Why is Christmas on December 25?

(Another Theory)

Growing up in the U.S., I encountered the Christmas holiday every year as a major celebration. As a child I puzzled over why Christmas happened to fall on December 25. No one I knew could explain it or even seemed to care much about it. It was just a tradition. When I began to learn more about Christian church history through my sacred studies classes at the Episcopal high school I attended, I discovered that nobody really knew exactly when Jesus was born. Also, I learned that it took about three centuries before there came to be an established holiday associated with the birth of Jesus.

Since nobody knew exactly what year, month, or day was the actual birthdate of Jesus, many different proposals were made. Eventually the majority of churches settled on a date that was very close to the Winter Solstice and coincided with the Roman holiday of *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (Birth Day of the Unconquered Sun). The DNSI was a celebration that began during the 3rd century A.D. with the patronage of Roman emperors and was an outgrowth of a core part of the traditional Roman holiday of Saturnalia with supposed influence from Mithra sun worship. Some have pointed to evidence of celebrations of Christ's birthday in December as early as 243 A.D., predating the official Roman establishment of DNSI as a holiday in their festival calendar. Nevertheless, both holidays seem to have evolved out of the ancient tradition of celebrating winter solstice.

Some say that December 25 was supposed to be the first day on which the lengthening of daylight time was noticeable. The discrepancy between December 21 and December 25, while reasonably explained by the previous sentence, still bothers me. People in those days did not have watches and could hardly notice a difference of a minute or so. Only the astronomers could measure it exactly. There must be a stronger reason why the holiday does not fall exactly on the solstice.

Another popular theory is that when Christians decided to start celebrating the birth of Christ in the 4th century, they chose the Winder Solstice according to the Julian Calendar that was generally used in those days. At that time the Winter Solstice supposedly fell on December 25 according to the Julian Calendar. However, the Julian Calendar drifted over time by about 11 1/2 minutes per year, so that after only about 150 years Christmas was no longer on the Winter Solstice. When the

Gregorian Calendar was adopted to address the defects in the Julian system, the date of Christmas was kept at December 25, even though this was no longer Winter Solstice. The problem with this theory is that when the Gregorian calendar came into effect in 1582 (over 1200 years after the church festivals began to be established), the old Julian calendar had already drifted away from Winter Solstice (and of course also Easter at Spring Equinox) by 10 days. Thus, after 4 October 1582, the next day was declared to be 15 October 1582. This adjustment allowed the calendar to "catch up" with the actual seasons. If a December 25 Christmas celebration was originally at Winter Solstice, the adjustment made by Pope Gregory would have returned the calendar to a December 25 that falls on Winter Solstice – but it did not do that, as we can see today on our calendars.

From the nativity stories in the Bible, we know the tradition was that Jesus was born at night. This fits the Winter Solstice motif, which is that it marks the longest night of the year. If December 25 is to be the celebration of his birth day, then the "real" Christmas must be during the night of December 24. Many people do celebrate at that time, for example, by attending a midnight Mass. However, December 24 still does not fall on the Winter Solstice. The astronomical event of the solstice usually occurs during the night of December 21 or early morning hours of December 22, but can vary from year to year from as early as December 20 to as late as December 23 on our calendar.

If we take the night of December 21 according to our Gregorian calendar as the standard for Winter Solstice, then December 22 should be the first day of the "new year" that marks the beginning of the return of the sun's light. Why then is Christmas Eve on the third night after the night of Winter Solstice?

Christmas and the Egyptian Calendar

I suspect that this little gap in time derives from a peculiarity of the Egyptian Solar Calendar. The Egyptians divided the year into 12 months and three seasons. Each season consisted of 4 months. Each month was 30 days long. This gave the Egyptians a "vague" year of 360 days. "Half" a year was 180 days. However, the actual solar year is 365 1/4 days long. This meant the Egyptians had to add 5 extra days to round out their calendar to the true solar year, and then every four years they needed an extra leap day.

Originally the Egyptian calendar had no such leap day and just drifted by one day every four years. In 1460 years it would drift by a whole year. In 120 years it

drifted by a 30-day month. In early Egyptian culture they saved up the leap days for 120 years and then added an intercalary month of 30 days that they called a “Henty” to bring the calendar back into alignment with the seasons. This meant that their old Solar Calendar was almost always out of kilter with the solstices, often by several weeks, and Solar Calendar events meant for one season could end up in another season. Eventually during the Ptolemaic period they shifted to adding a leap day every four years, and this allowed them to keep their Solar Calendar coordinated with the solstices from year to year.

