

## *The Encyclopedia Britannica on Christmas and Epiphany*

The entirety of the article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on Christmas is reproduced below; the article on Epiphany follows as well, as the two festival days are related. While the Christmas article is in error on Mark being the first gospel and in the idea that there was a “Q” document that underlies Matthew and Luke, its narrative of the origin of Christmas is accurate. The main points of the development of the festival day are:

CHRISTMAS (*i. e.* the Mass of Christ), in the Christian Church [that is, in the Roman Catholic religion, which is no Christian Church], the festival of the nativity of the Jesus Christ. The history of this feast coheres . . . closely with that of Epiphany [another feast developed under pagan, Gnostic, and heretical influences, and which proclaims a false gospel of baptismal regeneration] (*q. v.*), . . . The great church [the Roman Catholic religion] adopted Christmas much later than Epiphany; and before the fifth century it was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come on the calendar, whether on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, or the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, or the 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

The earliest identification of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December with the birthday of Christ is in a passage, otherwise unknown and probably spurious, of Theophilus of Antioch (A. D. 171-183), preserved in the Latin by the Magdeburg centuriators (i. 3, 118), to the effect that the Gauls [who were heretics] contended that as they celebrated the birth of the Lord on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, whatever day of the week it might be, so they ought to celebrate the Pascha on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March when the resurrection befell.

The next mention of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December is in Hippolytus' (c. 202) commentary on Daniel iv. 23. Jesus, he says, was born at Bethlehem on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, a Wednesday, in the 42nd year of Augustus. This passage also is almost certainly interpolated. In any case he mentions no feast, nor was such a feast congruous with the orthodox ideas of that age. As late as 245 Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ “as if he were a king Pharaoh.” The first certain mention of Dec. 25 is in a Latin chronographer of A. D. 354, first published entire by Mommsen.<sup>1</sup> It runs thus in English: “Year 1 after Christ, in the consulate of Caesar and Paulus, the Lord Jesus Christ was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, a Friday and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the new moon.” Here again no festal celebration of the day is attested.

There were, however, many speculations in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century about the date of Christ's birth. Clement of Alexandria, towards its close, mentions several such, and condemns them as superstitions. Some chronologists, he says, alleged the birth to have occurred in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, on the 25th of Pachon, the Egyptian month, *i. e.* the 20<sup>th</sup> of May. These were probably the Basilidian gnostics. Others said it on the 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> of Pharmuthi, *i. e.* the 19th or 20th of April. Clement himself sets it on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 3 B. C. . . . Christ . . . being the Sun of Righteousness . . . certain Latins as early as 354 may have transferred the human birthday from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January to the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, which was then a Mithraic feast and is by the chronographer above referred to, but in another part of his compilation, termed *Natalis invicti solis*, or birthday of the unconquered Sun. . . . The Syrians and Armenians . . . accused the Romans of sun-worship and idolatry, contending with great probability that the feast of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December had been invented by the disciples of Cerinthus and its lections by Artemon [heretics] to commemorate the *natural* birth of Jesus. [Christmas] . . . certainly originated in the West, but spread quickly eastwards. In 353 – 361 it was observed that the court of Constantius [the heretical Arian emperor]. . . . As early as 400 in Rome an imperial rescript includes Christmas among the three feasts (the others are Easter and Epiphany) on which theaters must be closed. Epiphany and Christmas were not made judicial *non dies* until 534. . . . The new feast was about . . . 440 . . . finally established in Alexandria. . . . The grounds on which the Church introduced so late as 350 – 448 a Christmas feast till then unknown, or, if known, precariously linked with the baptism, seem in the main to have been the following. (I) The transition from adult to infant baptism was

---

<sup>1</sup> In the *Abhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1850). Note that in A. D. 1, Dec. 25 was a Sunday and not a Friday.

proceeding rapidly in the East, and in the West was well-nigh completed. [So Christmas rose as the Biblical subjects of baptism were abandoned by the Roman Catholic religion.] . . .

In Britain the 25<sup>th</sup> of December was a festival long before the conversion to Christianity, for Bede (*De temp. rat.* ch. 13) relates that “the ancient peoples of the Angli began the year on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December when we now celebrate the birthday of the Lord; and the very night which is now so holy to us, they called in their tongue *modranecht* (*modra niht*), that is, the mothers’ night, by reason we suspect of the ceremonies which in that night-long vigil they performed.” With his usual reticence about matters pagan or not orthodox, Bede abstains from recording who the mothers were and what the ceremonies. In 1644 the English puritans forbade any merriment or religious services by act of Parliament, on the ground that it was a heathen festival, and ordered it to be kept as a fast. Charles II. revived the feast, but the Scots adhered to the Puritan view.

