

# Pagan Origins?

*Examining the Claim That Catholic Feasts, Doctrines and Practices Are  
Paganism in Christian Dress*

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## **Contents**

- I. The Charge
- II. What the Charge Must Prove
- III. Where the Charge Comes From: Alexander Hislop
- IV. Where December 25 Came From
- V. The Sun Feast Is Later Than the Christian Reckoning
- VI. Saturnalia Is the Wrong Festival
- VII. The Silence That Should Not Be There
- VIII. A Word Against Overreach on the Other Side
- IX. The Shepherds and the Lambing Season
- X. “Easter” Is an Accident of English
- XI. Eostre, the Eggs, and the Hares
- XII. The Tree, and What Jeremiah Was Describing
- XIII. Origin Does Not Determine Meaning
- XIV. What Paul Told a Church Surrounded by Paganism
- XV. The Rule Nobody Can Keep
- XVI. The Wider Charge: Doctrine, Image and Title
- XVII. The Watchtower’s Own Record
- XVIII. What the Church Does With What the Nations Made
- XIX. The Reply in Brief
- Endnotes

## **I. The Charge**

Of all the practices that mark Jehovah's Witnesses off from their neighbors, few are more visible than the refusal of Christmas. The lights go up along the street in December and one house stays dark. Children are withdrawn from the classroom party. The refusal is public, it is costly, and it is held with evident sincerity—which is reason enough to take the argument behind it seriously rather than to smile at it.

The argument is not obscure, and the Society has stated it plainly for a century. Reduced to its bones it runs like this: Christmas and Easter are pagan festivals; God rejects worship drawn from paganism; therefore a Christian may not keep them. Each premise is supported from the historical record and from Scripture, and the conclusion is drawn with a rigor that the Witnesses can fairly say most of their neighbors have never attempted.

The historical case is familiar. Scripture nowhere commands the celebration of Christ's birth, gives no date for it, and shows no first-century congregation observing it; what the apostles were told to keep was His death (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24–26). December 25 was the birthday of the Unconquered Sun and fell in the season of the Saturnalia. Luke's shepherds, out in the fields at night, rule out a Judean midwinter. "Easter" is the name of an Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess, and her eggs and hares are still attached to the feast. The decorated tree is described and condemned by Jeremiah. And behind all of it stands a principle running from Sinai to Corinth: that God does not accept worship He has not asked for, however sincerely it is offered (Deut. 12:30–31; Lev. 10:1–2; Ex. 32:5; 2 Cor. 6:17).

But the charge does not stop at the calendar, and it is a mistake—one this essay originally made—to answer it as though it did. The Watchtower holds that the Trinity was assembled out of pagan triads, that the immortality of the soul is Plato's and not Moses', that hellfire is the pagan underworld rebaptized, that the cross is the sign of Tammuz, that incense and holy water and vestments and candles and images are furniture carried over from the temples, and that the honors paid to Mary—above all the title Queen of Heaven, which Jeremiah condemns by name—are the old mother-goddess under a new one. The holidays are presented as one symptom of something much larger: a wholesale return to Babylon.

That is the case as its holders make it, and it deserves an answer rather than a shrug. This essay gives one. The short form of the answer is that the history is not what the charge assumes, that the framework it comes from has collapsed under examination, and that where the history does hold, the New Testament settles the principle in the other direction.

## **II. What the Charge Must Prove**

The argument has two joints, and it needs both. First, that the practices really did come out of paganism. Second, that a pagan origin would determine what they mean now. These are separate claims, and the difference matters more than anything else in the dispute, because they fail in different ways and a defender who answers only one has answered nothing.

Most of the argument on both sides is spent on the first joint—dates, festivals, etymologies, resemblances. That is the interesting part, and most of this essay takes it up in detail. But it is the second joint that carries the weight. Suppose every historical claim in the accusation were granted without a murmur: suppose the Church did lift December 25 from a sun cult, and “Easter” really is a goddess, and the tree came from a sacred grove. The argument would still have to show that this settles the question, and it is precisely there that the New Testament speaks—directly, at length, and about a case far harder than a fir tree.

So the reply comes in two parts. The history is weaker than its confident statement suggests, and in places it runs the other way entirely. And the principle is not the biblical one; the biblical principle was worked out by Paul for congregations surrounded by living, practicing paganism of a kind no one now meets, and it is not what the Watchtower says it is.

One further matter should be set aside at the start. Jehovah’s Witnesses also refuse birthdays, and this essay does not treat that refusal. The ground for it is thinner than the case against the holidays—two birthdays in Scripture happen to end badly, Pharaoh’s and Herod’s, and that is very nearly the whole of the biblical argument—and the rule has been softening for some years. It seems likely that the prohibition will be quietly dropped, as others have been. Arguing at length against a rule that may not outlive the argument is not a good use of anyone’s attention.

## **III. Where the Charge Comes From: Alexander Hislop**

Before examining the particulars, it is worth knowing where they come from, because they come very largely from one book, and the book is not a good one.

