

Does it really matter when Jesus was born?

by
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Someone asked me recently if Jesus was really born on December 25th. The Bible doesn't give us the exact date of Christ's birth. But we do know that it could not have been in the dead of winter. Shepherds would not have been roaming the hills at night during the winter with their sheep. Most scholars agree that Jesus was likely born in the spring or summer in the year 4 B.C.

In A.D. 350, Pope Julius I declared December 25 the official date of Christ's birth. The December date for Christmas was not arbitrary, but a calculated decision reflecting the importance of winter solstice festivals for the non-Christian cultures in Europe and Asia. To abolish these festivals in favor of only Christian forms of celebration would've been political suicide, so it became clear to church leaders early on that rather than trying to beat the non-Christians, it was wiser to join them.

The use of December 25 was a remnant of the Mithra - a dominant religion of the Roman Empire with close similarities to Christianity. Mithra, the god of light and wisdom, was supposedly born from a rock on December 25. Symbolizing the sun, Mithra was naturally a big part of solstice festivals, and his birth was celebrated as a major holiday by his followers. In the third century, before Constantine became emperor, Emperor Aurelian declared December 25 the "Day of the Invincible Sun." When Constantine converted to Christianity, remnants of his old religion remained throughout the empire.

For many people, incorporating Mithraic rites into the celebration of Christmas was easy to justify. Jesus represents life, triumph over death and darkness, and restored hope and light. So rather than celebrating the sun, people would be celebrating the Son of God. In other words, the birth of Christ replaced the birth of the sun as the reason for celebrating.

Remember, knowing the exact date when Jesus was born isn't really relevant – the important thing is that He was born. And the fact that God sent His only Son to be born as a baby to grow to be a man and die on the cross is life changing for each one of us.