In other words, Christmas is a Roman Catholic holy day that the Roman State-Church adopted in the fourth and fifth centuries, far after the true Baptist or Anabaptist churches had separated from Romanism<sup>2</sup> and far after Romanism had adopted a false gospel of baptismal regeneration, works salvation, “saint” and relic worship, and many other heresies. The State-Church adopted the festival from pagans and heretics, who held special celebrations to worship the devil on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. The Lord Jesus Christ was confounded with the sun god of Mithraism and worshipped on the winter solstice, the Day of the Unconquered Sun. Since there is not a scrap of support for Christmas in the Bible, which is enough to condemn it in the worship of the people of God (Leviticus 9:23-10:1; Jeremiah 7:31; Mark 7:13; Colossians 2:20-23), and, what is more, it is evidently heathen and pagan, those who sought to follow Scripture alone in their worship, such as the Baptists and the Puritans, rejected it, based on verses such as:

Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them [the heathen], after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods[.] . . . What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. (Deuteronomy 12:30-32)

Modern Baptists, and all others who profess to regulate their worship by Scripture alone, ought to follow their godly forefathers and reject the heathen festival of the Christ-Mass, along with all the extrabiblical festival days of that Roman Catholic religious system identified by John the Apostle as “BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Revelation 17:5). Instead, they ought to recall and re-embrace the blessed and Biblical Regulative Principle of worship, namely, that in the public worship of the church, whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden, so that “strange fire” is all that “which . . . the LORD . . . commanded them not” (Leviticus 10:1).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See, e. g., *History of Baptists*, John Christian, vol. 1, available at [faithsaves.net/ecclesiology](http://faithsaves.net/ecclesiology).

<sup>3</sup> Passages such as Romans 14:5-7 by no means grant permission to churches to establish any festival days, much less heathen ones. Romans 14:5-7 is speaking about the specific Old Testament feast days specifically ordained by God for Israel in the Old Testament. If a Christian Jew wished, in his own home, to continue to celebrate the Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, etc., he had the liberty to do so, although keeping the Old Testament ceremonial law was evidence of a weak faith (Romans 14:1). If a Christian Jew no longer wished to do so, as the Gentile Christians did not, that was absolutely acceptable. Romans 14:5-7 is not about giving churches liberty to legislate festival days, but about Jews who have unnecessary scruples in their consciences keeping the specifically ordained Old Testament feasts in their homes. Note that the Old Testament festival days were clearly not being celebrated in the church, for the church recognized the New Testament truth that they are fulfilled in Christ (Colossians 2:16-17) and are not for this dispensation. If Romans 14:5-7 does not justify the church’s celebration of feasts specifically ordained

The entire article from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on Christmas is reproduced, unedited and complete, below. The article on Epiphany follows immediately afterwards.

CHRISTMAS (*i. e.* the Mass of Christ), in the Christian Church, the festival of the nativity of the Jesus Christ. The history of this feast coheres so closely with that of Epiphany (*q. v.*), that what follows must be read in connexion with the article under that heading.

The earliest body of gospel tradition, represented by Mark no less than by the primitive non—Marcan document embodied in the first and third gospels, begins, not with the birth and childhood of Jesus, but with his baptism; and this order of accretion of gospel matter is faithfully reflected in the time order of the invention of feasts. The great church adopted Christmas much later than Epiphany; and before the fifth century it was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come on the calendar, whether on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, or the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, or the 25<sup>th</sup> of December.

The earliest identification of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December with the birthday of Christ is in a passage, otherwise unknown and probably spurious, of Theophilus of Antioch (A. D. 171-183), preserved in the Latin by the Magdeburg centuriators (i. 3, 118), to the effect that the Gauls contended that as they celebrated the birth of the Lord on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, whatever day of the week it might be, so they ought to celebrate the Pascha on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March when the resurrection befell.

The next mention of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December is in Hippolytus' (c. 202) commentary on Daniel iv. 23. Jesus, he says, was born at Bethlehem on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, a Wednesday, in the 42nd year of Augustus. This passage also is almost certainly interpolated. In any case he mentions no feast, nor was such a feast congruous with the orthodox ideas of that age. As late as 245 Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ "as if he were a king Pharaoh." The first certain mention of Dec. 25 is in a Latin chronographer of A. D. 354, first published entire by Mommsen.<sup>4</sup> It runs thus in English: "Year 1 after Christ, in the consulate of Caesar and Paulus, the Lord Jesus Christ was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, a Friday and 15<sup>th</sup> day of the new moon." Here again no festal celebration of the day is attested.

There were, however, many speculations in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century about the date of Christ's birth. Clement of Alexandria, towards its close, mentions several such, and condemns them as superstitions. Some chronologists, he says, alleged the birth to have occurred in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, on the 25th of Pachon, the Egyptian month, *i. e.* the 20<sup>th</sup> of May. These were probably the Basilidian gnostics. Others said it on the 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> of Pharmuthi, *i. e.* the 19th or 20th of April. Clement himself sets it on the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, 3 B. C. The author of a Latin tract, called the *De Pascha computus*, written in Africa in 243, sets it by private revelation, *ab ipso deo inspirati*, on the 28th of March. He argues that the world was created perfect, flowers in bloom, and trees in leaf, therefore in spring; also at the equinox, and when the moon just created was full. Now the

---

by God in the Old Testament, how much the less does it justify the celebration of heathen festivals such as Christmas in the church?