Alexander Hislop (1807–1865) was a Free Church of Scotland minister. In 1853 he published a pamphlet, expanded in 1858 into a volume with a title that states its thesis without ambiguity: *The Two Babylons: The Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife*. The argument is that the Catholic Church is not a corruption of Christianity but a continuation of the Babylonian mystery religion—that Nimrod, his wife Semiramis and their son Tammuz survive as a counterfeit trinity, that Mary is Semiramis,

that the Mass, the mitre, the tonsure, the rosary, the round host, the candles and the feasts are all Babylonian articles smuggled forward under Christian names.[1]

The method is association by resemblance, pursued without restraint. Words from unrelated languages are treated as cognates because they sound alike. Illustrations of pagan priests are compared with medieval vestments that did not take their present form until the tenth century or later. Assertions are made with no source at all—that Nimrod was born on December 25, that Christmas ornaments are Babylonian—and then cited later as though established.

The book has a difficulty at its very center that no amount of detail can repair. Semiramis is a historical figure: Sammu-ramat, an Assyrian queen regent about 811–808 B.C. Nimrod, whatever one makes of him, belongs to the earliest chapters of Genesis. They are separated by more than a millennium, no ancient source connects them, and no ancient source anywhere describes the marriage on which the whole system depends. The central couple of *The Two Babylons* were never a couple.

This is not a Catholic complaint about an unfriendly book. Hislop's work is rejected by scholars of the ancient Near East across the board, and by conservative Protestant scholars as firmly as by anyone else. Its influence has been enormous and its standing is nil.

The most telling witness against it is not a Catholic at all. Ralph Woodrow, an American evangelist, read Hislop as a young man and in 1966 published *Babylon Mystery Religion*, a popularization that carried the argument to a quarter of a million readers and became a staple of anti-Catholic apologetics. Years later he went back and checked the sources. He found that the parallels would not survive examination, that the etymologies were invented, and that quotations had been made to say what they did not say. He then did what almost nobody does: he took his own successful book out of print, at his own cost, and in 1997 published *The Babylon Connection?*, a refutation of Hislop and of himself.[2] A man who had built his reputation on the argument, and every incentive to leave it alone, examined it and withdrew it.

The Watchtower Society promoted Hislop's book, sold it, and drew on its framework in its own literature for decades. As his reputation collapsed the direct citations grew scarcer, but the arguments did not go away; they were absorbed, and they now circulate with the name of their author removed. This is worth saying plainly and without malice: a Witness at the door explaining that the mitre is the fish-head of Dagon, or that Mary is Semiramis, is repeating a nineteenth-century Scottish pamphleteer whom the scholarly world abandoned long ago, and whose most effective popularizer publicly repudiated him.

## **IV. Where December 25 Came From**

The date has a derivation that has nothing to do with the sun, and it is documented well enough that the burden ought to sit on the other side.

Ancient Jewish tradition held that the great prophets died on the same day of the year on which they were conceived or born—the notion sometimes called the “integral age,” the sense that a perfect life would be a whole number of years, without remainder. It is not a doctrine anyone was obliged to hold, but it was in the air, and early Christians reasoning about the life of Christ had it to hand.

Those Christians were working hard on a question that mattered to them a great deal more than the Nativity did: the date of the Crucifixion. The Passion could be dated, at least in principle, because the Gospels tie it to Passover and to a Roman governor. Western computists settled on 25 March. Sextus Julius Africanus, writing his *Chronographiai* around A.D. 221, gives 25 March as the date of the conception; the same date appears in the Latin West through the third century.[3]

Apply the integral-age principle and the rest follows without anyone deciding anything. If the Lord died on 25 March, He was conceived on 25 March. Nine months from 25 March is 25 December.

That is the whole derivation, and its footprint is still visible. The Church keeps the Annunciation on 25 March and the Nativity on 25 December, and the interval between them is exactly nine months, because the two dates are not two decisions but one calculation. A liturgical calendar assembled by borrowing from a solar festival would not have this internal arithmetic in it; it would have a Christmas and no particular reason for a March feast to stand nine months in front of it.

The Greek East reached 6 January by the same method from a different Passion date, 6 April—which is why the Armenians still keep the Nativity in January, and why the Western calendar has an Epiphany. Two different computations of Good Friday produced two different Christmases, both of them by arithmetic, and the pattern is very hard to explain if the date was taken from a pagan feast that fell on neither day.

## **V. The Sun Feast Is Later Than the Christian Reckoning**

The chronology runs the wrong way for the accusation, and this is the single most damaging fact in the file.

The emperor Aurelian instituted the feast of the *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun, at Rome in A.D. 274. Before that, as William Tighe puts it, 25 December “had no religious significance in the Roman pagan festal calendar... nor did the cult of the sun play a

prominent role in Rome before him.”[4] Aurelian had reasons of his own: the sun cult suited an emperor trying to bind a fracturing empire to a single supreme deity, and his coinage styles him *Pontifex Solis*.

But the Christian reckoning from 25 March was already in circulation when he did it. Which raises a possibility the accusation never considers: that the borrowing ran the other way, and that the feast of the Unconquered Sun was set on 25 December as a pagan counter-attraction to a date the Roman Christians were already keeping. Tighe argues exactly this, and so have others. It is not the only reading of the evidence, and this essay does not need it to be true. It is enough that it is a live reading—because if it is even possible, the confident claim that Christmas was lifted from a sun festival is not a finding but a guess with the arrow drawn in one direction.

