a statue called “the Statute of Hippolytus” in the Vatican
 - a. A figure seated on a chair
 - b. Some think the figure was originally a woman, then reworked to be a man (note the fringe under the robe)
 - c. At some time, the church connected with Hippolytus got hold of the statue and reworked it to represent him
2. Key factors on the statue:
 - a. Inscriptions on the chair, dating to AD 222
 - b. One inscription declares “that the ‘Genesis of Christ’ occurred on the Passover of April 2, 2 BC”⁶

II. The wording of Matthew and the role of *genesis*

A. Scholars and translators take *genesis* to refer to “birth”

“it is best to take the word to mean ‘birth’ or ‘origins’ in the sense of the beginnings of Jesus Messiah.”⁷

“The first sentence in this pericope (section of verses) serves as a title for the section, as the sentence in verse 1 did for 1:1–17. Matthew recorded the supernatural birth of Jesus in order to demonstrate further His qualification as Israel’s Messiah.”⁸

“*Now the birth of Jesus Christ.* The circumstances attending his birth.”⁹

⁶ Schmidt, “Calculating Chirstmas,” 53.

⁷ D. A Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 74.

⁸ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 1.18.

⁹ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Matthew & Mark*, ed. Robert Frew (London: Blackie & Son, 1884), 4.

B. T. C. Schmidt:

“in an extensive study I have shown that the word most likely refers to the ‘conception’ of Jesus.”¹⁰

1. The word is also used in 1.1

Mt 1.1 ¶ The record of the **genealogy** of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham:

2. The book of the genesis of Jesus ...

Blomberg: “Matthew is clearly describing a supernatural conception here, but he uses remarkable restraint in that description (similarly Luke 1:35).”¹¹

C. Significance:

If the date of the *genesis* of Christ is known, then the date of *birth* can also be known (approximately).

III. The witness of other ancients

A. The tradition of a Passover *genesis*

“The oldest and strongest tradition, however, concerns the date of Jesus’s conception, which all the earliest sources agree occurred on Passover.”¹²

1. “found in the pseudo-Cyprianic work *De Pascha Computus*, c. 240”¹³
2. “When the calendar system of Anno Domini was first introduced by Dionysius Exiguus in AD 525, he assigned the beginning of the new year to 25 March, because according to Christian doctrine, the age of grace began with the Incarnation of Christ at the Annunciation, on which date Jesus Christ is believed to have been conceived in the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Schmidt, “Calculating Christmas,” 53.

¹¹ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 58.

¹² Schmidt, “Calculating Christmas,” 54.

¹³ “Feast of the Annunciation,” in *Wikipedia*, November 20, 2022,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Feast_of_the_Annunciation&oldid=1122856364.

¹⁴ “Feast of the Annunciation.”

The point here is simply to establish the tradition, not prove the date

B. Passover's in the years around this time period:

3755	Apr 1	6 BC
3756	Mar 21	5 BC
3757	Apr 10	4 BC
3758	Mar 29	3 BC
3759	Mar 18	2 BC
3760	Apr 6	1 BC
3761	Mar 27	1 AD

With any of these, a Dec 25 birthdate would work: gestation is *about* 9 months, not *exactly* 9 months.

IV. The allegedly competing Roman festivals

A. Saturnalia

1. Began on Dec 17 every year
2. Lasted no longer than Dec 23
3. Never celebrated on Dec 25

B. Feast of Sol Invictus

1. *Was* on Dec 25
2. First celebrated in AD 274, by decree of emperor Aurelian
3. 52 years *after* Hippolytus statue denotes December 25 as the birth of Christ

C. The Bruma or Brumalian Festivals

1. Some say this occurred on Dec 25th, the Winter Solstice, from a time before Hippolytus
2. I found an article that contradicts this¹⁵
 - a. May be the time from Nov 24 to Dec 17
 - b. And connected to Saturnalia, not specifically Dec 25

¹⁵ Roger Pearse, "On 'Bruma' and 'Brumalia' in Ancient Rome, as Found in the OLD," *Roger Pearse* (blog), December 7, 2009, <https://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2009/12/07/on-bruma-in-ancient-rome-as-found-in-the-old/>.

Conclusion:

What is the point of all this “history lesson?”

- Among those who attack Christianity on the Dec 25th date are the Jehovah’s Witnesses

They try to discredit Christianity by these attacks.

While all this research is interesting, we still can’t prove which date Christ was born.

What we can prove is that Christmas was *not* created as a substitute for pagan festivals, the date became the traditional time to worship God for bringing our Lord into the world.

There is nothing wrong with using the birth of Christ as an occasion for worship, and that should be our focus every Christmas.