

XMAS TREE

The practice of idolizing trees goes back to just about the beginning of time. Throughout history, nearly every society or nation has worshipped trees in some form or another. In this booklet, we delve into the topic of the origin of the Christmas tree.

A description of tree worship is described in the book of Jeremiah. Let us read Jeremiah 10:1 to 5: ***"Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel: Thus with the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good."*** We begin our analysis of these verses with verse 3: ***"For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe."*** Notice the similarity of the ancient act described in the verse with our habits of our present age. For thousands of years, our ancestors have given veneration to trees. Our society still give the same reverence to the tree during the Christmas season. The only difference today is that the masses will deny they give adoration or worship to it, because we think of ourselves as much more intelligent than our ancestors. The truth of the matter is that although we may have advanced by great strides within the last couple of centuries in the areas of technology and science, we mistakenly confuse knowledge with wisdom. We may possess greater knowledge of the physical world around us but applying wisdom is another matter. It seems in today's age, the majority of people believe when they have acquired the knowledge of a profession or a trade, this learning has elevated them into persons of intellectual wisdom. Why do the majority of people who knows of the pagan origins of tree worship still choose to continue the practice? The reason appears to be that the masses will not take the time to logically and rationally reason out the things they do.

Staying with verse 3, it refers to ***"the customs of the people."*** The "customs" are the traditions of the people and are usually habit-forming practices. We often do not know the origins of the particular customs we follow, but accept the explanations (often false) offered by those around us for the customs without applying any scrutiny to understand their origin. Verse 3 continues to say these customs ***"are vain"***. In other words, these customs are useless and not profitable or beneficial to the people.

In recent decades, people have often gone to a department store and buy an artificial tree for the Christmas season. However, even to this day, there are those that take an axe or a saw and go out into the country with their family searching for a visually appealing tree, then chop it or saw it down. Alternatively, some may buy a real tree from a tree vendor that has already been cut down. After acquiring the tree, the family then take it to their home, stand it up and decorate it. It is left standing and admired for the duration of the Christmas festival. Read verse four of the same chapter: ***"They deck it with silver and with gold, they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not."*** Do you throw silver and gold tinsel upon the tree, as well as strings of lights and ornaments and as this decorating is being done, the family stands around in awe during or after the decorating? How is this not a form of tree adoration and worship? The scriptures go on to say how with nails and hammers the tree is made to stand upright after being cut down so that it will not fall over. All of this is familiar to those of us living in the west. It is very important to remember that this practice is a tradition of the heathen.

Jeremiah warns God's people to ***"Learn not the way of the heathen."*** The Father is telling you and I not to follow heathen practices. The exact origin of the Christmas tree is unclear as some believe it originated with the Babylonians, some say with the Romans, some say with the Germans, others say with the Scandinavians, and still others say with the Egyptians. The fact is nearly all, if not all, of the ancient nations of the world at some time in history worshipped trees and not only trees, but many of nature's elements. Take for instance the Sumerians, which were one of the earliest civilizations, even preceding the Babylonian empire. It is said that the Sumerians at the beginning of their known history first worshipped a spirit god, but in the course of time, added many other gods, which were in the form of objects that their eyes could focus upon, such as rivers,

animals, the sun, the moon, and even trees. As time passed, many other gods were added. For Christians, there is but one God, the Father, who is a spirit and those that worship Him do so in spirit and truth (John 4:23). Worshipping objects of any kind is forbidden by the Ten Words that we are supposed to live by: ***“Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God...”*** Exodus 20:3 to 5a.

In the past, it seems that it was much simpler for mankind to worship something that he could see, for often it did not impose a tedious task of searching and studying to understand the forces he could not see. For example, mankind should be analysing his relationship to those elements he lives with and within. By analysing, we would find that regardless of our insignificant size in comparison to our solar system, we can see the things that make us a superior, or at least, not an inferior, creature in comparison to all other creatures within our world. We were made as gods within our world (Psalms 82:6; John 10:33 to 36), yet we have in the sphere of intellect demeaned this intelligence that has been bestowed to us by our Creator, by our superstitiousness and our desire to want to give reverence to inferior creatures and nature's elements.