There is a further irony in the sun material that is worth a sentence. Christians did associate Christ with the sun, and said so openly—Malachi’s “sun of righteousness” (Mal. 4:2), the *Oriens* of the Benedictus, the eastward orientation of churches. None of this was concealed borrowing. It was a deliberate and public claim that the thing the pagans worshipped as the highest visible good was a created sign of the One who made it, and that the sign had now been answered. That is not syncretism. It is the opposite of syncretism: it is the confiscation of a metaphor.

## **VI. Saturnalia Is the Wrong Festival**

The Saturnalia is invoked in nearly every statement of the charge, and it does not fit the date.

The Saturnalia ran from 17 December, and in its expanded imperial form to 23 December. It did not fall on 25 December. Christmas does not occur on the Saturnalia, and the two are not the same feast on the same day; they are neighbors in a month, which is the whole of the connection.

This is worth pressing, because the Saturnalia is doing a particular kind of work in the argument. It supplies the atmosphere—feasting, gift-giving, license, a general midwinter unbuttoning—and the atmosphere is then used to make the date feel borrowed. But midwinter festivity in the northern hemisphere does not require a pagan pedigree to explain it. The days are short, the work of the year is done, the stores are full and will not keep, and people eat and give things to each other. Any culture at that latitude will produce something of the kind, and the fact that two of them did is not evidence that one copied the other.

What the earliest Roman record actually shows is a Nativity on 25 December entered without commentary. The Chronograph of A.D. 354, in the list known as the *Depositio*

*Martyrum*, records the birth of Christ at Bethlehem on the eighth day before the Kalends of January. It reads as a calendar entry, not as a decision, and it is the notice of a practice already in place.

## **VII. The Silence That Should Not Be There**

Now consider what is missing from the record, because the absence is louder than anything in it.

Suppose the Church had genuinely decided to place the Nativity on a pagan festival in order to draw converts, or to smother a rival celebration. That is a policy. Policies are discussed. And the Fathers were the least reticent body of writers in antiquity: they argued in public and at length about the date of Easter, the readmission of the lapsed, the rebaptism of heretics, the propriety of flight in persecution, the exact wording of the creed. A deliberate accommodation of paganism at the center of the calendar would have been controversial, and someone would have either defended it or denounced it.

No ancient Christian says it. There is no patristic source stating that the Nativity was timed to coincide with a pagan festival—not one, whether in approval or in attack. The accusation is not ancient testimony. It is a modern theory about ancient testimony, and it has an author and a date: it goes back in its present form to the Protestant scholar Paul Ernst Jablonski (1693–1757), who was compiling a catalogue of what he took to be the paganizing of the early Church, with the Jesuit Jean Hardouin arguing the other side.[5] That is the eighteenth century, not the fourth.

This matters methodologically. The argument that Christmas is pagan is an argument from a supposed resemblance, run backwards into a causal claim about which no one at the time said anything at all. It is the sort of reasoning that would establish almost any conclusion, given a large enough calendar and a free hand with the word “origin.”

## **VIII. A Word Against Overreach on the Other Side**

Honesty requires a paragraph here, because the defense of Christmas has its own bad arguments and they should not be borrowed.

It is sometimes claimed that Pope Telesphorus (c. 126–137) instituted midnight Mass at Christmas, which would place the feast in the early second century. The claim rests on the *Liber Pontificalis*, a compilation whose early lives are late, legendary, and not usable as evidence for the second century. It should not be cited, and it is not cited here. There is likewise a passage in Hippolytus’s *Commentary on Daniel* that appears to give 25 December as the birth date; its manuscript tradition has been disputed for a century, and

while a serious case has been made that the reading is sound, the honest position is that it remains contested.[6]

What survives without these props is enough: a documented method of calculation, a sun feast that is later than the calculation, a fifty-year gap running the wrong way for the borrowing thesis, and a complete patristic silence about any accommodation. The case does not need to be overstated, and overstating it would repeat the fault it is answering.

## **IX. The Shepherds and the Lambing Season**

The argument from Luke 2:8 is the one most often felt to be decisive, and it is the one that most cleanly reverses.

It assumes that shepherds would not have flocks in the fields on a December night in Judea, the season being cold and wet. But sheep are short-day breeders. Their reproductive cycle is triggered by decreasing daylight: they mate in the autumn as the days shorten, and with a gestation of roughly a hundred and fifty days, lambing across Israel, Jordan and Syria falls in December and January.[7]

And lambing is exactly when a shepherd sleeps outside. Ewes lamb at night, they lamb badly without help, and newborn lambs in a wet season die without attention. The night watch in the fields is not evidence against a winter birth; it is the practice of the one season in the year when the flock cannot be left. Luke's detail—"keeping watch over their flock by night"—fits a December birth more comfortably than a summer one, when the flock can largely be left to itself.

There is a second point of the same kind. Bethlehem is five miles from Jerusalem, and the flocks pastured there included the temple flocks, kept for sacrifice. That the announcement of the birth of the Lamb of God was made to men keeping the sacrificial lambs, in the season those lambs were born, is not an argument about the calendar. But it is a detail that the objection has to call an accident and the tradition does not.

None of this proves that Christ was born on 25 December. The Church has never taught the date as certain, nothing in the faith depends on it, and a Christian is perfectly free to think the true date unknown—which it very probably is. The point is narrower and it is sufficient: the shepherds do not rule out December, and the argument that they do rests on an assumption about sheep that is the reverse of the truth.

