**Is something wrong with Christmas?**

**by Piet Guijt**

**Introduction**

Many Christians look forward to celebrate Christmas each year, on which we remember that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, was born. We can think of the (often packed) church services in which the familiar old Christmas songs are sung, amongst others ‘Glory to God in the Highest’ with which a Christmas service often is closed. And even if it’s a side issue, people can enjoy the charm and sociability of Christmas, certainly in the season when the days are short and dark.

However, there are also Christians that wonder whether it’s proper and right to celebrate Christmas. Because is it perhaps “an ungodly matter from which we as biblically faithful Christians should stay away?” (2) Yet other Christians go even that far, that they judge fellow Christians who do celebrate Christmas (1).

The reason for writing this article, was the video film ‘Truth or Tradition’ (11) by the American Pastor Jim Staley. In this article we want to reflect on the Christmas Event.

Objections
What are the objections that are presented against the celebration of Christmas?
And what should we think of it?
1. The Bible doesn’t mention it;
2. The birth date doesn’t add up;
3. The Christmas Story doesn’t add up;
4. Objections against the Christmas tree;
5. There are pagan influences;
6. Saint Nicolas and Santa Claus have nothing to do with Christmas;
7. Decadence.

1. The Bible doesn’t mention it
An article (7) points out that the Bible doesn’t say anything about the celebration of Christian holidays such as Good Friday, Easter, Day of Ascension and Pentecost, and thus not about celebrating Christmas. Jesus only gave instructions about remembering His death (13). Furthermore, there are no historical proofs that the first Christians celebrated the birth of Christ (13).

In contrast, one could say that the Bible does speak about the birth, the death, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
Are those facts of Salvation not important to Christians, and shouldn’t they be remembered? And as far as Christmas is concerned, why shouldn’t we remember the birth of the Savior of the world?

2. The birth date doesn’t add up
The birth date of Jesus is not mentioned in the Bible and therefore not known. And that Jesus was born in December is unlikely, because the fact that the shepherds were in the field is all the more an indication that during Jesus’ birth there was absolutely no winter night (10). For in winter time there are no sheep to be found, even in the fields of Ephrata. Furthermore, winter is not a practical time to organize a census (9). Therefore, the ‘Midwinter’s Eve songs’ do not add up. As an alternative, people mention April and September as possible months in which the Lord could have been born (1). Sometimes also the beginning of October is mentioned (13). Others think that Jesus could have been born in the time of the Sukkoth Feast (see context) (4).

3. The Christmas Story doesn’t add up
Joseph and Mary had probably not gone past along all the inns, but have stayed with family relatives. Because there was no room in the ‘kataluma’, which was the guest room on the first floor of a house, Joseph and Mary had to stay in a room of one floor lower, a place where normally also animals could walk into and out (10). The Bible doesn’t mention whether there were animals present at birth of Jesus (10).

How did people then came up with the thought of an ox and a donkey? Possibly it is derived from Isaiah 1:3 – “An ox knows its owner, And a donkey its master’s manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand.” From this verse, the image has been romanticized into an endearing stable with an ox and a donkey. In 1223, Franciscus of Assisi placed a living Christmas stable in the village of Greccio in Italy (1). The ‘romantic’ scene of the familiar Christmas stables with Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus, including some animals, very likely don’t add up with reality.

