

# PRE–AD 196 CHRISTMAS DATE? DECEMBER 25 AND THE *EPISTLE OF THEOPHILUS*

*Kurt M. Simmons*

## ABSTRACT

*The earliest reputed reference to the Christmas date occurs in the so-called Epistle of Theophilus. Although clearly not derived from Theophilus, the historical recitals in its prologue are recognized as accurate. The sole contested exception is the occurrence of the Christmas date, reportedly observed by the Gauls before AD 196. This article argues that there is no basis to reject this account, particularly in light of the occurrence of the Christmas date in Africanus and Hippolytus about thirty years later.*

**T**he *Epistle of Theophilus*, more properly known as the *Council of Caesarea concerning the Pascha*, or the *Acta Synodi* for short, purports to be an account of the Council of Caesarea of about AD 196 to establish a uniform rule for the observance of the Christian Pascha (Passover), commonly known as “Easter.”<sup>1</sup> The document exists in no less than thirty-six manuscripts and four recensions.<sup>2</sup> The two main versions are Recension A (long version),

---

Kurt M. Simmons holds a juris doctorate, is a licensed attorney, and has served in ministry as a full-time pastor.

<sup>1</sup> Bede gives the following account for the term “Easter”: “Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated ‘Paschal month’, and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.” *The Reckoning of Time*, trans. Faith Wallis, Translated Texts for Historians 29 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, “Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656) and the History of the Easter Controversy,” in *Late Antique Calendrical Thought and Its Reception in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Immo Warntjes and Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 26 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 318.

published by Étienne Baluze in 1683, and Recension B (short version), published by Johannes Bronkhorst in 1537.<sup>3</sup> Recension A contains a reference to the Christmas date when it credits the Gauls with saying, “But as we keep the nativity of the Lord on whatsoever day December 25 falls, we also ought to keep the Pascha March 25, when according to tradition the resurrection of Christ occurred.”<sup>4</sup> This reference, if authentic, bears witness to the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 prior to AD 196, making it arguably the earliest witness we possess.<sup>5</sup>

The document in all of its versions is widely regarded as an Irish forgery, written in about AD 600 in defense of Irish customs regarding the proper limits for observing Easter, which were finally resolved by the Council of Whitby in 663.<sup>6</sup> Recension A refers to Eusebius and therefore cannot, at least in that part, be earlier than the fourth century or purport to be from the hand of Theophilus. Recension B does not include a reference to Eusebius or the Christmas date; it is also the more widely attested. It is unclear which recension has the better claim to priority. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine why an editor would add information naming Eusebius. On the other hand, if someone wanted to create the impression the document originated with Theophilus, as was believed by Bede and many others, it is easy to see why someone might remove it.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, since the Christmas date is mentioned only in passing and defending the date is not part of the epistle’s purpose, it is difficult to see why an editor would add it. But it is not difficult to see why it might be removed.

The Pascha followed the full moon, so the Pascha occurred at different times from year to year, moving within a thirty-day window governed by the lunar cycle. This made it difficult to calculate

---

3 Étienne Baluze, *Nova collectio conciliorum* (Muguet, 1683), columns 13–16; and Johannes Bronkhorst, *Beda Venerabilis: Opuscula complura de temporum ratione diligenter castigate* (Quentel, 1537).

4 Paul de Lagarde, *Mittheilungen* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1889), 4:274–82 (author’s translation). See also S. Isidori, Hispalensis Episcopi, *Opera Omnia* (Rome: Fulgoni, 1798), 3:515–18.

5 “Theophilus, who lived about the time of Emperors Commodus and Severus, made first mention of it that I know for certain.” Rudolph Hospinian, *De festis christianorum tractus* (Geneva, 1674), 168 (author’s translation).

6 Bruno Krusch, *Studien zur christlich-mittelalterlichen Chronologie* (Leipzig: Verlag, 1880), 303–10; and Bartholomew MacCarthy, ed., *Annals of Ulster* (Dublin: Alex. Thom & Co., 1901), 4:cxv.