## **X. "Easter" Is an Accident of English**

The name argument runs into a difficulty as soon as one steps outside the English language.

The feast is *Pascha* in Greek and *Pascha* in Latin; *Pâques* in French, *Pasqua* in Italian, *Pascua* in Spanish, *Páscoa* in Portuguese, *Pasen* in Dutch, *Påske* in Danish and Norwegian, *Påsk* in Swedish, *Pasg* in Welsh, *Cáisc* in Irish. Nearly every one of them is the Hebrew *pesach*, the Passover. Only English and German depart from it.

So the position the argument commits its holder to is this: a feast kept across the Christian world for centuries under the name of the Passover, in almost every language of that world, is really named after a Germanic goddess because two northern European languages, late, adopted a local word for it. The name of a thing in one language is not the origin of the thing. The feast is older than the English word for it by several centuries, and what the English word replaced was *Pascha*, which is what the Venerable Bede himself calls the feast when he is not discussing the month-name.

It is also worth noticing what the feast is, since the accusation rarely touches it. Easter is the Christian Passover: the Church's dating of it is derived from the Jewish calendar and was fought over on precisely that ground in the second-century Quartodeciman controversy, where the whole dispute was how closely to follow Nisan 14. A festival whose date is calculated from the Jewish Passover, and whose earliest recorded controversy is about how Jewish to keep it, is a strange candidate for a rebranded spring rite.

## **XI. Eostre, the Eggs, and the Hares**

The goddess herself is worth setting out carefully, because the fair conclusion is not that she is a fabrication—only that almost nothing is known about her.

The single early source is Bede, writing *De temporum ratione* in A.D. 725. In chapter 15, listing the old Anglo-Saxon month-names, he says that *Eosturmonath* was named for a goddess called Eostre, to whom the pagan English had kept a feast in that month, and that Christians had transferred the name to the Paschal season.[8] That is the whole of the ancient evidence. No other early writer mentions her; no inscription, no dedication, no myth.

Scholarship divides. Some hold that Bede inferred the goddess from the month-name, as an antiquarian filling a gap. Others defend her existence, and there is a real argument on that side: Jacob Grimm reconstructed a continental *Ostara* from the German *Ostern*, and a group of Romano-Germanic votive inscriptions to the *matronae Austriahenae*, found near Morken-Harff in 1958, may attest a related cult. The honest verdict is that Bede was probably reporting something real and that we know essentially nothing else about it.

What can be said with confidence is the part the argument actually needs, and it is negative. There is no ancient evidence connecting Eostre to eggs, or to hares, or to rabbits. Not a line. The association is a modern one, and the confident assertions that eggs and

bunnies are “her” fertility symbols are assertions with nothing behind them: we cannot even establish what she was the goddess of, let alone her iconography.[9] The related claim that “Easter” derives from Ishtar—a Babylonian name, in a Semitic language, reaching Old English by no route anyone has ever traced—is not a thin argument but a false one, and it descends, like so much else here, from Hislop.

The customs themselves have a homelier history. Eggs were forbidden during the Lenten fast, so a household accumulated them for forty days and ate them at the first feast that permitted it, which is Easter; the decorating of them follows from having a great many at once on a day of rejoicing. The Easter hare appears in German folklore, first recorded in the seventeenth century, and reaches America with German settlers. These are late, local, and domestic. They are not the debris of a fertility cult.

## **XII. The Tree, and What Jeremiah Was Describing**

Jeremiah 10:3–5 is the one place where the accusation can point to a text that looks, on the surface, exactly like a Christmas tree. It repays reading to the end of the sentence.

For the customs of the peoples are false: a tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. Men deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. (Jer. 10:3–5)

The passage is describing the manufacture of an idol, and it describes it from the first stroke to the finished object. Wood is cut; a craftsman shapes it with a tool; it is plated with precious metal; it is fastened upright with nails so that it will not topple. And then—this is the line that settles the matter—the prophet says of the thing that it must be carried because it cannot walk, that it cannot speak, and that it can do neither harm nor good. That is a cult statue on its plinth, an image made to be prayed to, and the whole force of Jeremiah’s mockery is that people bow to something they nailed down themselves so it would not fall over.

It is not a fir tree with candles on it, and the difference is not decorative. Nobody prays to a Christmas tree. Nobody asks it for rain, or fears its displeasure, or attributes anything to it whatever. It is not an idol, because an idol is not defined by its shape or its materials but by the worship offered to it—which is why Jeremiah’s test is whether the object can speak, act, or move, not whether it began as timber.

The chronology is also decisive on its own. The decorated evergreen indoors is a German custom of the sixteenth century. The guild records at Bremen mention a tree in 1570; the Strasbourg records describe trees brought into houses in the early seventeenth century,

hung with paper roses, apples and wafers—the apples and wafers standing for the fruit of the tree in Eden and the Eucharist, which is a catechetical use, not a pagan one. The custom reaches England with the German court in the nineteenth century and America with German settlers. The pretty story that Luther first set candles in a fir is unverified and probably invented. Whatever else may be said, a sixteenth-century German household custom is not what Jeremiah was condemning in the seventh century before Christ.