Relevant to our discussion on the origin of the Christmas tree is a man mentioned in the Bible who was called Nimrod. We are told in Genesis 10:8 to 10 that the beginning of his kingdom were the ancient cities of Babel, Erech, Accad and Calneh, but very little is actually said about his life in scripture, and we will not comment on the legends that grew around his life. Turning to Noah, we know the family of Noah moved east into the land of Shinar, but we have no exact knowledge when this movement occurred after the flood, so we are not completely sure of the chronological order of all the facts because of the existence of the Sumerian kingdom prior to that of the Babylonian kingdom. We also do not know certain facts such as whether all the family of Noah moved east, or when the construction of Babel (the name means 'confusion') first began. It was during the period of the construction of the city of Babel and the infamous tower there that Asshur (one of Noah's grandsons) went out of the land of Shinar to the north and built Nineveh (the abode of Ninus). Asshur was the son of Shem. We know from history that many of the descendants of Shem. Ham and Japheth (ie. Noah's sons) strayed after gods of their own liking. Because of the amount of legends and myths that grew up amidst the facts, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between reality and myth from the available historical accounts. One thing we do know is that mankind, during these early times, began worshipping the tree which played a part in their idolatry practices.

We will now attempt to trace Christmas tree customs from the last two millennia. The ash, elm and oak trees all had important roles in Scandinavian mythology. According to legend, from the ash and elm trees, the first man and woman were formed, who were called 'Ask' and 'Embla'. When the gods held their court, it was said to take place under an ash tree. In ancient times, it was believed in many countries that the ash tree was a strong defense against witches, poisonous animals and certain diseases. There was also a festival that was held at the time of the winter solstice, the Yule-log feast, which commenced on December 25th in commemoration of the fiery sun-wheel. The Norsemen believed that they could follow the personal movement on earth of Odin, Berchta and many others of the gods during the 12 nights from December 25th to January 6th. The fir tree was sacred to the Norsemen and they believed on the evening of the 24th of Yuletide, if they should approach the fir tree and give reverence to it that the god Odin would bestow special gifts to them during the year. It was said that the fir tree was held in reverence because it defied winter's power to kill the fir tree, (ie. the fir is an 'evergreen' meaning it does not shed its foliage during the winter).

In ancient Rome, the oak tree was held as divine, as also was the fir tree. The fir tree was used by pagans during the Saturnalia festivities: these trees were trimmed and decorated with red berries and it has been said that the image of the sun-god was placed at the top of the tree. Similarly, in today's age, artificial stars are often placed on top of the Christmas tree. Some people would claim that it represents the star of Bethlehem but in reality, we are just continuing an ancient pagan tradition and simply justifying it by suggesting it means something other than what our pagan ancestors thought. The truth of the matter is that the origin of the custom comes from paganism. Remember the verses we read earlier: we are told to not learn from the heathen and we are supposed to worship God in truth and in spirit.

The city of Rome was built on seven hills and one of those hills was called Capitoline Hill. On that hill was a sacred oak tree which was connected with the spirit of the great Roman god of the sky, Jupiter. Jupiter was to be worshipped day and night at the time of the full moon. The Roman legions, when returning from wars, placed offerings of the best of the war spoils on or under the sacred oak tree. Jupiter was connected with successful battles. As Jupiter Victor, he gave the Roman armies triumph, and as Jupiter Stator, when the soldiers were not faring well in battle, he stayed with them in spirit. Not only was the sacred oak connected with the spirit of Jupiter, but Jupiter was considered the supreme head of state, which is the reason why Jupiter's temple was on Capitoline Hill where the Romans paid homage to him and the sacred oak tree. Later, the god Mithra became the most popular deity with the Roman army. It has been suggested by some historians that fir tree worship was introduced into Germany by the legions of Drusus.

There is a legend that in the eighth century A.D., as a Catholic missionary, Boniface, was evangelizing in Germany, he persuaded the Germans to change their worship from the oak tree to the fir tree in honor of the Christ-child. The legend goes on to say that on Christmas eve, Boniface chopped down a sacred oak tree at a site which had been used for human sacrifices, and where the oak had fallen, a fir tree appeared miraculously. The only thing that we can accept as factual in this story is that the missionary, Boniface, did get the Germans to transfer their worship from the oak tree to the fir tree.