<sup>4</sup> In the *Abhandlungen der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1850). Note that in A. D. 1, Dec. 25 was a Sunday and not a Friday.

moon and sun were created on a Wednesday. The 28<sup>th</sup> of March suits all these considerations. Christ, therefore, being the Sun of Righteousness, was born on 28<sup>th</sup> of March. The same symbolical reasoning led Polycarp<sup>5</sup> (before 160) to set his birth on Sunday, when the world's creation began, but his baptism on Wednesday, for it was the analogue of the sun's creation. On such grounds certain Latins as early as 354 may have transferred the human birthday from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January to the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, which was then a Mithraic feast and is by the chronographer above referred to, but in another part of his compilation, termed *Natalis invicti solis*, or birthday of the unconquered Sun. Cyprian (*de orat. Dom.* 35) calls Christ *Sol verus*, Ambrose *Sol novus noster* (Sermo vii. 13), and such rhetoric was widespread. The Syrians and Armenians, who clung to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, accused the Romans of sun-worship and idolatry, contending with great probability that the feast of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December had been invented by the disciples of Cerinthus and its lections by Artemon to commemorate the *natural* birth of Jesus. Chrysostom also testifies the 25<sup>th</sup> of December to have been from the beginning known in the West, from Thrace even as far as Gades. Ambrose, *On Virgins* iii. Ch. I, writing to his sister, implies that as late as the papacy of Liberius 352-356, the Birth from the Virgin was feasted together with the Marriage of Cana and the Banquet of the 4000 (Luke ix. 13), which were never feasted on any other day but Jan. 6.

Chrysostom, in a sermon preached at Antioch on Dec. 20, 386 or 388, says that some held the feast of Dec. 25 to have been held in the West, from Thrace as far as Cadiz, from the beginning. It certainly originated in the West, but spread quickly eastwards. In 353 – 361 it was observed that the court of Constantius. Basil of Caesarea (died 379) adopted it. Honorius, emperor (395 – 423) in the West, informed his mother and brother Arcadius (395 – 408) in Byzantium of how the new feast was kept in Rome, separate from the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, with its own *troparia* and *sticharia*. They adopted it, and recommended it to Chrysostom, who had long been in favor of it. Epiphanius of Crete was won over to it, as were also the other three patriarchs, Theophilus of Alexandria, John of Jerusalem, Flavian of Antioch. This was under Pope Anastasius, 398 – 400. John or Wahan of Nice, in a letter printed by Combefis in his *Historia monothelitarum*, affords the above details. The new feast was communicated by Proculus, patriarch of Constantinople (434 – 446), to Sahak, Cataholicos of Armenia, about 440. The letter was betrayed to the Persian king, who accused Sahak of Greek intrigues, and deposed him. However, the Armenians, at least those within the Byzantine pale, adopted it for about 30 years, but finally abandoned this together with the decrees of Chalcedon early in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Many writers of the period 375 – 450, *e. g.* Epiphanius, Cassian, Asterius, Basil, Chrysostom and Jerome, contrast the new feast with that of the Baptism as that of the birth *after the flesh*, from which we infer that the latter was generally regarded as a birth according to the Spirit. Instructive as showing that the new feast traveled from West eastwards is the fact (noted by Usener) that in 387 the new feast was reckoned according to the Julian calendar by writers of the province of Asia, who in referring to other feasts use the reckoning of their local calendars. As early as 400 in Rome an imperial rescript includes Christmas among the three feasts (the others are Easter and Epiphany) on which theaters must be closed. Epiphany and Christmas were not made judicial *non dies* until 534.

---

<sup>5</sup> In a fragment preserved by an Armenian writer, Ananias of Shirak.

For some years in the West (as late as 353 in Rome) the birth feast was appended to the baptismal feast on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, and in Jerusalem it altogether supplanted it from about 360 to 440, when Bishop Juvenal introduced the feast of the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. The new feast was about the same time (440) finally established in Alexandria. The *quadragesima* of Epiphany (*i. e.* the feast of the presentation in the Temple, or *hupaponte*) continues to be celebrated in Jerusalem on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, forty days after the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, until the reign of Justinian. In most other places it had long before been put back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February to suit the new Christmas. Armenian historians describe the riots, and display of armed force, without which Justinian was not able in Jerusalem to transfer this feast from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February.

The grounds on which the Church introduced so late as 350 – 448 a Christmas feast till then unknown, or, if known, precariously linked with the baptism, seem in the main to have been the following. (1) The transition from adult to infant baptism was proceeding rapidly in the East, and in the West was well-nigh completed. Its natural complement was a festal recognition of the fact that the divine element was present in Christ from the first, and was no new stage of spiritual promotion coeval only with the descent of the Spirit upon him at baptism. The general adoption of child baptism helps to extinguish the old view that the divine life in Jesus dated from his baptism, a view which led the Epiphany feast to be regarded as that of Jesus' spiritual rebirth. This aspect of the feast was therefore forgotten, and its importance in every way diminished by the new and rival feast of Christmas. (2) The 4<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a rapid diffusion of Marcionite, or, as it was now called, Manichaean propaganda, the chief tenet of which was that Jesus either was not born at all, was a mere phantasm, or anyhow did not take the flesh of the Virgin Mary. Against this view the new Christmas was a protest, since it was peculiarly the feast of his birth in the flesh, or as a man, and is constantly spoken of as such by the fathers who witnessed its institution.