7 Bede, *Reckoning of Time*, 47. For Eusebius’s account of the history of the paschal controversy, see *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.23–25.

when Easter Sunday would occur. Easter computists labored for centuries to find the best cycle that would accurately predict the date decades in advance so that churches worldwide could observe it on the same day.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty involved with the Easter computus doubtless made celebrating Pascha on a fixed day in the solar calendar, March 25, attractive, which was the practice adopted by the Gauls. Moreover, to follow the moon seemed “Jewish” to them. That they could appeal to the fixed date of the nativity as December 25 would have tended to confirm the propriety of celebrating the resurrection on a fixed day each year. After all, all dates in the Jewish lunar calendar change from year to year vis-à-vis the solar calendar, including the day of Jesus’s birth. In 2 BC when Jesus was most likely born,<sup>9</sup> December 25 in the Julian calendar correlates to Tevet 28 in the Jewish calendar. The next year, 1 BC, was a leap year with thirteen months, or 384 days in the Jewish system.<sup>10</sup> This extra thirty days pushed Tevet 28 into the following

---

<sup>8</sup> See Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Luke 3:23 says Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday when baptized in the autumn of AD 29; this would place his birth in 2 BC. The church fathers were all but unanimous that Jesus was born in the forty-second year of Augustus Caesar (e.g., 2 BC) based on Luke. Those who give a different year for the nativity do so because of how they reckon the reign of Augustus, not because they believe Jesus was born in a different Julian year. For example, Tertullian (*Adv. Jud.* 7.8) and Clement Alexandria (*Strom.* 2.1.21) placed Christ’s birth in the forty-first year of Augustus, when he had been reigning twenty-eight years from the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra (30 BC). This may be compared with their regnal dates for Augustus. If dated from the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the forty-first year of Augustus would be 3 BC—a contradiction. But if dated from the Second Triumvirate, formed November 27, 43 BC, by the enactment of the *Lex Titia*, this would point to 2 BC. Contradiction resolved. Identical results are found in works by Irenaeus, Africanus, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius, and Epiphanius. The notion that Christ was born between 4–6 BC is a modern error that did not attain academic standing until the publication of Emil Schürer’s *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. and ed. Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar (1896; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), 1:281n3, 284n11, 327n1. Schürer proposed that Herod the Great died in 4 BC. However, this has been all but refuted by recent scholarship; see W. E. Filmer, “The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 17.2 (1966): 283–98; Ernest L. Martin, “The Nativity and Herod’s Death,” in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), 85–92; Ernest L. Martin, *The Star That Astonished the World*, 2nd ed. (Portland: ASK Publications, 1996), 119–55; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), 298–301; and Andrew E. Steinmann, “When Did Herod the Great Reign?,” *Novum Testamentum* 51.1 (2009): 1–29. The present trend of scholarship is to place Herod’s death in 1 BC, consistent with Luke.

<sup>10</sup> Twelve lunar cycles are completed in 354 days, eleven days shorter than the

Julian year, corresponding to January 13, AD 1 (e.g., there was no Tevet 28 in 1 BC). In AD 2, it fell back to January 1;<sup>11</sup> in AD 3 (another leap year), it leaped ahead to January 20, and so forth.<sup>12</sup> This gives a sense of the complexity of correlating dates in a lunar calendar. If rather than commemorating the nativity on its day in the Jewish calendar it could be fixed to a single date in the solar calendar, why not also the Pascha?<sup>13</sup> Arguments such as these may have prompted removing the reference to December 25, lest the simplicity and precedent of the fixed date for the one dissuade men from adopting the difficult, moveable date for the other. However, in the final analysis, determining which recension is the original is not a deciding factor regarding the historical accuracy of the Christmas date. Indeed, for present purposes, even if we assume that the reference to Christmas is not original, this will not affect the question of its veracity, which is separate from its originality.

The opening paragraph of the *Epistle of Theophilus* provides the historical background leading to the council. The rest of the document is a dialogue between Theophilus and the bishops of the council. As a literary form, dialogue is an exposition by means of *invented conversation* often consisting of contrasting or conflicting

---

solar year. To bring the two back into sync, an extra month of thirty days (“Adar II”) was added seven times in nineteen years. December 25, 2 BC + 365 - 11 + 30 = January 13, 1 BC.

<sup>11</sup> The Julian calendar was initiated in 45 BC and had a leap year every third year thereafter until AD 12, when Augustus reformed the calendar to intercalate a leap year every four years. By that rubric, AD 1 was a leap year in the Julian calendar, so twelve days, rather than eleven, come between lunar and solar calendars (366 - 354 = 12). This accounts for Tevet 28 corresponding to January 1, AD 2, whereas it would otherwise be January 2.

