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“The Day of His Coming”

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MARANATHA. That exclamation, transliterated from the Aramaic in 1 Corinthians 16.22, figured significantly in primitive Christian spirituality, and, as is clear from its occurrence in *Didache* 10, in primitive Christian liturgy as well. Like the Greek term, *parousia*, to which it is closely related, it has a double meaning. The double meaning of *parousia*, as we shall see, is simply a matter of interpretation. In the case of “maranatha,” however, the problem is one of grammar. The term as preserved in 1 Corinthians and in *Didache*, transliterated into Greek characters, appears as a single, unbroken word. In Aramaic (and Syriac) it is two words, *marana tha*, a form of imperative force oriented toward the future, “Come, our Lord.” However, that Greek transliteration could as easily present the perfect form expressive of a completed event in the past, *maran atha*, “our Lord has come.” This dual meaning, examined closely by Dom Botte at the liturgical week of the *Institut Saint-Serge* in 1965,¹ is crucial for our understanding of the second pole of the liturgical year, the celebration/expectation of the coming of Christ, a theme extended in current western liturgical practice over the many weeks that comprise the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle

In the closing weeks of the time after Pentecost in the western Church today there is a growing emphasis on the consummation of history, which comes to something of a climax on the final Sunday, the feast of Christ the King. This leads into the season of Advent, itself focused upon the coming of the Redeemer. The first of the four Sundays of that season is concerned with the final *parousia*, while the second and third focus on the Forerunner’s promise of Messiah’s coming. In the recent reforms, the fourth Sunday is given to the reading of accounts of the annunciation, followed in

¹ B. Botte, “Maranatha,” *Noel, Epiphanie: retour du Christ. Lex Orandi* 40 (Paris 1967) pp. 25-42.

the succeeding week by the festival of the nativity of the Redeemer. In the four weeks of Advent, in other words, the meaning of the coming, of the Messiah shifts from the expectation of the consummation of history itself to preparation for the nativity of the Savior, a preparation expressed on the final Sunday in the reading of the account of the incarnation event itself, the taking of flesh in the womb of Mary, fulfilled in the celebration of his nativity on December 25. Twelve days later the Church celebrates the festival of the Epiphany, which has, as we shall see, an uncommonly rich themeology, and the name of the feast itself is closely linked with the notion of parousia (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2.8).

In all this, it is clear that the Advent/Epiphany complex is a time of beginning that carries with it a strong note of eschatological expectation. In ritual cycles, the beginning and end times meet, and the liturgical year is no exception. It is with the Sundays of Advent that our liturgical books have long begun the year, an extension of the earlier custom of placing liturgical provisions for the vigil of Christmas before those for the feast. At Rome in 336 it is clear that the nativity itself, December 25, was considered the beginning of the liturgical year, and still earlier in the eastern empire the same was true of the Epiphany.

While the earliest stratum of this Christian festal complex seems to be older than had been supposed in such works as those of Usener and Botte,² there can be no doubt that these festivals that mark the beginning of the year are secondary developments, subsequent to and (we shall be concerned to argue) dependent upon the original Christian annual observance, Pascha. As we observed in Part One, the expectation of the parousia was often wedded to the Christian Passover, as it had been to the Jewish.

Such eschatological expectation, however, should not be taken for simple prediction of the future. Rather, it was a dimension of Jewish chronology and of the understanding of festival as the fulcrum of the year. The notion of a "New Year" is always in fact more ambiguous than we suppose, and we recognize a number of points at which the year turns. The civil New Year's Day is January 1 now, although in England it was March 25 through the first half of the eighteenth century. In addition, there are many other points from which the year is measured, the fiscal year, the academic year, the liturgical year, the years of our lives measured from the

² H. Usener., *Das Weihnachtsfest* (Bonn 1911); B. Botte, *Les origines de la Noel et de l'Epiphanie* (Louvain 1932).

day of our birth. Any of these is likely in certain respects to be considered an end time and a new beginning.

1. Creation and Final Redemption in Jewish Festival

In Judaism at the beginning of our era, we have noted, two points were especially important as turnings of the year, the months of Nisan and Tishri, and both creation and eschatological expectation were associated with each and with the festivals that fell at the full moons of those months.

The New Testament assures us repeatedly that none can know the time of that final act of the mystery of redemption, and the rabbinic sources are equally cautious. Nonetheless, eschatological expectation appears as an important element in the content of festivals associated with the turning of the year, and it is as such that Passover was urged as the time of the parousia, expressed as the sure time of Messiah's coming.

Other rabbinic sources reveal the alternative time for that final redemption. Tractate *Rosh Hashanah* relates a dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua around the beginning of the second century. R. Joshua held:

“In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born; on New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited; on New Year Joseph went forth from prison; on New Year the bondage of our ancestors ceased in Egypt; and in Nisan they will be redeemed in time to come.”³

R. Eliezer, by contrast, said:

“In Tishri the world was created; in Tishri the Patriarchs were born; in Tishri the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on New Year Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were visited; on New Year Joseph went forth from prison; on New Year the bondage of our ancestors in Egypt ceased; in Nisan they were redeemed and in Tishri they will be redeemed in the time to come.”⁴

³ Tal. bab., *Rosh Hashanah* 10b-11a.

