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The Genesis of Christmas.

By Jane A. Stewart.

IT IS always an interesting task to trace back a stream to its sources. The festival of Christmas had its rise in the dim shadows of the groves of the Druids, who knew not Christ. It sprang forth, a pure lotos lily, from the mire of the great heathen Saturnalia, or winter carnivals. For many years the festival of the nativity was a movable one, celebrated in April and May. About 220, A.D., the Eastern Church kept the 6th of January in commemoration of both the birth and the baptism of Christ. But the Western Church it seems, chose rather to observe the week of the winter solstice.

In common with many other church red-letter days, the cause that influenced the fixing of the Christmas festival at this period was the fact that most of the heathen nations of Europe regarded the winter solstice as the time when nature took on renewed life and vigor. At this part of the year, too, the sun is nearest the earth; and then occurred those hoary rites common among our rude ancestors, which had their origin in a species of sun worship. Strange to say, before the end of the fourth century the Eastern and the Western Christians had exchanged dates, the Eastern Church adopting December 25th.

It was Pope Gregory the Great who said: The heathen festivals must gradually be changed into Christian ones, and the Christian festivals must imitate those of the time before Christ." In this remark he revealed the genesis of the Christmas festival of today. The Saturnalia, the Juvenalia, and the Brumalia of Italy were transmuted into and sanctified by the establishment of the Christian cycle of Christmas observance. And if, in Latin countries, the heathen winter holidays have been turned into a celebration of the nativity, there is little doubt that the old Jul festival of the Teutonic races was the foundation for the German observance. The Jul festival, like the Saturnalia, was the greatest feast of the ancient Germans. It began on December 24th and ended on January 6th. It was the time dedicated to the greatest god of the heathens—Wodan. This

was the old Germans' "god of heaven," who blessed the fields and gave victory; who was worshipped as the giver of good things.

It is generally understood that the true date of Christ's birth cannot be ascertained from the New Testament, nor from any other source. But all controversy as to the date was happily terminated in the fourth century by the decision of Pope Julius, who had an investigation made by St. Cyril, and became fully satisfied that, as nearly as could be ascertained, December 25th

was the correct date. Before the end of the fourth century the dictum was universally accepted, and since that time nobody has ever seriously thought of seeking to change the date.

The observance of the festival of the Nativity was from the beginning called Christmas (Christ-mass), because a special mass was celebrated on that day. The pure glow of the spiritual festival dissipated the dark clouds of licentious and wicked ceremonies that marked the notorious Roman Saturnalia; but the Christian observance,

while exterminating the evils of the heathen festival which it displaced, permitted many of the pleasing and innocent features to remain. Among these are customs which survive in the twentieth century—the decorating with evergreens, holly and laurel; the burning of the Yule log, and the singing of Christmas carols, which are the evolution of the ancient hymns of praise to Saturn and Bacchus and other heathen gods.

It was not until the sixth century that the whole of Christendom united in keeping Christmas on the same day. The reasons for this delay in instituting the feast are summed up by an authority who explains that, in the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost; second, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in gospel history, and cannot certainly be determined; third, that the church lingered at first about the death and resurrection of Christ, the completed fact of redemption, and made this the centre of the weekly worship and the church year; and fourth, that the earlier feast of Epiphany afforded a substitute for the festival of the Nativity.

In seeking for light on the genesis of Christmas, one is led to dwell irresistibly on the initial Christmas, which gave to the world the Saviour of men. The story of that first memorable Christmas is probably the most beautiful of any recounted among men. Aside from its tremendous religious significance, as a beginning of a new era in the spiritual life of men, it is unequalled in its impression upon the poetic, imaginative, and romantic instincts. Imagination, it is safe to say, has never invented scenes so lovely and appealing as those of the holy night at Bethlehem. The shepherds keeping watch over the temple flocks by night; the angels breaking from the sky to herald the tidings of great joy; the sudden descent of a multitude of the heavenly host hymning the "Gloria in Excelsis"; the manger, the Mother and the Babe—in these things, with the star and the visit of the kings with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, are revealed a transcendent panorama and an inexhaustible fount of inspiration, to charm and attract the hearts and minds of men in all ages.

For Such as Are in Sorrow

A Christmas Prayer

By George Hodges, D. D.

O Father of mercies and God of all comfort, behold how we sit solitary in the midst of gladness. While our neighbors keep the feast with merry hearts, Thou seest how our souls are filled with grief. Bless us also, O our Father, with a Christmas blessing.

We remember, Lord, the shepherds, how they watched their flocks in the chill night under the black sky. Thou didst open Heaven's gate; Thou didst send a multitude of angels, shining and singing round about them, with messages of peace. Lighten now, O Father, our most bitter darkness; speak to our souls.

We remember, Lord, the strangers, how they came on their long journey, friendless and bewildered, out of the way, knowing not whither they went. Thou didst shine upon them with the star of wonder, setting them in the right path, giving them great joy, and bringing them into the presence of the King. We, too, O Father, have lost our way. Guide us, we pray Thee; show us Thy star of hope.

We remember, Lord, the stable at Bethlehem, how the holy mother came there very weary, in distress and pain, finding a forlorn lodging. Thou didst glorify the place. Thou didst change sorrow into joy, and darkness into light eternal. Visit, O Father, our poverty of soul, our weariness and weakness; O visit us with Thy salvation.

Thou Thyself didst come, O Lord, as on this day, to live our life; help us now to live it, when it is very hard. Thou hast borne our sicknesses and carried our sorrows; we are heavy laden, and Thou hast promised rest. Lift us up, bless us with courage, strengthen our faith. We are in tribulation, Lord, in a world which we cannot understand. But Thou dost understand; Thou hast overcome even death itself. Teach us, O Lord, the lesson of Thy consolation; grant us Thy peace; help us to enter into the Christmas joy.