

I have heard that Jesus wasn't really born in December and that he wasn't born on Christmas because Christmas is actually a pagan holiday. Is it true that Christians today worship a Pagan holiday thinking they are worshipping the actual birthday of Jesus Christ?

—E., U.S.

Thank you for contacting Answers in Genesis. This is a common, but good question—especially around this time of year—and the answer is much deeper than most realize. Up front, the Bible simply doesn't give us the date of Christ's entrance into the world, so any estimates would only be inferences. But first, let's discuss this pagan holiday.

This celebration was the pagan holiday Saturnalia,¹ which was the Roman festival for their god Saturn.² It ran from about December 17–23. Saturn is the Roman god analogous to the Greek god "Cronus" or "Kronos."

Saturn/Cronus Goes Back to a Bible Person

The land of Greece was inhabited by the descendants of Noah's grandson Javan. In fact, the Hebrew name for Greece is still *Javan*. Javan had 4 sons, and they were:

1. Elishah
2. Tarshish
3. Kittim (Cethimus)
4. Rodanim (Dodanim)

In Greece and the surrounding area, these names are still a reflection on the landscape. Many of Javan's sons' names and variants have cities, islands, and other geographical features named for them. Paul, the biblical author of two-thirds of the New Testament came from "Tarsus," a variant of Tarshish. There were also the "Taurus" mountains in Turkey, and the "Tanais" is the old name for the Don River flowing into the Black Sea.

Eliseans was the old name of the ancient Greek tribe now called the Aeolians. Cethimus inhabited the island Cethima, from which the name of the island Cyprus was derived. (Josephus, a Jewish historian about 2,000 years ago, [elaborated on these relationships](#) in more detail.)

Many of the characters of Greek mythology are based on real historical figures who were raised up to godlike status. One example here is "Hellen," the alleged mythological patriarch and god of the Aeolians (or Elisians). Hellen (Ἕλλην) is likely a variant of Elishah.³ Even in other cultures, ancestors were often deified; for example, in Germanic and Norse mythologies there is Tiras (Tyras, Tiwaz, Tyr), who was the king of the gods and also happens to be one of Noah's grandsons ([Genesis 10:2](#)).

So it makes sense that Cronus/Kronos (Κρόνος), a variant of Cethimas/Kittem, could have been raised up to godlike status. Considering that Noah and his early descendants were [living such long lives](#), it should be obvious why many of these ancestors were raised up to be “god-like.” Not only did they live long lives, but they were obviously the oldest people around and would seem to be the people (gods, demigods) that started civilization. Noah would have been roughly 500 years older than anyone else and his sons approximately 100 years older. We know this was because of the Flood, but the true message would quickly be changed to fit the pagan ideas. Thus it is interesting that this pagan festival was likely born as a result of a suppressed view of a biblical character.

When Was Jesus Born?

When we turn in the Scriptures ([Luke 1:26–37](#)), it says:

Now in the *sixth month* the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!” But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the *sixth month* for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” [Emphasis added.]

Here we learn approximately when John was conceived, relative to when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary for the conception of Christ. John would have been conceived around 6 months before Jesus. If we assume John’s conception was the previous year’s final month or perhaps the first month of the year we can do some rough calculations. By assuming this, Elizabeth, John’s mother, could have been in her sixth month during the sixth month of the Jewish year.

This meeting with Gabriel was presumably close to the time when the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary. In fact, it could have been almost immediate, as verse 28 indicates “the Lord is with you,” but it was likely soon after, as verse 35 says “*will* come upon you” (emphasis mine).