In Britain the 25<sup>th</sup> of December was a festival long before the conversion to Christianity, for Bede (*De temp. rat.* ch. 13) relates that "the ancient peoples of the Angli began the year on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December when we now celebrate the birthday of the Lord; and the very night which is now so holy to us, they called in their tongue *modranecht* (*modra niht*), that is, the mothers' night, by reason we suspect of the ceremonies which in that night-long vigil they performed." With his usual reticence about matters pagan or not orthodox, Bede abstains from recording who the mothers were and what the ceremonies. In 1644 the English puritans forbade any merriment or religious services by act of Parliament, on the ground that it was a heathen festival, and ordered it to be kept as a fast. Charles II. revived the feast, but the Scots adhered to the Puritan view.

Outside Teutonic countries Christmas presents are unknown. Their places taken in Latin countries by the *strenae*, French *etrennes*, given on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January; this was in antiquity a great holiday, wherefore until late in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Christians kept it as a day of fasting and gloom. The setting up in the Latin churches of a Christmas *crèche* is said to have been originated by St Francis.

AUTHORITIES.—K. A. H. Kellner, *Heortologie* (Freiburg im Br., 1906), with Bibliography; Hospinianus, *De festis Christianorum* (Genevac, 1574); Edw. Martene, *De Antiquis Ecclesia Ritibus*, iii. 31 (Bassani, 1788); J. C. W. Augusti, *Christl. Archaeologie*, vols. i. and v. (Leipzig, 1817-1831); A. J. Binterim, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, v. pt. i. p. 528 (Mainz, 1825 &c.); Ernst Friedrich Wernsdorf, *De originibus Solemnum Natalis Christi*

(Wittenberg, 1757, and in J. E. Volbeding, *Thesaurus Commentationum*, Lipsiae, 1847); Anton. Bynaeus, *De Natali Jesu Christi* (Amsterdam, 1689); Hermann Usener, *Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Bonn, 1889); Nik. Nilles, S. J., *Kalendarium Manuale* (Innsbruck, 1896); L. Duchesne, *Origines de culte chretien* (3<sup>e</sup> ed., Paris, 1889). (F. C. C.) (pgs. 293-294, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. VI. New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1911).

EPIPHANY, FEAST OF. The word epiphany, in Greek, signifies an apparition of a divine being. It was used as a singular or a plural both in its Greek and Latin forms, according as one epiphany was contemplated or several united in a single commemoration. For in the East from an early time were associated with the feast of the Baptism of Christ commemorations of the physical birth, of the Star of the Magi, of the miracles of Cana, and of the feeding of the five thousand. The commemoration of the Baptism was also called by the Greek Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Theophany or Theophanies, and the Day of Lights, *i. e.* of the Illumination of Jesus or of the Light which shone in the Jordan. In the Teutonic West it has become the Festival of the three Kings (*i. e.* the Magi), or simply Twelfth day. Leo the Great called it the feast of the *Declaration*; Fulgentius, of the *Manifestation*; others, of the *Apparition* of Christ.

In the following article it is attempted to ascertain the date of institution of the Epiphany feast, its origin, and its significance and development.

Clement of Alexandria first mentions it. Writing *c.* 194 he states that the Basilidians feasted the day of the Baptism, devoting the whole night which preceded it to lections of the scriptures. They fixed it in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius, on the 15<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> of the month Tobi, dates of the Egyptian fixed calendar equivalent to January 10<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>. When Clement wrote the great church had not adopted the feast, but toward A. D. 300 it was widely in vogue. Thus the Acts of Philip the Martyr, bishop of Heraclea in Thrace, A.D. 304, mention the "holy day of the Epiphany." Note the singular. Origen seems not to have heard of it as a feast of the Catholic church, but Hippolytus (died *c.* 235) recognized it in a homily which may be genuine.

In the age of the Nicene Council, A.D. 325, the primate of Alexandria was charged at every Epiphany Feast to announce to the churches in a "Festal Letter" the date of the forthcoming Easter. Several such letters written by Athanasius and others remain. In the churches so addressed the feast of Jan. 6 must have been already current.

In Jerusalem, according to the Epistle of Macarius<sup>6</sup> to the Armenians, *c.* 330, the feast was kept with zeal and splendour, and was with Easter and Pentecost a favorite season for Baptism.