### **XIII. Origin Does Not Determine Meaning**

Suppose all of the foregoing were wrong. Suppose the date was taken from the sun cult, the name from the goddess, the tree from a sacred grove. The argument would still not reach its conclusion, and it is important to see why, because this is the joint on which everything actually turns.

The claim being made is that the origin of a practice determines its meaning permanently, so that what a custom once was is what it still is, regardless of what anyone now does or intends by it. State the principle nakedly and its difficulties are immediate. It would mean that meaning is fixed by the dead, that no practice can ever be converted, and that a Christian kneeling before the crib in a lit church on a December night is, without knowing it and against everything he intends, worshipping the sun. It is a claim about the metaphysics of custom, and it is a strange one: it treats the past as a contaminant that no present intention can wash out.

In every other area of life we know this is false. A word's etymology does not govern its use—nobody calls a *panic* a tribute to Pan, and the man who says goodbye is not aware of pronouncing “God be with ye,” though he is. Wednesday belongs to Woden by derivation and to the middle of the week by use, and the second of these is what the word now means. Meaning is carried by a living community's use, not by an ancestor's intention.

But the decisive answer is not a point about language, because the New Testament faced this exact question in its hardest possible form, and answered it.

### **XIV. What Paul Told a Church Surrounded by Paganism**

The Corinthian question was not about a custom whose pagan associations were centuries dead. It was about meat that had, that week, been slaughtered in a temple as an offering to a god, and was now for sale in the market. The pagan connection was not historical, disputed, or inferred. It was current, direct, and undeniable. If any material thing on earth was disqualified by its origin, it was this.

Paul's ruling is unambiguous:

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” (1 Cor. 8:4)

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” (1 Cor. 10:25–26)

The reasoning is exactly the one the Watchtower position denies. The idol is nothing; therefore the food that passed through its temple is nothing; therefore its history has no power over it. The only restriction Paul adds is charitable rather than metaphysical—abstain if it would wound a brother who still believes the idol is something (1 Cor. 8:7–13)—and he is careful to say that the abstention is for the brother’s sake, not because the meat is tainted.

On days he is blunter still, and this is the passage the whole controversy turns on:

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. (Rom. 14:5–6)

Note what Paul does not say. He does not say that all days are alike and the man who keeps one is in error. He says that either practice is acceptable, that each man must be convinced in his own mind, and—crucially—that the man who keeps the day keeps it *to the Lord*, which is precisely the intention the Watchtower argument holds to be impossible.

And then he forbids the one thing the argument requires:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. (Col. 2:16)

A rule that divides the Church over the keeping of days is the thing explicitly prohibited. Whatever else the pagan-origins argument may be, it is a judgment passed on other Christians with regard to a festival, and that is the practice Colossians names.

The honest counter-text is Galatians 4:10, where Paul writes with alarm, “You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!” It must be dealt with rather than avoided. But the context of Galatians is the whole letter’s subject: converts being pressed to take on the Mosaic law—circumcision above all—as necessary for justification. What alarms Paul is not the keeping of a day but the theology behind it, the return to law as the ground of salvation, which he calls turning back to the “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (Gal. 4:9). Romans 14 shows that he did not mean to forbid the observance itself, since there he permits it by name. A Christian who keeps Christmas is not seeking to be justified by keeping it, and Galatians is not about him.

The pattern of Sinai is worth a word too, since the left-hand argument leans on it. Nadab and Abihu, and the golden calf, are not cases of an origin contaminating a practice. They are cases of *idolatry and of presumption*—of offering what God had forbidden, or of making an image and calling it the Lord. The calf was not wrong because bulls were an Egyptian motif; it was wrong because Israel bowed to it. Christmas involves no image treated as God and no rite God has forbidden. The parallel fails at the point where it would need to hold.

## **XV. The Rule Nobody Can Keep**

A principle is tested by consistent application, and this one cannot survive it.

The days of the week are named for Norse and Roman gods: Tiw, Woden, Thor, Frigg, Saturn. Sunday is the day of the Sun, and Jehovah's Witnesses hold meetings on it. The months are worse: January belongs to Janus, March to Mars, June to Juno, and the Society dates every one of its publications by them. The wedding ring has a documented pagan pedigree and is worn without discussion. The Memorial itself—the one observance the Witnesses do keep—falls on a date computed from a calendar whose month-names Israel acquired in Babylon during the exile, Nisan among them.

And on the principle at stake the Society has already agreed, in print. Asked about wedding rings, whose pagan ancestry its own literature acknowledges, it answered: "Really, the question is not so much whether wedding rings were first used by pagans but whether they were originally used as part of false religious practices and still retain such religious significance" (The Watchtower, January 15, 1972, Questions From Readers). That is this essay's whole argument, stated by the Watchtower about a ring: origin does not bar a practice once no false worship remains attached to it. The principle that clears the ring clears the calendar.

None of these is refused, and the reason is plain enough: the rule cannot be applied consistently because consistent application would leave nothing standing. What remains is a principle invoked where it is wanted and set aside where it is not, and a principle that behaves that way is not functioning as a principle. It is functioning as a boundary marker—a way of being visibly separate—which is a real thing and can be honestly defended as such, but it is not the argument being made.