<sup>12</sup> Scott E. Lee, Rosetta Calendar, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.rosetta-calendar.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> The difference, of course, is that the first day of the week has a special significance within the New Testament as the day of Christ’s resurrection. From the start, it was the day of the common assembly of believers and observance of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:17–34; 16:1–2). Because a fixed date in the solar calendar might fall on any day of the week, an annual observance of the Pascha based on a solar calendar was thought to conflict with the special significance attached to Sunday and the resurrection. Eusebius said the bishops all agreed that “the mystery of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead could be celebrated on no day save Sunday, and that on that day alone we should celebrate the end of the paschal fast.” *Ecclesiastical History: Volume 1: Books 1–5*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library 153 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 503–5. Nevertheless, liturgical writers tend to agree that the Quartodeciman Pascha was originally observed and that the feast was only later transferred to Sunday. Thomas J. Talley, “Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church: The State of Research,” in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 26.

points of view. Perhaps the best-known examples of this literary form are the dialogues of Plato, in which he uses fictitious conversations between Socrates and other characters as a teaching device to advance his thesis. Just as the dialogues of Plato possess a quality that allows us to recognize we are dealing with a literary genre and not a deliberate deceit, the same seems true here. The exchange between Theophilus and the bishops is completely artificial; no reasonable person would argue that the council transpired as presented or that these are the actual words of those who attended. The artificial quality of the dialogue cannot have been an accident: the author almost certainly intended that his piece be understood as an invention, not a verbatim account of the synod. This is particularly true in light of the reference to Eusebius, which openly dates the document to subsequent centuries. If so, it would be inaccurate to classify the piece as a “forgery,” which implies intentional deceit. Rather, it is better understood as an exposition in which Theophilus and the bishops serve as literary characters used to investigate the typological corollaries of creation, redemption, and the proper limits of Easter.

In addition to the artificial dialogue is the telltale manner of how the rule itself is worked out. The bishops derive the limits for Easter more from the asserted facts and times of *creation* than the law of Moses or the historical circumstances surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. No attempt is made to identify when Jesus’s ministry began, how long it lasted, or when it ended based on available evidence in the Gospels and other historical sources. Rather, creation week is seen as a prophetic type of God’s work of redemption, allowing the assumed facts of the one to establish and confirm those of the other. Because creation allegedly occurred on Sunday, March 25, at the full moon of the vernal equinox, the resurrection purportedly occurred at that date and time as well.

If the resurrection is placed on March 25, AD 31, it indicates that the so-called “short chronology” was followed. The short chronology is based on a misreading of the Synoptic Gospels and assumes Jesus’s ministry lasted only one year and several months, beginning late AD 29 and ending at Passover AD 31, in which year Nisan/Luna 13 fell on Sunday, March 25, in the Julian calendar.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Among Christian writers, the short chronology is first encountered in Clement of Alexandria (AD 153–217): “And that it was necessary for Him to preach only a year, this also is written: ‘He hath sent Me to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.’” *Stromata*, in *Fathers of the Second Century*, vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo,

March 25 had historically been associated with the equinox among the Romans. However, due to an error in the Julian calendar, the equinox at the time of Christ occurred two or more days before March 25.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even if it is assumed Jesus rose on March 25, it would not have been the equinox. Passover was observed at the full moon on or after the vernal equinox. Since the vernal equinox marks the beginning of spring, for the resurrection to occur on the equinox the third day following Passover would have required Jesus to keep Passover in the closing days of *winter* preceding spring, contrary to the law (Exod 12:2–28). Finally, John’s Gospel shows that Jesus’s ministry spanned four Passovers in 3.5 years, from autumn AD 29 to spring 33.<sup>16</sup> This was also the opinion of Eusebius who stated that Jesus’s ministry was completed in the space of just less than four years, which may provide another reason why the reference to Eusebius was removed—he contradicts the short chronology upon which the *Acta Synodi* is based.<sup>17</sup> However, this much is clear: Jesus did not die or rise on March 25, AD 31. The

---

NY: Christian Literature, 1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 333. Cf. Isaiah 61:2 // Luke 4:19. However, Irenaeus (AD 120–202) refuted a similar tradition among the heretics: “They, however, that they may establish their false opinion regarding that which is written, ‘to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,’ maintain that He preached for one year only, and then suffered in the twelfth month.” *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 391. The Synoptic Gospels pass over the first year and a half to two years of Jesus’s ministry and instead focus on his Galilean ministry following the arrest of John (Mark 1:14; Matt 11:2). One explanation may be that the Synoptic Gospels derive from a common original compiled by one of the apostles, such as Matthew who joined the Twelve late in Jesus’s ministry (Matt 9:9; cf. Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27) and whose notes would therefore have been largely confined to its last couple of years. John’s Gospel supplies the first part of Jesus’s ministry before John the Baptist’s arrest.