A later event concerning the Christmas tree tradition as we know it today is credited to Martin Luther, as he is considered the first person to decorate and light up a tree inside the home. The story goes that on a beautiful, starry Christmas eve as Luther walked among the evergreens, he could see the stars shining and glittering on the trees. Wanting to share this experience with his family, he cut down a small fir tree and took it to his house, put candles on the tree and lit them, saying that ***"the glowing tree represented, Christ, who is the light of the world."*** Chambers Encyclopedia, which is now out-of-print but in its day was considered reliable and accurate, suggests the Christmas tree was introduced to England from Germany by Queen Charlotte. The first recorded instances of people bringing the Christmas-tree into homes dates from 1605, and was described as follows: ***"at Christmas they set up fir trees in the parlours.... and hang upon them roses cut from many colored paper, apples, wafers, gilt-sugar sweets etc."***

Most of the historical records that exist on tree worship of the Druids come from Roman, British and German writers. The Druid's tree of worship was the oak and it was very sacred to them. The Druid priests would gather in oak-groves where they held most of their rites. One of their most important rites was paying homage to the sacred oak tree. The Druid priests would select from the oak-grove the most well-formed tree. Then they would chop off all the side branches of the selected tree, only leaving two well-formed limbs positioned evenly opposite one another on each side of the trunk, or alternatively, the priests would attach two limbs opposite one another horizontally to the upper section of the trunk. The tree was intended to represent a man with out stretched arms, but there are historians who claim it was the form of the cross that they worshipped. It should be noted that the Druid practice of worshipping the cross preceded the worshipping of it by the third and fourth century Christians. With the Druids, the tree was used for adoration, in which the shape of the tree was the emblem of their deity, and often inscribed in various places on the bark was a symbol that looked like the letter "T".

An object that has been associated with the oak tree of adoration and sacredness was the mistletoe. The mistletoe is a parasitic ever-green plant which grows on many trees. It is a bushy growth of yellowish green twigs, each having two green leaves, with small yellowish flowers between the leaves. In the winter, the plant is covered with small white berries. Contrary to popular belief, the mistletoe is very rarely found on oak trees. The mistletoe tradition has its roots in Druidic and Scandinavian pagan religions. It was believed some marvelous power was attributed to the mistletoe shrub by the Scandinavians, for it did something amazing. According to legend, it slew the god of whom the Anglo-Saxons considered "the empire" of their heavens. So the mistletoe shrub was also considered a divine shrub. It had come from heaven and attached itself to a tree that sprang out of the earth, and by this divine shrub grafting itself to the tree, heaven joined itself to earth and sin was cast off. Thus, the mistletoe bough became a sign of heaven's reconciliation to mankind, so a

kiss under the mistletoe became a token of pardon and reconciliation. Kissing under the mistletoe has been a Christmas tradition for centuries.

The Druids regarded the mistletoe with great veneration as they did the oak tree. The mistletoe was so sacred that the Druid priests gathered the plant only with a golden knife, and only on the sixth day after the first new moon of each year. The whole ritual was done with great ceremony. The Druid priests would be dressed in white robes. One would climb the tree, cut the bushy mistletoe off with the golden knife and drop it to another priest on the ground who was in his ceremonial white robe. Then they divided the bushy green twigs and distributed them to the people who wore them as a sacred charm against evil.

Many other traditions and superstitions have developed regarding the mistletoe since ancient times. In the Middle Ages, the mistletoe was believed to have control over good luck and bad luck. Another belief was that a piece of mistletoe hung over a doorway would ward off evil and a later belief was that mistletoe boughs put out for Christmas had to be removed by Candlemas eve (February 1st) or else each leaf left on the mistletoe would spawn a goblin that would cause harassment to that household for the rest of that year. The modern day "kissing under the mistletoe" comes from an old pagan marriage rite. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe was a privilege for men since any woman who was under it, a man could kiss, but before kissing her, the man was required to remove one of the berries and present it to the woman. The man could continue to do this until the last berry. Then the kissing game was over. Even today, some hang mistletoe at Christmas time over the door and those who meet under it are supposed to have good luck and may kiss.

So ends our treatise on the origins of the Christmas tree tradition. For us to be faithful to the Will of God, we should not let writers and clergymen to induce us into pagan worship which includes the tradition of setting up a Christmas tree, an object of nature which God's Ten Words warns us against worshipping. Let us be honest with ourselves: most people of today still give reverence to trees, gazing in fascination upon the lighted and decorated Christmas tree. Let us remember the words of Jeremiah 10:2 and choose to serve God rather than the traditions of men.