We have evidence of the 4<sup>th</sup> century from Spain that a long fast marked the season of Advent, and prepared for the feast of Epiphany on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. The council of Saragossa *c.* 380 enacted that for 21 days, from the 17<sup>th</sup> of December to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, the Epiphany, the faithful should not dance or make merry, but steadily frequent the churches. The synod of Lerida in 524 went further and forbade marriages during Advent. Our earliest Spanish lectionary, the *Liber comicus* of Toledo, edited by Don Morin (*Anec. Maredsol.* vol. i), provides lections for five Sundays in Advent, and the

---

<sup>6</sup> For its text see *The Key of Truth*, translated by F. C. Conybeare, Oxford, and the article ARMENIAN CHURCH.

gospel lections<sup>7</sup> chosen regard the Baptism of Christ, not His Birth, of which the feast, like that of the Annunciation, is mentioned, but not yet dated, December 25 being assigned to St Stephen. It is odd that for “the Apparition of the Lord” the lection Matt. ii. 1-15 is assigned, although the lections for Advent belong to a scheme which identified Epiphany with the Baptism. This anomaly we account for below. The old editor of the Mozarabic Liturgy, Fr. Antonio Lorenzani, notes in his preface §28 that the Spaniards anciently terminated the Advent season with the Epiphany feast. In Rome also the earliest fixed system of the ecclesiastical year, which may go back to 300, makes Epiphany the *caput festorum* or chief of feasts. The Sundays of Advent lead up to it, and the first Sundays of the year are “The Sunday within the octave of Epiphany,” “the first Sunday after,” and so forth. December 25 is no critical data at all. In Armenia as early as 450 a month of fasting prepared for the Advent of the Lord at Epiphany, and the fast was interpreted as a reiteration of John the Baptist’s season of Repentance.

In Antioch as late as about 386 Epiphany and Easter were the two great feasts, and the physical Birth of Christ was not yet feasted. On the eve of Epiphany after nightfall the springs and rivers were blessed, and water was drawn from them and stored for the whole year to be used in lustrations and baptisms. Such water, says Chrysostom, to whose orations we owe the information, kept pure and fresh for one, two and three years, and like good wine actually improved it the longer it was kept. Note that Chrysostom speaks of the Feast of the *Epiphanyes*, implying two, one of the Baptism, the other of the Second Advent, when Christ will be manifested afresh, and we with him in glory. This Second Epiphany inspired, as we saw, the choice of Pauline lections in the *Liber comicus*. But the salient event commemorated was the Baptism, and Chrysostom almost insists on this as the exclusive significance of the feast: – “It was not when he was born that he became manifest to all, but when he was baptized.” In his commentary on Ezekiel Jerome employs the same language *absconditus est et non apparuit*, by way of protest against an interpretation of the Feast as that of the Birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, which was essayed as early as 375 by Epiphanius in Cyprus, and was being enforced in Jerome’s day by John, bishop of Jerusalem. Epiphanius boldly removed the date of the Baptism to the 8<sup>th</sup> of November. “January 6” (=Tobi 11), he writes, “is the day of Christ’s birth, that is, of the Epiphanyes.” She uses the plural, because he adds on January 6 the commemoration of the water miracle of Cana. Although in 375 he thus protested that January 6 was the day “of the Birth after the Flesh,” he became before the end of the century a convert, according to John of Nice, to the new opinion – December 25 was the real day of this Birth. That as early as about 385, January 6 was capped as the physical birthday in Jerusalem, or rather in Bethlehem, we know from a contemporary witness of it, the lady pilgrim of Gaul, whose *peregrinatio*, recently discovered by Gamurrini, is confirmed by the old Jerusalem Lectionary preserved in Armenian.<sup>8</sup> Ephraem the Syrian father is attested already by Epiphanius (c. 375) to have celebrated the physical birth on January 6. His genuine Syriac hymns confirm this, but prove that the Baptism, the Star of the Magi, and the Marriage at Cana were also commemorated on the same day. That’s the same in union prevailed in Rome up to the year 354 may be inferred from Ambrose.

---

<sup>7</sup> These are Matt. iii. 1-11, ci. 2-15, xxi 1-9; Mark i. 1-8; Luke iii. 1-18. The Pauline lections regard the Epiphany of the Second Advent, of the prophetic or Messianic kingdom.

<sup>8</sup> Translated in *Rituale Armenorum* (Oxford, 1905).

Philastrius (*De haer.* Ch. 140) notes that some abolished the Epiphany feast and substituted a Birth feast. This was between 370 and 390.

In 385 Pope Siricius<sup>9</sup> calls January 6 *Natalicia*, “the Birthday of Christ or of Apparition,” and protests against the Spanish custom (at Tarragona) of baptizing on that day – another group that in Spain in the 4<sup>th</sup> century it commemorated the Baptism. In Gaul at Vienna in 360 Julian the Apostate, out of deference to Christian feeling, went to church “on the festival which they keep in January and call Epiphania.” So Ammianus; but Zonaras in his Greek account of the event calls it the day of the Saviour’s Birth.