There remained the problem that you can not divide 365 days nicely into two equal sets of days. Since this was not possible, and the solar month of 30 days was so mathematically elegant, the Egyptians divided the year into one “half” that was 180 days long and another “half” that was 185 days long. The extra 5 “epagomenal” days were dedicated to the five great national gods of Egypt (Osiris, Horus, Set, Isis, and Nephthys) and formed a kind of short intercalary week at the end of their Solar Year.

Another interesting issue emerged from the concept that the New Year was not related to the solstices, but to the flooding of the Nile, a phenomenon that was unique to Egyptian (and all Nilotic African) culture. The Nile flood reaches Egypt in the late summer, around late July or early August, and is thus over a month later than the Summer Solstice (which is the season when the summer rains of Ethiopia that feed the Nile inundation occur). While the onset of the flood could vary by days or weeks from year to year, it was determined by the generally fixed weather patterns of Africa, which in turn were driven by the solar seasons, and thus were directly linked to the solstices and equinoxes. The Egyptians placed their 5-day intercalary month at the end of their Solar Year and began their New Year around the time when the flood usually began.

The situation was complicated further by their simultaneous use of a Lunar Calendar that fluctuated against the Solar Calendar from year to year like the Chinese Lunar Calendar. Like many Asians today Egyptians determined lunar phase celebrations and many traditional festivals according to the Lunar Calendar. Egyptian “New Year” thus became a drawn-out affair that went by both the Solar and Lunar Calendars.

The Egyptians worshiped the sun as the ideal symbol for the source of life. Technically they started their Solar Year on the equivalent of our June 21 (or 22) at

the Summer Solstice. They called that day Wepet Renpet, "The Opening of the Year". However, because they also wanted the Solar Year to align with the agricultural New Year that began with the Nile flood and the heliacal rising of Sirius that came a month or more after Summer Solstice, they seem to have called the solar month beginning with the Summer Solstice the twelfth month of the Solar Year, even while giving the corresponding last month of the Lunar Calendar (that ended the season Shemu and roughly corresponded to this time, but shifted about from year to year) the name Wepet Renpet that means "Opening of the Year". This month name came to be called "Mesut Ra", which means "The Birth of the Sun". This translates into Latin as "Dies Natalis Solis", which is almost the same as "Dies Natalis Solis Invicti", the holiday at Winter Solstice that was celebrated in the later years of the Roman Empire from the 3rd century up until it was abolished by Theodosius in 390 A. D.

If we start from June 22 (the day after Summer Solstice) as the technical Wepet Renpet (as opposed to the festive Opening of the Year that began with the first new moon during the rise of the Nile) and count off 185 days, we end up on December 23 instead of at the Winter Solstice on December 21. Thus, Christmas should be on the first day of the next solar month, December 24. Since the story is that Jesus was born at night, we celebrate Christmas Eve on the evening of the 24th, and the Feast of Christmas Day then comes on December 25. Christmas Day thus corresponds to the second day of the sixth month on the fixed Egyptian Solar Calendar (not the drifting one).

Dec. 24 --> June 21 = 180 days. June 22 --> Dec. 23 = 185 days.

Part of the myth of Osiris is that when he (re)gains his immortality, he identifies with Ra, the sun god. Ra symbolizes the Higher Self. The great Osirian rituals at Abydos were carried out during November. This represented the death of Osiris. His birth day was supposed to be on the first of the five epagomenal days that formed the intercalary month. This day apparently fell on the first day after the end of the Solar Year, which apparently would be on July 21. However, the actual "Mesut Nepra" (Birth of the Corn God) would be sometime in December when the newly planted crops began to sprout after the Nile waters receded and the farmers had plowed and sowed.

Nepra was another name for Osiris in his role as the god of grain. The Egyptians oddly thought of the epagomenal days as unlucky although they were the birthdays of

the national gods. Why would they consider the birthday of Osiris unlucky if they depended for their lives on the crops that he brought? My theory is that the Egyptians actually celebrated the lucky [birth]days of the national gods on other days, so the Epagomenal Days were thus unlucky by a kind of reflection principle. The logical place for the rebirth of Osiris was late December when the crops started to become visible, though some put Nepra's birthday at the end of the harvest season around the beginning of April when the grain was gathered in. Since Osiris was essentially an idealized myth, his rebirth might well be at the mirror reflection of the sun's Summer Solstice – the Winter Solstice. Putting it at the beginning of the sixth Solar Month of the civil calendar would be a natural place for it. From our calculations of the solar months, we arrive at a possibility that his birthday is December 24.