<sup>15</sup> The solar year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds. The Julian year was set at exactly 365 days and 6 hours—a difference of 11 minutes and 14 seconds, or about one day every 128 years. Because the Julian year was longer than the solar year, the astronomical quarter points of the year occurred earlier and earlier than their calendar dates until whole days separated them. By the time of the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the vernal equinox occurred four days early on March 21, which became the fixed date thereafter for the earliest limit of Easter. By the time the Gregorian calendar was adopted in AD 1582, ten days had accumulated between them. Therefore, when the Gregorian calendar was adopted, ten days were removed from the calendar to return the equinox to March 21. Reluctant to follow the Catholic lead in this correction, Protestants in England postponed adopting the Gregorian calendar until 1752, requiring eleven days to be removed from the calendar to return the equinox to March 21. See Denis Feeney, *Caesar’s Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>16</sup> Three Passovers are expressly mentioned in John 2:13, 23 (AD 30); 6:4 (AD 32); 13:1 (AD 33). The fourth (AD 31) occurred after chapter 4 but before chapter 5.

<sup>17</sup> Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.10.

tract's appeal to creation typology was almost certainly intended to support the short chronology, which is itself short on facts.

Unfortunately, these points were not always understood in early times, and March 25 acquired almost canonical status as the date of the resurrection or crucifixion. Despite having virtually no historical basis, this date is attractive because of its perfect symmetry with the December 25 nativity. March 25 is nine months before December 25, thereby producing the triad of 3/25, 12/25, and 3/25 for the conception, nativity, and resurrection or crucifixion of Christ.<sup>18</sup> It was believed that John the Baptist was conceived on or around the Day of Atonement near the autumnal equinox, which means that Jesus would have been conceived about six months later near the vernal equinox and Passover. The earliest trend among commentators such as Hippolytus, Ephrem the Syrian, and others was to place the annunciation on or around the day of Passover.<sup>19</sup> Occasionally, Passover would fall on March 25, but this was rare and happened only once in Jesus's life in AD 12.<sup>20</sup> Theologically committed to Passover as the date of the annunciation, commentators were slow to adopt March 25 instead. Eventually, however, the perfect symmetry of the dates 3/25, 12/25, and 3/25 won popular imagination.<sup>21</sup> The attempt to force dates into perfect symmetrical patterns and typological constructs continued into the Middle Ages and left a lasting mark in the ecclesiastical calendar of the Catholic Church, which retains many of these dates even today.<sup>22</sup> The re-

---

<sup>18</sup> The triad likely first found expression with Julius Africanus (AD 160–240). Kurt Simmons, "Revisiting the Fathers: An Examination of the Christmas Date in Several Early Patristic Writers," *Questions Liturgiques* 98.3 (2017): 143–80. Tertullian placed the passion on March 25 (*Adv. Jud.* 8.18).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' *Canon and Chronicon*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 69.5 (2015): 542–63. Ephrem the Syrian said, "Moses shut up a lamb April on the tenth day—a symbol of the Son Who came into the womb and closed Himself up on the tenth day. He came out from the womb in this month when the light conquers." "Hymns on the Nativity," in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. Kathleen E. McVey, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1989), 108.

<sup>20</sup> Scott E. Lee, Rosetta Calendar, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.rosetta-calendar.com/>.

<sup>21</sup> It appears that December 25 was practiced by the church before March 25. The earliest reference to March 25 occurs here connected with the Gauls, where it appears in tandem with December 25. March 25 also was used by Tertullian as the date of the crucifixion about this same time (*Adv. Jud.* 8.18). December 25, however, probably occurs sometime before AD 170 in early versions of the Protevangelium of James, probably borrowed from an already existing tradition within the church similar to January 6 and Epiphany (see below).

<sup>22</sup> The Feast of the Annunciation is celebrated on March 25 and the birth of John

port that the Gauls observed March 25 as the resurrection and December 25 as the nativity reflects the beginning of the process we have just described.

The question is whether the report that believers in Gaul observed Christmas on December 25 prior to AD 196 is accurate. Here, it must be noted that virtually every other fact provided in the history leading up to the council is unquestionably true. All admit that there was a great diversity of practices commemorating the passion and resurrection. That the Gauls observed the Pascha annually on March 25 is admitted and documented by Bainton.<sup>23</sup> It is also well-known that believers in Asia Minor observed the fourteenth day of the moon with the Jews. That Victor called for a council and entrusted it to Theophilus is not in dispute.<sup>24</sup> Only the report that the Gauls celebrated the nativity on December 25 is open to objection, and this only upon the basis of the *Chronograph of 354* and the history of religions theory, which argue Christmas was adopted sometime after AD 274, making the claim here too early.<sup>25</sup> However, as the *Chronograph of 354* does not support the claims made for it, and as the Christmas date occurs about thirty years after the Council of Caesarea and perhaps fifty years or more before that council, we will conclude that the *Chronograph of 354* offers no objection to the historicity of the *Acta Synodi*'s account.