The reply sometimes offered is that the day-names are no longer understood as religious, while Christmas is still a religious observance. This is true, and it concedes the entire case: it grants that present meaning, not origin, is what determines whether a practice is idolatrous. Once that is granted, the question about Christmas is what Christians now mean by it, and the answer is not in dispute.

## **XVI. The Wider Charge: Doctrine, Image and Title**

The calendar is only the most visible part of the accusation. The same method is applied to the Trinity, the soul, the cross, the sacraments, the priesthood, the furniture of the church building, and the honors paid to Mary and the saints. Each of these deserves the full treatment given to Christmas, and several have their own essays; what follows is the short answer, and the reason the method fails before any particular case is examined.

The method is to observe a resemblance and infer a derivation. Biblical scholarship has a name for the habit—Samuel Sandmel called it “parallelomania” in 1962—and the objection to it is not that parallels are never real but that resemblance by itself establishes nothing about descent.<sup>[10]</sup> Two religions may bury their dead facing east, wash before prayer, burn something fragrant, and set a light before a holy place, for the sufficient reason that human beings are the same everywhere and these gestures suggest themselves. To find the resemblance and announce a borrowing is to skip the only step that would matter.

And the method has a consequence its users have not noticed. Turn it on the Old Testament and it destroys the religion God gave Israel. The Tabernacle had an altar of sacrifice, a holy place and a holy of holies, a lampstand kept perpetually burning (Ex. 25:31–40), incense compounded to a fixed formula and burned twice daily (Ex. 30:1–8, 34–38), a priesthood in linen with turban, ephod and jeweled breastpiece (Ex. 28), ritual washings at a bronze laver (Ex. 30:17–21), water of purification mixed with ashes (Num. 19), first fruits, and a festal calendar reckoned by new moons. Every one of these has a close parallel somewhere in the ancient Near East, and every one of them was commanded by God Himself, in detail, from the mountain. If parallels prove paganism, then God gave Israel a pagan religion—which is the *reductio* the argument cannot escape. What Scripture forbids is not the use of an altar or of incense, but the worship of what is not God.

With that in hand the particular charges can be answered briefly. The pagan *triads* are three gods, which is polytheism; the Trinity is one God in three Persons, a formula no polytheism has ever produced and which was hammered out from Scripture in the teeth of philosophical objection, not borrowed from it. The immortality of the soul is said to come from Plato—but the Christian hope is the resurrection of the body, which is the one doctrine Greek philosophy found ridiculous, and it was laughed at on exactly that ground at Athens (Acts 17:32); a Church shopping in Plato’s wardrobe would not have come home with that. The cross is said to be the sign of Tammuz, but the earliest evidence for it is Christian and early: Tertullian describes Christians tracing it on the forehead before the year 200, and a pagan scratched the *Alexamenos* graffito on the Palatine at about the same date to mock a Christian for worshipping a crucified man—the enemies of the

Church knew what she venerated and why. Incense, lamps, vestments and holy water are answered above: they are the furniture of the Temple.

The charge that presses hardest, and the one most worth stating fairly, concerns Mary—because here the accusation can point to a phrase that Scripture condemns by name. Jeremiah denounces the women of Judah for baking cakes for “the queen of heaven” and pouring out libations to her (Jer. 7:18; 44:17–25), and that queen of heaven is a real goddess, Ishtar or Astarte. Catholics call Mary Queen of Heaven. The inference looks irresistible.

It does not survive a look at what the two titles mean. Jeremiah’s queen of heaven is a goddess receiving sacrifice: cakes made in her image, incense, drink offerings poured out. That is worship, *latría*, and offering it to anyone but God is precisely what the Church means by idolatry. Mary is not offered sacrifice. There is no Mass said to Mary, no offering made to her, no petition addressed to her that is not a request for her prayers—the same request Christians make of one another (Jas. 5:16), addressed to someone the Lord has told us is alive, since “he is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:32).

And the title itself is not borrowed from Babylon; it comes from the throne room of David. In the kingdom of Judah the queen was not the king’s wife but the king’s mother, the *gebirah*, and she held a recognized office: when Bathsheba comes to Solomon, the king rises to meet her, bows to her, and has a throne set at his right hand (1 Kings 2:19). To call Mary queen is therefore to say something about her Son—that He is the son of David and reigns—and her title is entirely derivative of His. The Church’s reasoning is set out in exactly those terms, and the woman crowned with twelve stars in Revelation 12:1 is read in the same light.[11]

There is a last point that disposes of the whole class of arguments from shared vocabulary. *Baal* is simply the Hebrew word for lord or master. Scripture calls God “Lord” on nearly every page while denouncing the Baals in the same breath, and Hosea plays on the collision deliberately: “you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’” (Hos. 2:16). A shared word is not a shared identity. If it were, the divine title used most often in the Bible would be the one most compromised.

The same holds for *Theotokos*, God-bearer, which the accusation traces to Isis. The word was defined at the Council of Ephesus in 431 to settle a question about Christ, not about His mother: if the one born of Mary is a single Person who is God from the first instant of His conception, then His mother is the mother of God, and to deny her the title is to divide Christ in two. It is a Christological safeguard, and what it protects is the Incarnation itself.

## **XVII. The Watchtower's Own Record**

There is a fact about the history of the Society itself that bears on how settled this teaching is, and it is not a debating point but a matter of their own published record.