Then something about the manger. In Luke 2: 6,7 we read: “While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” It was the word ‘manger’ which made people presume that the birth of the Lord Jesus took place in a stable (by the way, with ‘stable’ you can also think of a cavern or a cave, because those were often used as such), all the more so because it says that there was no room for them in the inn. “The Hebrew word for what is translated in Greek as ‘phatne’ and then as ‘manger’, can also be translated as ‘storage for food’. Jews stored their food in a chest and probably the Lord Jesus as a newly born, was laid down in a bread chest. In this context it is remarkable that the Lord Jesus called Himself later ‘the Bread of Life’ (Jn 6:35) and called His body ‘Bread’ at the initiation of the Last Supper (Lk 22:19). In addition, ‘Bethlehem’ can be translated as ‘House of bread’ (1).
In Matt. 2:1 we read that wise men (NASB: magi, magicians; the same word also occurs in Acts 8: 9,11 and 13: 6,8) came from the East in Jerusalem. Matthew mentions neither their number nor their names, but according to tradition, there were three wise men. This number of three was probably determined by the number of the gifts they brought. The description ‘three kings’ appears only since the 3rd century, likely as fulfillment of the prediction in Psalms 72:11: “Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him” (15). The names Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar are dated only from the middle age. Around the 8th century they were mentioned in the chronicles of Excerpta latina barbari as Bithisarea, Melichior en Gathasp. In other Christian traditions other names appear, e.g. with the Syrian Christians the three wise men are called Larvandad, Goesjnasap en Hormisdas (15).
Even if the Christmas story doesn’t add up in some details, should that be a reason not to celebrate Christmas?

4. Objections against the Christmas tree
Some Christians point out the occult background of the Christmas tree. On the pagan midwinter’s festival a tree (symbol of fertility) was decorated and candles and other lights were lit (1). Hislop (3) tries to derive the Christmas tree from Babylonian symbols, while researchers today agree that the Christmas tree did not appear on the scene until the 16th century, not even in Roman Catholic, but German Protestant areas, specifically in the Elzas” (9).

There are Christians (even Jehovah’s witnesses) that do not celebrate Christmas because they read in Jeremiah “about people who decorate trees and consider them as idols. God forbade Israel to do that. If they were not allowed to decorate trees, why do we do that with Christmas?” (8).
However, if anyone has a problem with the (presence of the) Christmas tree, then surely one can also celebrate Christmas without a Christmas tree! After all, there are countries and regions where Christmas trees do not grow, e.g. in deserts or in the Poles. And people should also consider that the tree that Jeremiah refers to, is about the worshiping of an idol, while the Christmas tree is certainly not about worshiping the tree. Thus, it is about two completely different matters that people should not confuse one with the other.

5. There are pagan influences
Christmas would be mixed with all kinds of pre-Christian and pagan elements, also in connection with the date of 25th December. This date was the day of the midwinter or winter solstice, meaning: the shortest day of the year. Nowadays, it is 21st or 22nd December, but two thousand years ago, that day fell on the 25th December.
As earlier mentioned, the first Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ (13). (By the way, Jehovah’s witnesses still do not celebrate birth days because bad things happened on those day - Matt. 14:6) By the influence of the Romans, Christians started to celebrate birth days and therefore also the birth day of the Lord Jesus. Already in 221 AD, the Roman Army officer Sextus Julius Africanus proposed to celebrate the date of 25th December as the birth day of Christ because that day was already a celebration day (1). Also to make it easier for the pagans - who were celebrating the Winter Solstice festival on 25th December - to accept Jesus, the Roman Emperor Constantin the Great decided to use the 25th December as the birth day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This date is debatable for some Christians, for on that date people celebrated the Midwinter Festival in ancient Rome called the Natalis Invicti (solis) (which is the ‘[re]birth of the invincible [sun]’), a feast for the coming light and a feast for the honor of the sun god (Sol Invictus or Mithras [Roman Empire], Ra [Egypt] and Helios [Greece]) (1) because from that day on the days began to get longer again. The origin of the celebration date back to the pagan Rome with its mixture of feasts to the honor of the god of agriculture Saturn, and the sun god Mithras (13). This is why the Mithras religion is associated with Christmas by some Christians, because the god Mithras would have been born on 25th December. Christmas would be a disguised Mithras feast (9). Christmas is also associated with the Roman Saturnalia – a festival to the honor of the god Saturn. But that festival was absolutely not on the 25th December, but on 17th – 19th December.