#### CHRONOGRAPH OF 354 AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS THEORY

The main theory in academic circles for the origin of the Christmas date is the “history of religions theory.” This theory has it that the Christmas date was surreptitiously appropriated by church officials in the middle of the fourth century to “Christianize” the pagan winter solstice or, more specifically, the festival Sol Invictus. The basis for this charge is the *Chronograph of 354*, an illuminated codex commissioned by a wealthy Roman senator named Valentinus. The codex is divided into seventeen sections, including a calendar,

---

the Baptist on June 24 at the summer equinox in the Catholic Church. The quintessential attempt to force the conception and births of John and Christ into perfect conformity with the astronomical points of the year is found in the anonymous tract *De solstitiis et aequinoctiis conceptionis et nativitatis Domini Nostri Jesu Christi et Iohannis Baptistae*, which was at one time misattributed to John Chrysostom.

<sup>23</sup> Roland H. Bainton, “Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 42.1/2 (1923): 115–16.

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.23–25; cf. Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.22.

<sup>25</sup> See Bainton, “Basilidian Chronology,” 115–16.



paschal tables for the years AD 312–411, a section entitled *Depositio episcoporum* (“Burial of bishops”), and a section named *Depositio martirum* (“Burial of martyrs”). The *Depositio episcoporum* consists of a short list containing the date, name, and place of burial of Roman bishops set in calendrical order from December 25 to December 24.<sup>26</sup> The *Depositio martirum* consists of a similar list denoting the date and location of the burial of martyrs. This section is also arranged beginning with December 25 and the birth of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Here is the notation for the date of Christ’s birth: *VIII kal. Ian. Natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*.

It is generally agreed that the *Depositio episcoporum* originally dates to AD 336 but was updated to 354 for inclusion in the codex by adding the deaths of the two most recent bishops.<sup>28</sup> Because it is arranged from December 25 to December 24, it is apparent that the nativity of Christ marked the beginning of the ecclesiastical year in Rome at least as early as AD 336. The calendar for the same date (VIII kal. Ian.) has the following entry: N INVICTI CM XXX.

N = Natalis (“birthday/nativity”)  
 INVICTI = Of the unconquered one  
 CM = Circenses Missus (“games ordered”)  
 XXX = 30

Thus, for the birthday of the “unconquered one” that year, thirty games were ordered. It is widely believed that this references the quadrennial games instituted in AD 274 by Emperor Aurelian, who worshiped the Unconquered Sun, Sol Invictus.<sup>29</sup> On the strength of the shared date of December 25, it is inferred by advocates of the history of religions theory that Christians surreptitiously appro-

<sup>26</sup> In fact, the first entry is “VI kal. Ianuarias” (Dec 27), but the consensus of scholarship is that the ecclesiastical year began December 25 as evidenced by the birth of Christ in the following section. See R. W. Burgess, “The Chronograph of 354: Its Manuscripts, Contents, and History,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5.2 (2012): 345–96.

<sup>27</sup> The anomaly that a list denoting the date of martyrs’ deaths should be headed up by the birth of Christ is generally explained by the early Christian view that the date of one’s earthly demise was equal to one’s birth to heavenly life.

<sup>28</sup> Burgess, “Chronograph of 354,” 379.

<sup>29</sup> Steven Hijmans, “Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas,” *Museion* 47.3 (2003): 377–98; C. P. E. Nothaft, “The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research,” *Church History* 81.4 (2012): 903–11; Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas*, Liturgia Condenda 5 (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995); Susan K. Roll, “The Debate on the Origins of Christmas,” *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 40.1–2 (1998): 1–16; and Susan K. Roll, “The Origins of Christmas: The State of the Question,” in Johnson, *Between Memory and Hope*, 273–90.

priated the date for Christ's birthday to offset this allegedly popular pagan holiday. However, the basic assumption underlying this argument is without support; namely, the games mentioned in the *Chronograph of 354* celebrated December 25 are probably *not* those instituted by Aurelian.

Roman tradition records worship of Sol from as early as the Sabine kings. Ritual calendars posted in Rome after the adoption of the Julian calendar denote public sacrifices to Sol on August 8, 9, 28, and December 11. Of these, only August 28 still appears in the calendar of 354.<sup>30</sup> Two additional places in the *Chronograph* also denote games held in honor of Sol: October 19–22 and December 25. However, the games held on December 25 are differentiated by Julius the Apostate (AD 361–63) in his oration to Sol from the quadrennial games instituted by Aurelian. Hijmans notes:

For festivals of Sol there are three key passages in that hymn:

1. near the beginning, in c. 3 he exhorts his reader to celebrate the annual festival of Sol as it is celebrated in the ruling city;
2. in c. 41, he draws a contrast between the quadrennial games for Sol (τετραετηρικοὺς ἀγῶνας) which he characterizes as relatively new, and this annual festival which he ascribes to Numa.
3. in c. 42–3, lastly, he states that this annual festival in honour of the rebirth of the sun takes place immediately after the Saturnalia and he gives a convoluted and quite fictitious explanation for why it is held a few days *after* the solstice rather than on the solstice itself. He refers to this latter festival as a περιφανέστατον ἀγῶνα.