Why the feast of the Baptism was called the feast or day of the Saviour’s Birth, and why the fathers of that age when they call Christmas the birthday constantly qualify and add the words “in the flesh,” we are able to divine from Pope Leo’s (c. 447) 18<sup>th</sup> Epistle to the bishops of Sicily. For here we learn that in Sicily they held that in His Baptism the Saviour was reborn through the Holy Spirit. “The Lord,” protests Leo, “needed no remission of sins, no remedy of rebirth.” The Sicilians also baptized neophytes on January 6, “because baptism conveyed to Jesus and to them one and the same grace.” Not so, argues Leo, the Lord sanctioned and hollowed the power of regeneration, not when He was baptized, but “when the blood of redemption and the water of baptism flowed from his side.” Neophytes should therefore be baptized at Easter and Pentecost alone, never at Epiphany.

Fortune has preserved to us among the *Spuria* of several Latin fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Maximus of Turin, various homilies for Sundays of the Advent fast and for Epiphany. The Advent lections of these homilists were much the same as those of the Spanish *Liber comicus*; and they insist on Advent being kept as a strict fast, without marriage celebrations. Their Epiphany lection is however Matt. iii. 1-17, which must therefore have once on a time been assigned in the *Liber comicus* also in harmony with its general scheme. The psalms used on that day are, cxiii. (cxiv.) “When Israel went forth,” xxviii. (xxix.) “Give unto the Lord,” and xxii. (xxiii.) “the Lord is my Shepherd.” The same lection of Matthew and also Ps. xxix. are noted for Epiphany in the Greek oration for the day ascribed to Hippolytus, which is at least earlier than 300, and also in special old Epiphany rites for the Benediction of the waters found in Latin, Greek, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, &c. Now by these homilists as by Chrysostom,<sup>10</sup> the Baptism is regarded as the occasion on which “the Saviour first *appeared* after the flesh in the world or on earth.” These words were classical to the homilists, who explained them as best they can. The baptism is also declared to have been “the consecration of Christ,” and “the regeneration of Christ and a strengthening of our faith,” to have been “Christ’s second nativity.” “This *second birth* hath more renown than his first . . . for now the God of majesty is inscribed (as his father), but then (at his first birth) Joseph the Carpenter was assumed to be his father . . . he hath more honour cries aloud from Heaven (viz. God the Father), then he who labours upon earth” (viz. Joseph).<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Epist. Ad Himericum, c. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Hom. I. in Pentec. *Op.* tom. II. 458; “With us the Epiphany is the first festival. What is the festival’s significance? This, that God was seen upon earth and consorted with men.” For this idea there had soon to be substituted that of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

<sup>11</sup> See the Paris edition of Augustine (1838), tom. v., Appendix, *Sermons* cxvi., cxxxv., cxxvi., cxxxvii.; cf. tom. vi. *Dial. Quaestionum*, xlvi.; Maximus of Turin, Homily xxx.

Similarly the old *ordo Romanus* of the age of Pepin (given by Montfalcon in his preface to the Mozaarabic missal in Migne, *Patr. Latina*, 85, col. 46), under the rubric of the Vigil of the Theophany, insists that “the *second birth* of Christ (in Baptism) being distinguished by so many mysteries (e.g. the miracle of Cana) is more honoured than the first” (birth from Mary).

These homilies mostly belong to an age (? 300 – 400) when the commemoration of the physical Birth had not yet found its own day (Dec. 25), and was therefore added alongside of the Baptism on January 6. Thus the two Births, the physical and the spiritual, of Jesus were celebrated on one and the same day, and one homily contains the words: “Not yet is the feast of his origin fully completed, and already we have to celebrate the solemn commemoration of his Baptism. He has hardly been born humanwise, and already he is being *reborn* in sacramental wise. For to-day, though after a lapse of many annual cycles, he was hollowed (or consecrated) in Jordan. So the Lord arranged as to link rite with rite; I mean, in such wise as to be brought forth through the Virgin and to be begotten through the mystery (*i. e.* sacrament) in one and the same season.” Another homily preserved in a MS. of the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century and assigned to Maximus of Turin declares that the Epiphany was known as the Birthday of Jesus, either because He was then born of the Virgin or *reborn in baptism*. This also was the classical defence made by Armenian fathers of their custom of keeping the feast of the Birth and Baptism together on January 6. They argued from Luke’s gospel that the Annunciation took place on April 6, and therefore the Birth on January 6. The Baptism was on Christ’s 30th birthday, and should therefore be also on January 6. Cosmas Indicopleustes (*c.* 550) relates that on the same ground believers of Jerusalem joined the feasts. All such reasoning was of course *après coup*. As late as the 9<sup>th</sup> century the Armenians had at least three discrepant dates for the Annunciation – January 5, January 9, April 6; and of these January 5 and 9 were older than April 6, which they perhaps borrowed from Epiphanius’s commentary on the Gospels. The old Latin homilist, above quoted, hits the mark when he declares that the innate logic of things required the Baptism (which must, he says, be any how called a *natalis* or birth festival) to fall on the same day as Christmas – *Ratio enim exigit*. Of the argument from the 6<sup>th</sup> of April as the date of the Annunciation he knows nothing. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Armenian Patriarch Nerses, like this homilist, merely rests his case against the Greeks, who incessantly reproached the Armenians for ignoring their Christmas on December 25, on the inherent logic of things, as follows:

“Just as he was born after the flesh from the holy virgin, so he was *born* through baptism and from the Jordan, by way of example unto us. And since there are here *two births*, albeit differing one from the other in mystic import and in point of time, therefore it was appointed that we should feast them together, as the first, so also the second birth.”