In the Jewish calendar, there are 12 months of roughly 30 days each with a leap month every so often to get them back to about 365 days. The Jewish calendar equivalents are shown below:

Month	Name	Scripture Reference	Modern Gregorian Calendar Equivalent
First	Nisan	Esther 3:7	March–April
Second	Iyar (Iyyar)	N/A	April–May
Third	Sivan	Esther 8:9	May–June
Fourth	Tammuz	N/A	June–July
Fifth	Ab (Av)	N/A	July–August
Sixth	Elul	Nehemiah 6:15	August–September
Seventh	Tishri	N/A	September–October
Eighth	Marchesvan (Heshvan)	N/A	October–November
Ninth	Chislev (Kislev)	Nehemiah 1:1 ; Zechariah 7:1	November–December
Tenth	Tebet (Tevet)	Esther 2:16	December–January
Eleventh	Sheni (Shevat)	N/A	January–February
Twelfth	Adar	Esther 3:7 , 9:1	February–March
Leap month (intercalary)	Adar Sheni (second Adar)	N/A	February–March on leap years

This would have put John the Baptist at about six months in the womb around August/September. Assuming about nine months for pregnancy, John would have been born about November/December by the modern calendar based on the assumptions we used.

If the Holy Spirit did come upon Mary in the sixth month (Elul) or around August/September, as it seems to indicate in Scripture, then Jesus should have been born about nine months later, which would place His birth around May/June. Since John the Baptist was still in the womb of Elizabeth when he leapt for joy in Jesus’ presence ([Luke 1:39-42](#)), this means that the conception had to take place within the next three months or so of the visit by Gabriel—before John was born. Regardless, by this reckoning, the birth of Christ isn’t even close to Christmas on the modern calendar.

What about Other New Year’s Days on the Jewish Calendar?

We need to exercise some caution since we were using some assumptions (e.g., no leap month and the date of the Jewish New Year. [Esther 3:7](#) points out that Nisan is the first month of the Jewish calendar, and that is still acknowledged today. In Judaism, however, there are other “new year’s” days as well. The most popular is called Rosh Hashanah, literally meaning “head of the year.”

Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on the first of Tishri, which is normally the seventh month ([Leviticus 23:24](#)) and is the start of the civil year. If this were the reference point for the news when the angel Gabriel met Mary, then the sixth month from this would have been the twelfth month on the normal Jewish calendar (or February/March), and if this were the case, then Jesus would have been born nine months later in November/December. So, it is not without biblical merit that December may have been the date of Christ's birth if we use Rosh Hashanah as the start of the new year.

Around A.D. 220 Julius Africanus, an early Christian writer, reckoned that Jesus was conceived on March 25. Hence, nine months later—about December 25—Jesus was born. Other Christians have made cases for the December Christmas-time as well. Ultimately, we can't know exactly when He was born.

To clarify some points though, we, nor other Christians, do not “worship” a pagan holiday or any holiday. We “worship” God on the day that is set aside as Christmas. We take time to “remember” (not worship) the birth of Christ on that day. This is important because we often get wrapped up in the wrong things, and sometimes we need to step back and remember:

Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. ([Psalm 46:10](#))

The Church has often failed during Christmas-time because we simply talk about the birth of Christ without talking about *why* He came. Whether Christmas happens to occur at the same time (or close to the same time) as a pagan holiday is irrelevant. There is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating a Christian holiday at the same time the pagans celebrate. Do Christians refuse to take communion if it falls on a pagan holiday like [Halloween](#)? Absolutely not. On Halloween, some celebrate Reformation Day, because of what Martin Luther did. Many would contend that Easter is based on ancient pagan holidays, as well, but even if the timing is close to these spring holidays, we remember it because Christ's resurrection occurred around that time.

What should be of greater concern to Christians is the extent to which we have adopted some of the pagan practices during Christmas-time. Some have gone overboard on this, and we should be cautious of making Christmas about mythical images like Santa, Charlie Brown, Rudolph, etc., rather than the birth of Christ and why He came to save those who were lost.

What is important is that we understand the implication of the omnipotent Son of God leaving His heavenly throne to empty Himself! Why would the Creator of the universe choose to do this, knowing he would be raised by sinful parents in a sinful world to be rejected and to die a horrible death? Unbelievable as it is, it was to pay the penalty for the sin of humankind ([Romans 3:23; 6:23](#)) so that we, undeserving, hateful sinners—doomed to die, could instead live with Him in paradise for eternity. Now, that is worth celebrating! [Find out more about this wonderful gift.](#)

With kindness in Christ,
Bodie