Where does the expression "Merry Christmas" come from?

Every year at the Christmas holiday we greet people by saying "Merry Christmas". Surprisingly, this expression is extremely ancient and predates Christianity as we know it. By chance or by design the English version of this greeting preserves a very close approximation to an ancient Egyptian expression. One of the traditional ways Egyptians liked to bless a person was to wish them a beautiful burial – "Qerest Nefert". The Egyptians believed in the immortality of the soul and the principle of rebirth. Osiris was the idealization of this in their mythology. He died an unnatural death and then resurrected from the dead and recovered his innate immortality – just as we are told that Jesus did. Through this experience of dying and then returning to life, Osiris mastered death and gained immortality. As with Osiris, the essential immortality of Jesus is on an invisible spiritual level, not on the level of the physical body that obviously ages and dies. For Egyptians Osiris symbolized the annual death and rebirth of plants. Although Egypt had no cold winters, the summer drought dried up many plants. The annual Nile flood then brought them back to life again, giving Egypt a clearly defined agricultural cycle.

For Egyptians the word "Qerest" meant death and burial. On the other hand, "Mes" was the Egyptian word for birth. Each person at death was identified with Osiris, and so the "Qerest" was the transformation of a person from a living individual into a dead body whose spiritual essence identified with Osiris. The Egyptian name for Osiris was "Asar" or "Weser", and is the origin of our word for "wizard". In life you were Horus, the son of Osiris, and a transformation of the sun god, Horus. The Egyptian word for Horus was Heru. You live as a Hero and you die as Osiris. As

Osiris you become Qerest, (Christ), the buried one. **The Book of the Dead**, chapter 17, says: "Qeres Asar, Ba Ankhy. . . der asfetau, seshem nef Wat Heh." = "Buried Osiris is the Living Ram (Soul), who takes away sins and guides on the Way of Eternity." The comes pretty close to the Agnus Dei – "O Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace."

Once you were properly buried, you could be born again. The process of birth was called "Mes". Thus, in Egyptian "Qeres-mes" means to be buried and then born. The ritual of the "Mass" does not mean to be "sent away" as most people derive it from the Latin "missa". It means to be born. The Mass is a ritual of rebirth, a rededication to life.

The Egyptian word "Mery" corresponds to our English word "merry" and other related words such as Mary and marry. Literally it means one who is beloved or full of love. The expression "Merry Christmas" (Mery Qeres-mes) means in Egyptian, "O beloved one, be buried and then born [again]." and is a way of wishing a person (o beloved one) a new birth of life as the sun again begins to bring more light to the earth each year after Winter Solstice.

The Nile flood lasted about four months from its beginning late July or early August until the waters receded in late October or early November. At that time they celebrated the death and reawakening of Osiris with the Osirian rites at Abydos. This prepared for the beginning of the agricultural cycle. They began planting around the end of November or early December, and by Winter Solstice and Christmas time the new crops were sprouting and the Nile delta again became very lush. For Egyptians this was indeed a Merry Christmas.

Whatever we may believe about Jesus as a historical and spiritual personality, the principle that immortality is life viewed from beyond the cycles of death and rebirth can be seen to manifest every year in the cycles of nature.

The Roman soldiers who put Jesus to death were particularly fond of Sol Invictus as a symbol of a good soldier's invincible spirit in the face of death. The word soldier comes from the Latin "solidare" which means to give money. Most Roman soldiers were distinct from tribal warriors in that they were paid professionals. The government paid them with coins, and the coins had the emperor's head on them. By the beginning of the 4th century the Romans began to mint coins struck from "solid" gold and these became used to pay soldiers. They called the gold coin a

"Solidus" or "Sun God" coin. The Roman emperor was the deified incarnation of the sun god just like the Egyptian pharaoh was. Each coin was a miniature icon of the sun. Thus the Roman soldier was in the service of the sun god, Sol, just as Osiris was. The solidi were used from the fourth century through the Byzantine period even though the Empire became nominally Christian during the fourth century. The French coin called a "sou" carried on this tradition, as did the Italian "soldi" and Spanish "sueldo". The soldier's honor was to die as a Hero for the emperor as the living embodiment of the Sun and leader of the empire.