Clearly Julian is speaking of two different festivals to Sol, the one purportedly old, annual, and celebrated after the Saturnalia and before the new year; the other instituted fairly recently and celebrated every four years.<sup>31</sup>

But if the *annual* celebration was held on December 25 following the solstice, then the *quadrennial* games must belong to some

---

<sup>30</sup> Steven Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas: A Contribution to the Modern Construct of Late Antique Solar Syncretism," in *Hermann Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie*, ed. Michel Espagne and Pascale Rabault-Ferhahn, *Studies in Culture and Social Sciences* 7 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 147–48.

<sup>31</sup> Hijmans, 145 (emphasis original). For a translation of the relevant portions of the hymn, see Julian, *Julian the Emperor*, trans. C. W. King, *Bohn's Classical Library* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), 220, 249–50.

other date.<sup>32</sup> Since that leaves only the games held October 19–22, Aurelian obviously instituted these, not those of December 25.

Julian's claim that the annual festival held on December 25 dates back to Numa is dismissed by Hijmans as a piece of fiction intended to give an ancient provenance to what was apparently a relatively new festival. In his words, "The notion that Mithraists celebrated December 25th in some fashion is a modern invention for which there simply is no evidence."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Hijmans even goes so far as to speculate that December 25 was adopted by pagan authorities in response to the Christian celebration of Christ's birth on that date.<sup>34</sup> As a result, although there is evidence for the Christmas date in Rome as early as AD 336, there is *no evidence* of a festival to Sol on December 25 earlier than the *Chronograph of 354*. According to Hijmans,

As the Christian celebration of Christmas on December 25th can be attested in Rome by AD 336, at which point it may already have been well-established, and the celebration of Sol on that day cannot be attested before AD 354/362 and had not yet entered the calendar in the late 320s, it is impossible to postulate that Christmas arose in reaction to some solar festival. There is quite simply not one iota of explicit evidence for a major festival of Sol on December 25th prior to the establishment of Christmas, nor is there any circumstantial evidence that there was likely to have been one.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the debate ultimately hinges on chronological priority, whether Christians or pagans celebrated December 25 first. On the strength of the *Chronograph of 354*, the evidence favors Christians—exactly the opposite of what we have been told for almost one hundred and fifty years. Because the *Chronograph of*

---

<sup>32</sup> December 25 occurred after the solstice because by AD 362 when Julian the Apostate composed his oration to Sol, an error in the Julian calendar caused it to lag behind the astronomical event by four days. The same phenomenon was noted by the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) relative to the vernal equinox.

<sup>33</sup> Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas," 144.

<sup>34</sup> "Julian's contention that the winter solstice festival was instituted by Numa is a fabrication and his convoluted explanation of the date is impossible. The chronology of the feasts of Christmas and the *Natalis Invicti* may present a motive for Julian's fabrication. By placing Christ's birthday on such a cosmologically significant day the Christians undermined through appropriation one of the main philosophical justifications of paganism, namely the divine order of the cosmos and the divine nature of its bodies. . . . One can speculate that the supposedly ancient festival of Sol was 'rediscovered' by pagan authorities in response to the appropriation of the winter solstice by Christianity. We could then surmise that Julian more or less faithfully repeats the fabricated 'proof' that they presented to support this 'rediscovery.'" Hijmans, 350.

<sup>35</sup> Hijmans, 348. See also Hijmans, "Sol Invictus," 377–98.

354 is the sole basis for the charge that Christians adopted December 25 in response to Aurelian's quadrennial games, the history of religions theory must be dismissed as a viable explanation for the origin of the Christmas date.

This brings us back to the *Acta Synodi* and the assertion that the Gauls celebrated the nativity on December 25. Since the *Chronograph of 354* speaks only to the fact of the Christmas date, not when or how it first entered the church, it cannot serve to reject or impugn the *Acta Synodi*. The only remaining basis to discredit the *Acta Synodi* is the questionable nature of the document itself. However, this offers small refuge: the questionable nature of the *Acta Synodi* does not negate the historical facts recited in its opening paragraph. As we have seen, virtually every other fact mentioned leading up to the council is admittedly true. If every other fact is accurate, what basis do we have to reject its assertions about Christmas? The history of religions theory has been dispelled; what else is there? I know not any. Moreover, just because the mention of the Christmas date in the longer Recension A may be the addition of a later hand, it does not mean that it is therefore false or historically inaccurate. Since the document itself is not from the hand of Theophilus, it is of little consequence whether the assertions about Christmas were part of the original. Either way, it does not date from AD 196. The question is whether the information is accurate, not when or how it found its way into the record. The occurrence of the Christmas date in other period documents suggests that it is, in fact, both accurate and reliable.