The Bible Students kept Christmas. It was celebrated at the Brooklyn Bethel, with a tree and a dinner and gifts, through the whole of Russell's life and for a decade after it. The practice was dropped in 1926, under Rutherford. The Society's own *1975 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* records the change plainly, without embarrassment.[12]

This does not make the present teaching false; a group may correct itself, and the fact that a rule is recent is not an argument that it is wrong. But it does bear directly on the way the rule is now urged. If the pagan derivation of Christmas is as clear as the literature says—clear enough that keeping the feast is idolatry, and refusing it is worth the separation from family and neighbor that it costs—then it is difficult to explain how it escaped the notice of the movement's founder and his associates for fifty years, in an organization that prided itself on precisely this kind of research.

The pattern is not confined to holidays. The cross was worn by Bible Students and used on the cover of *The Watch Tower* until 1931. Vaccination was condemned as a violation of God's law in 1931 and permitted in 1952. Organ transplantation was called cannibalism in 1967 and left to conscience in 1980. In each case a practice was forbidden on grounds presented as scriptural and permanent, and in each case the prohibition was later lifted without the scriptural grounds having changed.[13] A reader deciding what to do about Christmas is entitled to weigh that record when he is told that this particular rule is beyond question.

## **XVIII. What the Church Does With What the Nations Made**

It remains to say what the Catholic position positively is, because it is not merely a denial of the charge. The Church does take up what the nations made, deliberately and as a matter of principle, and she has a reason for it.

The reason is that creation is God's and was never the devil's to begin with. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," Paul writes to the Corinthians, quoting the psalm, and he applies it to temple meat. Whatever is good in a human custom—the marking of a season, the giving of gifts, the bringing of light into a dark month—is good because God made the world that way, and its misuse by idolaters is a theft, not a title. To take it back is not to borrow from paganism. It is to recover stolen property.

Scripture shows this happening. Israel left Egypt carrying Egyptian gold, given to them at God's own instruction (Ex. 12:35–36), and that gold went into the tabernacle. Solomon built the Temple with Phoenician craftsmen sent by Hiram of Tyre, in an architectural

idiom that was not invented in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5). Paul stood on the Areopagus, took a pagan altar as his text and quoted two pagan poets to an audience of philosophers, telling them that the God they worshipped in ignorance was the one he came to declare (Acts 17:22–28). None of these is an accommodation of idolatry. Each is a claim of ownership.

Augustine made the principle explicit, and used the gold of Egypt as his figure: whatever truths and useful institutions the pagans possess are to be taken from them for the right use of the Gospel, as the Israelites took the Egyptians' vessels, since these things were not theirs but were being put to bad purposes.[14] It is a rule about redemption, and it is the same rule that governs everything else in Christianity: what is fallen is not discarded but taken up and healed. A faith whose central claim is that God assumed a human nature and made it the instrument of salvation cannot consistently hold that a December date is beyond redeeming.

And it is worth saying plainly what the feast now is, since the argument spends so little time on it. Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation—that the eternal Son took flesh and was born of a woman in a particular place at a particular hour. Whatever the calendar once held on that day, this is what the Church now proclaims on it, and this is what the Christian who keeps it intends. The Catechism puts the liturgical year's purpose in exactly these terms: the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ through the cycle of the year, so that what He did once is made present to each generation.[15]

## **XIX. The Reply in Brief**

The framework is discredited at the source. The great bulk of the pagan-origins material descends from Alexander Hislop's *The Two Babylons*, a book whose central couple never existed, whose etymologies are invented, and which the scholarly world abandoned long ago—and whose most successful popularizer, Ralph Woodrow, examined the sources, withdrew his own book, and wrote its refutation.

The historical case does not hold as stated. December 25 descends from a calculation about the date of the Crucifixion, not from a festival; the arithmetic linking it to 25 March is still visible in the Church's calendar. The sun feast is fifty years later than the Christian reckoning and may well be the borrower. The Saturnalia is the wrong festival on the wrong days. No ancient Christian anywhere says the Nativity was timed against a pagan rite, and the accusation in its modern form is eighteenth-century. The shepherds argument runs backwards, since lambing in the Levant falls in December and shepherds watch by night at lambing. "Easter" is a local English name for a feast the rest of Christendom still calls the Passover, the goddess behind it rests on one sentence in Bede, and nothing ancient

connects her to eggs or hares. Jeremiah is describing a cult statue nailed upright so it will not fall, and the decorated tree is a German custom of the sixteenth century.

The wider charge fails with it. Resemblance is not derivation, and the method that convicts the Church of paganism convicts the Tabernacle first—incense, lamps, vestments, washings and a festal calendar were all commanded by God and all have pagan parallels. Triads are not the Trinity; the resurrection of the body is not Plato; the cross is attested by the Church's own enemies before 200. And Mary is called queen because in the kingdom of Judah the queen is the king's mother who sits at his right hand, which is a statement about her Son—not because of a goddess who was offered cakes and libations, the very thing the Church calls idolatry and does not do.