The Epiphany feast had therefore in its own right acquired the name of *natalis dies* or birthday, as commemorating the spiritual rebirth of Jesus in Jordan, before the *natalis in carne*, the Birthday *in the flesh*, as Jerome and others call it, was associated with it. This idea was condemned as Ebionite in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, yet it influences Christian writers long before and long afterwards. So Tertullian says: “We little fishes (*pisciculi*), after the example of our great fish (ἰχθύς) Jesus Christ the Lord, are born again (*gignimur*) in the water, nor except by abiding in the water are we in a state of salvation.” And Hillary, like the Latin homilists cited above, rights of Jesus that “he was *born again* through baptism, and then became Son of God,” adding that the Father cried, when he had gone up out of the water, “My Son art thou, I have this day begotten thee” (Luke iii. 22). “but this,” he

adds, “was the begetting of a man who is being reborn; on that occasion too he himself was being reborn unto God to be perfect son; as he was son of man, so in baptism, he was constituted son of God as well.” The idea frequently meets us in Hilary; it occurs in the Epiphany hymn of the orthodox Greek church, and in the Epiphany hymns and homilies of the Armenians.

A letter is preserved by John of Nice of a bishop of Jerusalem to the bishop of Rome which attests a temporary union of both feasts on January 6 in the holy places. The faithful, it says, met before dawn at Bethlehem to celebrate the Birth from the Virgin in the cave; but before their hymns and lections were finished they had to hurry off to Jordan, 13 m. the other side of Jerusalem, to celebrate the Baptism and by consequence neither commemoration could be kept fully and reverently. The writer therefore begs the pope to look in the archives of the Jews brought to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem, and to ascertain from them the real date of Christ’s birth. The pope looked in the works of Josephus and found it to be December 25. The letter’s genuineness has been called in question; but revealing as it does the Church’s ignorance of the date of the Birth, the inconvenience and precariousness of its association with the Baptism, the recency of its separate institution, it could not have been invented. It is too tell-tale a document. Not the least significant fact about it is that it views the Baptism as an established feast which cannot be altered and set on another date. It has been shown above that perhaps as early as 380 the difficulty was got over in Jerusalem by making the Epiphany wholly and solely a commemoration of the miraculous birth, and suppressing the commemoration of the Baptism. Therefore this letter must have been written – or, if invented, then invented before that date. Chrysostom seems to have known of it, for in his Epiphany homily preached at Antioch, *c.* 392 (op. vol. ii. 354, ed. Montf.) he refers to the archives at Rome as the source from which the date December 25 could be confirmed, and declares that he had obtained it from those who dwell there, and who observing it from the beginning and by old tradition, had communicated it to the East. The question arises why the feast of the Baptism was set on January 6 by the sect of Basilides? And why the great church adopted the date? Now we know what sort of considerations influenced this sect in fixing other feasts, so we may have a clue. They fixed the Birth of Jesus on Pachon 25 (= May 20), the day of the Niloa, or feast of the descent of the Nile from heaven. We should thus expect January 6 to be equally a Nile festival. And this from various sources we know it was. On Tobi 11, says Epiphanius<sup>12</sup> (*c.* 370), every one draws up water from the river and stores it up, not only in Egypt itself, but in many other countries. In many places, he adds, springs and rivers turn into wine on this day, *e. g.* at Cibyra in Caria and Gerasa in Arabia. Aristides Rhetor (*c.* 160) also relates how in the winter, which began with Tobi, the Nile water was at its purest. Its water, he says, if drawn at the right time conquers time, for it does not go bad, whether you keep it on the spot or export it. Galleys were waiting on a certain night to take it on board and transport it to Italy and elsewhere for libations and lustrations in the Temples of Isis. “Such water,” he adds, “remained fresh, long after other water supplies had gone bad. The Egyptians filled their pitchers with this water, as others did with wine; they stored it in their houses for three or four years or more, and recommended it the more, the older it grew, just as the Greeks did their wines.”

---

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Epiphanius is here, after his wont, transcribing an earlier source.

Two centuries later Chrysostom, as we have seen, commands in identical terms of water blessed and drawn from the rivers at the Baptismal feast. It is therefore probable that the Basilidian feast was a Christianized form of the blessing of the Nile, called by Chabas in his Coptic calendar *Hydreusis*. Mas'udi the Arab historian of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in his *Prairies d'or* (French trans. Paris, 1863, ii. 364), enlarges on the splendors of this feast as he saw it still celebrated in Egypt.

Epiphanius also (*Haer.* 51) relates a curious celebration held at Alexandria of the Birth of the Aeon. On January 5 or 6 the votaries met in the holy compound or Temple of the Maiden (Kore), and sang hymns to the music of the flute till dawn, when they went down with torches into a shrine under ground, and fetched up a wooden idol on a bier representing Kore, seated and naked, with crosses marked on her brow, her hands and her knees. Then with flute-playing, hymns and dances they carried the image seven times round the central shrine, before restoring it again to its dwelling-place below. He adds: "And the votaries of say that to-day at this hour *Kore*, that is, the Virgin, gave birth to the Aeon."