The video film ‘Truth and Traditions?’ (11) by the American pastor Jim Staley was the cause to write this article, because many Christians have let themselves to be influenced by this video and started to think that as a Christian one is not permitted to celebrate Christmas. If you watch this video for the first time and see an overflow of terrifying images etc., it is imaginable that you are impressed by what Staley intends to convey, namely that Christmas would be an occult and by paganism contaminated feast. But on closer inspection, his arguments turn out to be messy and difficult to follow, and to which all kinds of other aspects are added. It is not only about Christmas but also about Easter, the legendary origin of the egg (symbol of fertility), the Easter bunny, child sacrifices to Astartes, the Roman feast Saturnalia for celebrating the birth days of the gods, the alleged association between Wodan and Santa Claus, the background of holly branches, etc., etc.. Paganism has crept into Christianity, this according to Staley.

The video film points out that Baal (sun god) and Astartes can be traced back to Nimrod and Semiramis. Staley mentions some Babylonian legends that are too bizarre and shocking (because of the child sacrifices) to display here. He casually also makes the connection between Astartes and Easter. The son of Nimrod and Semiramis was Tammuz, whom after his death was remembered as a god’s son. The birth day of Tammuz was on the first day of the year when the sun gets ‘born’ again in the middle of the winter, on the winter solstice on 25th December (formerly the 21st but because of the Julian Calendar it was changed into 25th December). And during this winter solstice, one of the greatest cult and pagan celebrations took place, according to Staley.

He says that people could argue that it’s about their heart and not about appearances, and that our thoughts are not on Tammuz or the winter solstice festival, but on the Lord Jesus when we celebrate Christmas.
But Staley points out in the film that it’s not about what it all means to us, but what it means to God. For who are we that we would know it better than God? This remark is undoubtedly well-intentioned by Staley, but it’s very manipulative. And there’s where the delusion lies. Staley uses for example the celebration of a birth day. You don’t celebrate the birth day of your wife on the birth day of your former girlfriend, do you? Or, as someone else writes: “How would we like it if it were decided that our birth day from now on should be celebrated on the birth day of an earthly dictator or serial killer?” These comparisons do not make sense because we do know when we were born. The video is, in my opinion, an example of indoctrination and manipulation. All sorts of things are being added and discussed, and at certain points there are also factual inaccuracies.

How far a person can go in rejecting Christmas is shown in the following. Because it was put in a serious context, it would not be intended as a joke.
“The author explained that the word No-el meant: ‘no God’! That’s the worst of it. ‘No’ is English, and ‘El’ is Hebrew, but that’s not the point of course …… In reality Noel – which is the French translation for Christmas – is derived from the Latin (dies) natalis, which means ‘birth day’, namely the birth day of Christ” (9).

Now what about the Christmas celebration on 25th December? Even though one has associated the origin of the Christmas celebration with the pagan winter solstice festival (which is today on 21st December and in those days on 25th December), the winter solstice (the phenomenon of the ‘shortest day’) as such has absolutely nothing to do with paganism, but is simply a creation phenomenon, which is appointed by God (9).

The objection mentioned by Staley against the celebration of Christmas, because of the fact that on 25th December the idol Tammuz was remembered, can also be ‘reversed’. After all, instead of people thinking of Tammuz or whatever idol, we now think of Jesus and honor Jesus, Who has conquered the power of Satan and the darkness! It’s about our hearts. With the coming of the Lord Jesus, the light has appeared to be more powerful than the darkness and the light breaks through. That’s exactly what the date of the winter solstice displays well. Are we not allowed to use that date then, because other people already chose it for other reasons?

If we cannot figure out anyway when Christ was born, what time is better suited to celebrate it than the end of December when the days start to get longer again and the light begins to break through again? That the pagans made their own feast of it shouldn’t bother us at all. We as Christians are just above that (9).

Is it therefore such a strange idea that the earlier church has given a Christian interpretation to this celebration and sanctified it? “Christ is after all the ‘Sun of righteousness’ (Mal. 4:2). On the Mountain of Transfiguration, the face of Jesus shone as the sun (Matt. 17:2). When Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus, Saul saw a light that was brighter than the sun (Acts 26:13). And when Jesus appeared to the apostle John at Patmos, His face was like the sun shining in its strength (Rev. 1:16). Jesus is also the One Who conquered the darkness (Jn 1:5; 8:12; 12:46; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9; 1 Jn 2:8). Therefore midwinter is a wonderful time to celebrate Christmas (‘Christmas’ is derived from Christ)” (4).

