

# THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

There is a small, but vocal, minority within the worldwide Christian community that objects to celebrating Christmas. They argue that that Jesus was not born in late December, and that 25 December was in fact the date of two ancient, pagan holidays: Saturnalia (the worship of Saturn) and Natalis Invicti (the birth of the sun god Mithras). After Christianity became a state-wide religion, they argue, the church selected an already popular festival day to give Christians an alternative way in which to celebrate it. Since there is no clear mandate to celebrate Jesus' birth, and since 25 December has demonstrable pagan roots, these objectors find the celebration of Christ's birth on 25 December to be offensive.

Objectors further argue that there is no evidence in Scripture or in the earliest post-apostolic Christian writings that the church celebrated the birth of Jesus. In fact, there is no mention of Christmas as we know it until around 324 AD—and it was only later, during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527–565) that the holiday was formalised in the Christian calendar.

Arguments over the date of Jesus' birth are pointless. A late-December date [is not completely implausible](#), but since God chose not to reveal the date, it is ultimately inconsequential. And while 25 December may have been a pagan festival long before the birth of Christ, the roots of Christmas actually stretch back much further than any pagan festival celebrated on 25 December. Indeed, the promise of Christmas was humanity's earliest hope, and prophecies of the incarnation are scattered throughout the Old Testament.

In late December 2012, Ligon Duncan preached sermon series titled "An Ancient Christmas: The Coming of Jesus in the Old

Testament," in which he pointed to nine specific Old Testament prophecies of Christmas. There are more than just nine, of course, but he chose those for a specific purpose: These nine prophecies offer a picture of an ancient Christmas—promises, long before Jesus' birth, of the person and work of the coming Messiah.

In a series of daily articles leading up to Christmas Eve, I want to borrow Duncan's title and take an abbreviated look at each of these prophecies with the aim of considering that Christmas, indeed, has deep, biblical roots. The ancient prophecies give us some astonishing insight into who the

promised Messiah would be and what he would do.

In Genesis 3, we learn that the promised Messiah would be a descendant of the woman, sent by God to destroy the work of Satan. Satan's work, as defined in Genesis 3, is sin and death, and the promise is therefore that Messiah would come to destroy sin and death. He would do so at great personal cost, but would emerge victorious in this endeavour.



In Isaiah 7, we learn that, astonishingly, Messiah would be born of a virgin. As we will see, there is perhaps a tiny hint of a virgin birth in Genesis 3, but that hint is made explicit in Isaiah 7.

Isaiah 9 highlights the truth that Messiah would come as a wise and just ruler. God's people longed for such a ruler, but every ruler that God gave fell short of expectations. Messiah would not. He would be filled with the Spirit and therefore rule wisely, accomplishing the just rule for which God's people longed.

In Isaiah 10–12, Messiah is portrayed as a tiny sprig in a decimated forest. He would not come with great pomp or self-promotion, but humbly, almost unnoticed. His coming would seem insignificant, but ultimately he would be God's chosen servant to bring life and peace to God's people.

Micah 5 prophesies the very birthplace of Messiah: Bethlehem—an insignificant, backwater town south of Jerusalem. God's people would experience continued oppression, but the ruler arising from Bethlehem would give them rest.

Ezekiel 34 portrays Messiah as a good shepherd. Where Israel's shepherds had failed to gently lead God's people in truth, Messiah would act as the shepherd that God always was to his people (see Psalm 23). The poor shepherds are rebuked as a greater shepherd is promised.

Isaiah 52–53 teaches that Messiah would come as one despised by men, and would therefore be rejected. He would not meet the expectations that God's people had of Messiah, and so they would ultimately crucify him.

Psalm 110 reminds us that this humble child, insignificant and despised by those he came to save, was not only the offspring of a woman, but the Lord of eternity. He would live life on earth meekly and gently. He would be rejected and ultimately killed by those he came to save. But he would be Lord of all. He would be God's eternal ruler, and the one who would ultimately crush his enemies.

The ancient Christmas, therefore, is one that is set against the backdrop of warfare—war between the serpent and the promised seed of the woman. The war would be long and protracted, and God's people would suffer many defeats along the way. But one day a little child would be born in Bethlehem and would grow to be the one who, in his death, would deal the deathblow to Satan and his work. That is something to be celebrated!

Christ's victory over Satan was accomplished at the cross, of course, not in the manger. Victory cost Jesus his life—but only temporarily. His resurrection proved to be the decisive act. In the resurrection, Christ displayed his victory. The power of Satan had been trampled underfoot. The victory was won at Calvary.

But victory at Calvary would have been impossible apart from birth in Bethlehem. In order for the offspring of the woman to gain victory, he had to first be born. And ever since the promise in the garden, humanity anticipated the coming of the offspring who would crush the head of the serpent.

For centuries following the fall, Jewish women lived in hope that they would be the one to bear the promised offspring. As history marched on, and the curse continued to weigh down on humanity, and the war between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed continued to rage, the only hope of victory was the anticipated offspring, promised from the very dawn of time.

One Christian website, which opposes the celebration of Christmas, speaks of “the severe warnings in Scripture of what their eternal fate and destiny will be if they continue to embrace this ancient custom,” and concludes with this exhortation: “Christmas is pagan. There is no doubt about it. The question is: What are you going to do about it? May YEHOUAH God help you to make the right decision, so you can inherit eternal life, and reign with the saints forever.”

I reply that, apart from Christmas—apart from the incarnation of the promised offspring—there would be no eternal life and no eternally reigning saints. Thank God for the promise of Christmas, without which the victory of Easter would be impossible.