And the principle fails even where the history holds. Paul settled this question for congregations living among real and practicing paganism, in the hardest case it admits of—meat sacrificed to an idol that week. The idol is nothing and the meat may be eaten; the day may be kept, and the man who keeps it keeps it to the Lord; and what is forbidden is passing judgment on a brother with regard to a festival. The rule the Watchtower urges instead cannot be applied to the calendar it prints its own literature by, and it was not applied to Christmas at Bethel until 1926.

What is left, when the argument is set down, is a genuine concern that deserves respect: that worship should be given to God as He wills and not confused with the worship of anything else. That concern is right, and it is Catholic. But it is not answered by tracing customs to their ancestors. It is answered by asking what is being worshipped. A Christian who kneels on 25 December before a child in a manger, and confesses that this child is God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, is not worshipping the sun. He is worshipping the One the sun was made to serve, and doing the one thing the sun was never able to do anything about.

## Endnotes

1. Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons: The Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife* (pamphlet 1853; expanded ed. 1858). On the central difficulty, Semiramis is the Assyrian queen regent Sammu-ramat, c. 811–808 B.C.; no ancient source links her to Nimrod or describes the marriage on which Hislop’s system depends.
2. Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* (1966), withdrawn from print by its author, and *The Babylon Connection?* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1997), which sets out in detail why Hislop’s parallels, etymologies and quotations do not survive examination.
3. On the “integral age” tradition and the derivation of 25 December from 25 March, see William J. Tighe, “Calculating Christmas,” *Touchstone* (December 2003). Sextus Julius Africanus, *Chronographiai* (c. A.D. 221), gives 25 March as the date of the conception; the 25 March dating of the Passion is attested in the Latin West by the early third century. The parallel Eastern computation from 6 April yields 6 January, still the Nativity date of the Armenian Church.
4. Tighe, “Calculating Christmas”: 25 December “had no religious significance in the Roman pagan festal calendar before Aurelian’s time, nor did the cult of the sun play a prominent role in Rome before him.” Aurelian reigned 270–275; the feast of the *Sol Invictus* is dated to 274. His coinage styles him *Pontifex Solis*.
5. The derivation of Christmas from a pagan feast in its modern form goes back to Paul Ernst Jablonski (1693–1757), with the Jesuit Jean Hardouin (1646–1729) arguing against him. No patristic source states that the Nativity was timed to coincide with a pagan festival.
6. On the *Liber Pontificalis* and the early papal lives, see the standard cautions in any modern edition; the second-century entries are not usable as evidence. On the Hippolytus passage, the manuscript difficulties and the case for the reading are set out by Tom C. Schmidt, “Hippolytus and the Original Date of Christmas” (2010). The reading remains contested and nothing here depends on it.
7. Sheep are short-day (negative photoperiod) breeders, mating as daylight decreases in autumn; with a gestation of roughly 150 days, lambing in Israel, Jordan and Syria falls in December and January, as recorded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Shepherds keep night watch at lambing rather than in the mating season.

8. Bede, *De temporum ratione* (A.D. 725), ch. 15. Bede says only that *Eosturmonath* was named for a goddess Eostre to whom feasts were kept in that month, and that Christians transferred the name to the Paschal season. He himself calls the feast *Pascha* elsewhere.
9. Jacob Grimm reconstructed a continental *Ostara* in *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835) from the German *Ostern*; the *matronae Austriahenae* inscriptions found near Morken-Harff in 1958 may attest a related cult. No ancient source connects Eostre with eggs, hares or rabbits. The derivation of “Easter” from the Akkadian *Ishtar* is philologically impossible and has no scholarly standing.
10. Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13, on the extravagance of inferring dependence from resemblance.
11. On the queenship of Mary and the Davidic *gebirah*, see Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam* (1954), and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§966, 971. On the distinction between the adoration due to God alone and the honor paid to the saints, see *Catechism* §§2096–2097 and 971.
12. 1975 *Yearbook of Jehovah’s Witnesses* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society), which records the celebration of Christmas at the Brooklyn Bethel and its discontinuance in 1926.
13. On the cross, see the covers of *The Watch Tower* through 1931. On vaccination, *The Golden Age* (1931) against and the *Watchtower* of 15 December 1952 permitting. On organ transplants, *The Watchtower* (15 November 1967) against, and (15 March 1980) leaving the matter to conscience. On the general pattern of changed rules, see Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience*.
14. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* II.40.60, on the gold of the Egyptians.
15. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1163–1173, on the liturgical year.

## For Further Reading

*Calculating Christmas*, by William J. Tighe—Touchstone , December 2003.

*The Babylon Connection?*, by Ralph Woodrow—the author’s refutation of Hislop and of his own earlier book.

*Christmas*, Catholic Encyclopedia—the history of the feast and its date. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/o3724b.htm>.

*De temporum ratione*, by the Venerable Bede—the sole early witness to Eostre. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2711.htm>.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1163–1173, on the liturgical year and the feasts. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

*Crisis of Conscience*, by Raymond Franz—on the Society’s changing rules.

*Does History Condemn the Church?*, The record and its legends, examined honestly.

*The Two Babylons*, by Alexander Hislop (1853)—the source of the pagan-origins charges this page answers; readable at the Internet Archive. Free online at <https://archive.org/details/twobabylonsorpao0ohislgoo>.

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*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end. Amen.*

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## **A Note on Authority**

This essay represents the author’s articulation of the Catholic response to the claim that her feasts, doctrines and practices are pagan in origin, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.