6. Saint Nicolas and Santa Claus have nothing to do with Christmas.
“The Bishop of Myra, Saint Nicolas, is one of the ‘holy ones’ who were honored by the Roman Catholic Church. Saint Nicolas was celebrated at the beginning of December with people giving presents to one another. Luther was annoyed by it (he found that the adoration of saints was wrong) and he introduced the Christ child: Christkindl). This child gave itself as a gift to the world (as the Lord Jesus also really did)” (1). “Emigrants to America brought their European cultural and religious heritage with them. The celebration of Saint Nicolas, mixed with ‘the Christkindl’ turned into Sinte Klaas = Santa Claus. And so Santa Claus, the giver of presents, arose instead of the Christ child. Commerce pounced on it and with America as an example, Christmas developed from remembering the coming of the ‘Light of the world’ into the coming of Santa Claus with his sleigh and presents. And the feast was celebrated extensively with delicious diners, lightened with candles, a sphere of warmth, coziness and fun” (1).

“Something of the former holiness lingered in the minds of the people; they felt that celebrating in this way was actually not the right thing to do. Fueled by this guilty feeling and by the Christmas stories of Charles Dickens’ they inserted ‘do good to the poor’ in the Christmas celebration. Christmas time has become the pre-eminent time for charity (that’s why it’s also raining donation checks from charity organizations around the Christmas days)” (1).

The fact that Santa Claus was invented by Coca Cola as a competitor of Saint Nicolas, has indeed nothing to do with the Christmas feast on which we remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus, but that’s no reason to refrain from celebrating Christmas in its true sense.

7. Decadence
As we already saw, the Christmas celebration has often turned (degraded) into a family celebration. The focus is not so much on the birth of Christ, but on the coziness, including Christmas lights on and around the house, the beautifully decorated and lighted Christmas tree in the homes and the numerous Christmas decorations with candles. And the tables are set for luxurious meals on which the Christmas shopping is focused (1).

Why celebrate Christmas anyway?
Even though Christmas as a feast is not mentioned in the Bible and there is no explicit order to celebrate Christmas, why should we not remember and celebrate with great gratitude that God has looked out for us and that Jesus came as the light of the world? Surely, the world-changing advent of our Lord to the world is worth celebrating! Why should we celebrate a birth day and not the birth of Jesus?

Moreover, Christmas offers us, certainly in this Corona time, a wonderful opportunity to be hospitable (Lk. 14:12-14) and tell others that God really looked out for us (6), so we can tell our family, friends, colleagues and neighbors about Who Jesus really is, and tell those who normally don’t go to church or don’t belong to a congregation, the joyful news of salvation through faith in Jesus! People seem to be more open for the gospel in Christmas time than in other periods of the year.

I would also like to point out a quote from a daily meditation (5) of the internationally known Bible teacher Derek Prince. At the one hand, because I recognize myself in it from my own experience and because it indicates how important Christmas is. And at the other hand, we shouldn’t let ourselves be led by all kinds of false arguments to believe or be deceived into taking Christmas away from us. “In countries where Christmas is celebrated in freedom, there is a special sphere in the air in the period of Christmas. That’s not only because of the Christmas music in the shopping malls. From my own childhood I remember that with Christmas it always touched my heart in a certain way. I was not yet a believer in God at that time, but Christmas did something to me. In one way or the other I felt that one dimension was missing in my life, something that would make me complete. Somehow I knew that I was missing something. I believe that there are thousands of non-believers on the street that recognize something of it. Christmas is about only one thing: the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior, the Son of God. Therefore it is important that we put Christ in the center of all the Christmas hustle and bustle, especially because in our western society, Christmas is often related to materialism, commerce and the lust of pleasure what the Bible is actually warning us about”, according Derek Prince (5).