The Protevangelium of James, which settled into its present form about AD 170,<sup>36</sup> assumes the winter birth of Christ because Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was widely understood by the ancients to have been serving the week of Tishri 10 on the Day of Atonement.<sup>37</sup> Since John was about six months older than Jesus, the latter would have been conceived per the story about the time of Passover and born nine months later around the traditional date of December 25.<sup>38</sup> Thus, even in the form we presently pos-

---

<sup>36</sup> George Themelis Zervos, *The Protevangelium of James: Critical Questions of the Text and Full Collations of the Greek Manuscripts*, vol. 2, Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies 18 (New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 11; and Ron Cameron, ed., "The Protevangelium of James," in *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 108.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., John Chrysostom, *In diem natalem Christi*.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth was in her sixth month when Mary received the annunciation (Luke 1:24–25, 36). See Ephrem's commentary on Exodus 12:3: "Now the Lamb is a symbol of our Lord, who was conceived on the tenth of Nisan. For Zachariah was told on the

sess, the Protevangelium of James testifies that the traditional, early winter birth of Christ was extant in the church by AD 170—twenty or more years before the Council of Caesarea.<sup>39</sup> However, there is evidence in Nicephorus Callistus and Julius Africanus that early versions of the Protevangelium of James expressly dated the nativity to December 25.

The Ecclesiastical History of Nicephorus records a fragment attributed to Evodius, a successor of the apostles and reputed martyr under Nero, who features prominently in the Protevangelium of James. Although it may be doubted whether Evodius is the actual author, it seems equally certain the fragment cited is very early. As already noted, the Protevangelium of James is generally dated to the mid- to late second century, perhaps AD 170. The fragment preserved here by Nicephorus, however, differs in various particulars, which arguably represents a significantly earlier version:

The whole time from the nativity until the passing of the mother of God he says were accomplished forty-four years, but of the whole of her life fifty-nine years. This obtains if in fact it was in her third year she was presented in the temple and there in the holy of holies passed eleven years. Then verily by the high priest was given into the custody of Joseph with whom she remained four months when she received the joyful annunciation from the angel Gabriel. But it was in her fifteenth year on the 25th day of December that she bore the Light of the World. And when he who was the eternal and before-all-ages Word had passed thirty-three years, her son went forth from the earth. After the cross, however, at his request, she completed eleven years in the home of John, so that the whole age of her life being gathered together was fifty-nine years.<sup>40</sup>

In the Protevangelium of James, Mary lived in the temple until she turned twelve, when she was betrothed and placed in Joseph's custody for four years before the annunciation by Gabriel and the conception of Christ. The reason for Mary leaving the temple when she

---

tenth day of the seventh month that John was going to be born, and six months later, when the message was brought to Mary by the angel, was the tenth day of the first month." *The Exodus Commentary of St. Ephrem: A Fourth Century Syriac Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Alison Salvesen, Mōrān 'Eth'ō 8 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), 32. See also *Ephrem the Syrian*, 108, 211–13.

<sup>39</sup> Various indicia in the Gospels confirm this tradition. If Jesus was baptized in the autumn just before his thirtieth birthday (Luke 3:23), and if he began his public teaching ministry and made his first disciples after returning to John at Bethabara (John 1:26–51), followed by his first miracle at Cana on January 6 marked by Epiphany (2:1–11), then his thirtieth birthday would have occurred sometime between late fall and early winter.

<sup>40</sup> Nicephorus Callistus, *Hist. Ecclesiastica* (1553; repr., Paris, 1562), 2.3 (author's translation).

does is expressly stated to be prompted by concerns of preserving the temple's ritual cleanliness vis-à-vis Mary reaching puberty and beginning menstruation.<sup>41</sup>