Epiphanius says this was a heathen rite, but it rather resembles some Basilidian or Gnostic commemoration of the spiritual birth of the Divine life in Jesus of the Christhood, from the older creation the Ecclesia.

The earliest extant Greek text of the Epiphany rite is in a Euchologion of about the year 795, now in the Vatican. The prayers recite that at His baptism Christ hallowed the waters by His presence in Jordan,<sup>13</sup> and ask that they may now be blessed by the Holy Spirit visiting them, by its power and inworking, as the streams of Jordan were blessed. So they will be able to purify soul and body of all who draw up and partake of them. The hymn sung contains such clauses as these:

"To-day the grace of the Holy Spirit hallowing the waters appears (*ἐπιφαινέται*, cf. Epiphany) . . . To-day the systems of waters spread out their backs under the Lord's footsteps. To-day the unseen is seen, that he may reveal himself to us. To-day the Increate is of his own will ordained (*lit.* hath hands laid on him) by his own creature. To-day the Unbending bends his neck to his own servant, in order to free us from servitude. To-day we were liberated from darkness and are illumined by the light of divine knowledge. To-day for us the Lord by means of rebirth (*lit.* palingenesis) of the Image reshapes the Archetype."

This last clause is obscure. In the Armenian hymns the ideas of the rebirth not only of believers, but of Jesus, and of the latter's ordination by John, are very prominent.

The history of the Epiphany feast may be summed up thus: –

From the Jews the Church took over the feasts of Pascha and Pentecost; and Sunday was a weekly commemoration of the Resurrection. It was inevitable, however, that believers should before long desire to commemorate the Baptism, with which the oldest form of evangelical tradition began, and which was widely regarded as the occasion when the divine life began in Jesus; when the Logos or Holy Spirit appeared and rested on Him, conferring upon Him spiritual unction as the promised Messiah; when, according to an old reading of Luke iii. 22, He was begotten of God. Perhaps the Ebionite Christians of Palestine first instituted the feast, and this, if a fact, must underlie the statement of John of Nice, a late but well-informed writer (*c.* 950), that it was fixed by the disciples of John the Baptist who were present at Jesus' Baptism. The Egyptian gnostics anyhow had the feast and set it on January 6, a day of the blessing of the Nile. It was a feast of Adoptionist complexion, as one of its names, viz. the Birthday (Greek

---

<sup>13</sup> The same idea is frequent in Epiphany homilies of Chrysostom and other 4<sup>th</sup>-century fathers.

γενέθλια, Latin *Natalicia* or *Natalis dies*), implies. This explains why in east and west the feast of the physical Birth was for a time associated with it; and to justify this association it was suggested that Jesus was baptized just on His thirtieth birthday. In Jerusalem and Syria it was perhaps the Ebionite or Adoptionist, we may add also the Gnostic, associations of the Baptism that caused this aspect of Epiphany to be relegated to the background, so that it became wholly a feast of the miraculous birth. At the same time other epiphanies of Christ were superadded, *e. g.* of Cana where Christ began His miracles by turning water into wine and *manifested* forth His glory, and of the Star of the Magi. Hence it is often called the Feast of *Epiphanies* (in the plural). In the West today is commonly called the Feast of the three kings, and its early significance as a commemoration of the Baptism and season of blessing the waters has been obscured; the Eastern churches, however, of Greece, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Egypt, Syria have been more conservative. In the far East it is still the season of seasons for baptisms, and in Armenia children born long before are baptized at it. Long ago it was a baptismal feast in Sicily, Spain, Italy (see Pope Gelasius to the Lucanian Bishops), Africa and Ireland. In the Manx prayer-book of Bishop Phillips of the year 1610 Epiphany is called the “little Nativity” (*La nolicky bigge*), and the Sunday which comes between December 25 and January 6 is “the Sunday between *the two Nativities*,” of *Jih duni oedyr 'a Nolick*; Epiphany itself is the “feast of the water vessel,” *lail ymmyrt uyskey*, or “of the well of water,” *Chibbyrt uysky*.

AUTHORITIES.—Gregory Nazianz., Orat. Xli.; Suicer, *Thesaurus*, s. v. ἐπιφάνεια; Cotelerius *In constit. Apost.* (Antwerp, 1698), lib. V. cap. 13; R. Bingham, *Antiquities* (London, 1834), bk. Xx.; Ad. Jacoby, *Bericht über die Taufe Jesu* (Strassburg, 1902); H. Blumenbach, *Antiquitates Epiphaniarum* (Leipzig, 1737); J. L. Schulze, *De festo Sanctorum Luminum*, ed. J. E. Volbeding (Leipzig, 1841); and K. A. H. Kellner, *Heortologie* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1906). (See also the works enumerated under CHRISTMAS.) (F. C. C.) (pgs. 695-698, *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., vol. IX. New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1910)