There is a whole other reason to continue to celebrate Christmas. The devil would like us to stop celebrating Christmas. He is the inspirer that, with all kinds of secondary issues and supposedly pagan and even occult influences, wants to keep Christians away from celebrating Christmas. On a website it shows how an American Muslim woman looks at Christmas. The woman dressed in burka, argues that it is offensive and islamophobic to celebrate Christmas or even to acknowledge it or tolerate it. She claims the whole idea of Christmas to be blasphemous and, according to her, Muslims should not tolerate Christmas: “It’s not just a feast with giving presents, coziness and the singing of songs … If we allow this celebration, we participate in something that is in conflict with the Koran that says that God has not been born, not created. He is not the son, not the father, there is only God. We believe that no one is above God” (12). It’s remarkable that she doesn’t make any distinction between God the Father and Jesus, the Son of God. On that same site an (extreme) imam even declares that saying ‘Merry Christmas’ is worse than fornication, drinking alcohol or killing somebody. Even if other people see Jesus differently than we as Christians do, we do not need to let them take the Christmas celebration away from us.

In conclusion
Whatever was created or done by the inspiration of the evil one in all forms of occultism, is a fact, but we should not let that impress us. We should be and we are allowed to be grounded and remain grounded. The question is on Whom we are focused. Of course we can ask ourselves critical questions about the Christmas celebration because of the points mentioned in this article. But don’t let those questions or remarks lead that Christmas becomes a ‘forbidden feast’ due to fear of an alleged ‘occult contamination’.

The question whether you (are allowed to) celebrate Christmas or not is a question that every person should answer for himself (Rom. 14:12). Therefore, don’t let us force anything on each other. My personal opinion is that I am allowed to celebrate Christmas wholeheartedly and with great gratitude. A pastor wrote the following about Christmas: “When the days start to become longer I get all excited in my heart. That’s because of the great Light that has entered the world. That’s what I would also love to testify of coming weekend. And let the (anti-Christmas) grumblers stay grumbling at home, for I cannot imagine a Sunday service, which is the day after tomorrow, without referring to the birth of Christ …”(9). The devil would like us not to celebrate it, and he would laugh his head off if we fall into the trap of his manipulation and intimidation. But if anyone is tortured by doubt, he or she may search his or her heart sincerely and pray for wisdom. “Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). And consider that “To the pure, all things are pure” (Tit. 1:15).
I think that we must above all, ask the question HOW we do celebrate Christmas. Of course we may enjoy a Christmas meal and may enjoy the lights and coziness, certainly in the dark days of the year. But above all, let us not forget that it’s about remembering with great gratitude that Jesus Christ, the Son of God was born and would later die as the Lamb of God and conquer death so in this way reconcile us with God and redeem us from eternal death.
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**Context**

The Bible doesn’t indicate when the Lord Jesus was born. The author Ouweneel says that the time of the feast of the Tabernacles or Sukkot (September/October) is a good suggestion. Such a pilgrim’s feast is exactly the excellent time for a census, because many people are on the road. Additionally, the suggestion can be substantiated as follows: The priest Zacharias was serving in the temple according to the custom of the priest’s ‘office’, which was the eighth office of the course of Abia (Lk 1:5; 1 Chron. 24:10). This office was due for executing office in the temple around the fourth month of the religious year. The conception of John the Baptist took place some weeks later (Lk 1:23–24), and the conception of Jesus was almost six months thereafter (vs. 26). It can be derived from that (‘calculated’) that the birth of Jesus supposedly took place in the seventh month of the religious year, which is the month of the Tabernacles, the third pilgrim’s feast in Israel. But this makes us to be two months late for the celebration of Christmas in December. But because we don’t know anyway precisely when Jesus was born, the Midwinter makes it actually very beautiful. The days start to get longer! The light is breaking through again! And the fact that we believe in it, we show by burning as much lights as we can with Christmas. The light has overcome! (5).