Conversely, in the fragment preserved by Nicephorus, Mary is *fourteen* years old when she is betrothed to Joseph and lives with him only *four months* until she receives the annunciation and conceives the Christ child. Since Mary was capable of conceiving when she was betrothed, she would necessarily have already experienced menstruation. But as this would have polluted the temple under Levitical law (Lev 15:19–23), the story was evidently rewritten to lower Mary's age to *twelve* at the time of her betrothal and extend the period until the annunciation from four months to *four years*.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the Protevangelium of James we now possess appears to be a later version rewritten to avoid the problem inherent in the version preserved by Nicephorus. If this is correct, and if the Protevangelium of James settled into its present form by AD 170, then the copy attributed to Evodius necessarily dates earlier than that. More important for our purposes, in Nicephorus's edition, the nativity is expressly stated to be December 25, and Jesus is called the Light of the World—a probable reference to the solstice. Thus, if the version attributed to Evodius predates the Protevangelium, then the Christmas date is attested before AD 170.<sup>43</sup>

This same pattern occurs in a document known as the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*, where the December 25 birth of Christ is again embedded within portions of the Protevangelium of James:

In the same consulship our Lord Jesus Christ was born under Augustus on the eighth calends of January. He was born in a desert whose name was Puusdu: that is "Pious." On the same day he was born, the shepherds saw the star Chuac 28. Verily from Adam unto the nativity

---

<sup>41</sup> "And when she was twelve years old there was held a council of the priests, saying: Behold, Mary has reached the age of twelve years in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her, lest perchance she defile the sanctuary of the Lord?" "Protevangelium of James," trans. Alexander Walker, in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, vol. 8 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1886), 363. However, since a prepubescent girl cannot pollute the temple, the passage is better understood as an explanation of why Mary's age was reduced from fourteen than why she was allegedly betrothed at twelve.

<sup>42</sup> Fourteen is the age preserved by the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Gospel of the Birth of Mary. In the History of Joseph the Carpenter, Mary is betrothed at twelve and conceives at fourteen. Only the Protevangelium of James expressly mentions Mary defiling the temple due to her becoming of marriageable age as the reason for seeking her betrothal.

<sup>43</sup> For a full discussion, see Simmons, "Revisiting the Fathers," 143–80.

of our Lord Jesus Christ there were 5,500 years.<sup>44</sup>

The *Excerpta* have been shown elsewhere to ultimately derive from Julius Africanus's *Chronographie*, believed to be written between AD 212 and 221.<sup>45</sup> Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170–235), a younger contemporary of Africanus, is also known to have used the Christmas date and helps to corroborate this early usage by Africanus.<sup>46</sup> That the Protevangelium of James was the primary source of Africanus's birth narrative after the Gospels is witnessed by his reference to the martyrdom of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, under Herod the Great, the three days of mourning that followed, and the appointment of Simeon as high priest in place of Zechariah, all of which are taken directly from Protevangelium of James.<sup>47</sup> Since Africanus would have consulted the earliest version of the Protevangelium of James available for his *Chronographie*, he almost certainly used an edition similar in date and provenance as that attributed to Evodius, where he also apparently found the date of December 25 for Jesus's birth. The Christmas date may have been dropped from later editions of the Protevangelium of James when the notion Jesus was born on January 6 became more popular, causing editors to leave this detail out of the story in order to give it wider reception, implicitly retaining the winter birth but with no date specified—the form in which we find it today.

In summary, there is significant evidence for the occurrence of the Christmas date near the time of the Council of Caesarea. Within thirty years or so after the council, we find the date in Julius Africanus and Hippolytus. The source for Africanus's citation, which he also apparently shared with Evodius, appears to be dated sometime before AD 170, fifty years or so before the Council of

---

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Justus Scaliger, *Thesaurus temporum: Eusebii Pamphili Caesareae, Palaestinae Episcopi* (Lugdunum Batavorum, 1606), 67–68 (author's translation). Cf. Alfred Schoene, ed., *Eusebii chronicorum: liber prior*, vol. 1 of *Eusebii chronicorum: libri duo* (Berlin, 1875), 227 [50a].

<sup>45</sup> Simmons, "Revisiting the Fathers," 143–80. Heinrich Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die Byzantinische Chronographie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt, "Calculating December 25," 542–63; and Thomas C. Schmidt and Nick Nicholas, *Hippolytus of Rome: Commentary on Daniel and 'Chronicon'*, Gorgias Dissertations 67 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> In the Protevangelium of James, Zechariah, the son of Berachiah, who was slain between the temple and the altar (Matt 23:35), is equated with Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, rather than the Old Testament prophet by that name (Zech 1:1). Simeon is the gentle soul introduced by Luke at the presentation of the Christ child at the temple forty days after his birth (Luke 2:25–33). The author of the Protevangelium of James makes Simeon the successor of Zechariah as high priest after the latter's alleged martyrdom.

Caesarea. As such, there is no obstacle to receiving a reference to the Christmas date in the *Acta Synodi* as historically accurate—at least not on the evidence we possess at present.