⁴ Ibid. The standard English translation of the Talmud published by Soncino Press, London, contains an error in 10b where R. Eliezer is made to say, “In Nisan they will be redeemed in the time to come.” Our own text depends on the older German version of Goldschmidt. Prof. Lawrence Hoffman of Hebrew Union College has been good enough to examine this disagreement in the versions and give assurance that the reading in the Soncino edition is not supported by the manuscripts or the tradition.

In the following text, R. Eliezer argues further to defend his view, point by point. There he further specifies his disagreement with R. Joshua, again placing the coming redemption in Tishri.

82

“On New Year the bondage of our ancestors ceased in Egypt.’ It is written in one place, *And I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians*, and it is written in another place, *I removed his shoulder from the burden*. ‘In Nisan they were delivered/ as Scripture recounts . ‘In Tishri they will be delivered in the time to come.’ This is learnt from the two occurrences of the word ‘horn.’ It is written in one place, *Blow the horn on the new moon*, and it is written in another place, *In that day a great horn shall be blown.*”

More is involved in all this discussion than simply the date of the coming redemption. The teaching here reveals two important matters: first, time is thought of as a series of integral years so that the day of creation and the day of final redemption are the same, and on that same basis the births and deaths of the patriarchs are placed on the same day; second, there is evident a disagreement about the month in which creation occurred, and therefore the month which marks the turning of the year. According to R. Eliezer, that turning of the year is in the autumn. For R. Joshua, on the other hand, creation began in the spring, whence Nisan had been called the first of the months of the year. *Rosh Hashanah 12a* suggests that R. Joshua’s dating of the annual cycles from Nisan prevailed: “Our Rabbis taught: ‘The wise men of Israel follow R. Eliezer in dating the Flood and R. Joshua in dating the annual cycles.’” In spite of that, again, the Mishnah under discussion in this first chapter of the tractate makes Tishri the month from which years are marked.

“There are four New Years. On the first of Nisan is the New Year for Kings and for festivals. On the first of Elul is the New Year for the tithe of cattle. R. Eleazar and R. Simeon, however, place this on the first of Tishri. On the first of Tishri is the New Year for years, for release and jubilee years, for plantation and for [tithe of] vegetables.”

The designation of the first spring month as “Nisan” derives, as do the other month names, from the Babylonian calendar. Even before the adoption of that Babylonian name, however, the month with which spring began had been taken to be the first month of a year based on the Babylonian lunar calendar, its months numbered rather than named. That calendar was adopted in Israel, evidently

in the seventh century, but after the reign of Josiah. Deuteronomy 16.1 still uses the old Canaanite name for the opening month of spring, Abib.⁵

Prior to this seventh-century adoption of the Babylonian lunar calendar beginning in the spring, there is evidence of a turning of the year in the autumn, in the month later called Tishri. This was the month of the great feast of Ingathering, later to be called Tabernacles, Booths, or *Sukkoth*. Exodus 23-16 speaks of that festival as occurring at the “going out” of the year, and Exodus 34.22 also places the festival at the turning of the year (*tequphath hashshanah*). That was all changed, of course, by the adoption of the Babylonian calendar beginning in the spring, yet something of that ancient role of the month of Tishri continued, and it must be this tradition that is reflected in the teaching of R. Eliezer, teaching that continued to reflect the earlier preeminence of the feast of Tabernacles as the day of creation and the day on which the promised one would bring to completion the redemption of Israel, however strong the later tradition that bound those limits of history to the Passover in the month of Nisan. That disagreement lies beyond our concerns, but it is important that there was a significant alternative to paschal expectation of the parousia in the first centuries of the Common Era, and that the Jewish calendar beginning with the first day of Tishri bears continuing testimony to that alternative.

2. Expectation of the Parousia in Early Christianity

B. Lohse, in his significant study of the Quartodeciman Pascha,⁶ argued that the difference between that form of paschal observance and the Sunday Pascha was that the latter was a celebration of the resurrection, while the Quartodeciman Pascha was focused entirely on eschatological expectation. That difference has been shown to be false, but his characterization of the Quartodeciman Pascha is also seriously oversimplified. His argument rested primarily on a somewhat contrived reconstruction of chapter 17 of *Epistula Apostolorum*, in which he sought to make the original form of that text announce the parousia at Passover. In fact, as is clear in the edition of Duensing (cited by Lohse on p. 15 of his study), Christ’s an-

nouncement of the parousia places it between Pentecost and the following Passover.

⁵ See R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London 1961) p. 185.

⁶ B. Lohse, *Das Passafest der Quartadecimaner* (Giltersloh 1953).

The text of the Ethiopic version on which Lohse (pp. 78f) attempted to build his reconstruction of the original is itself erroneous due, evidently, to a misprint in the text as presented by Wajnberg in the massive study of that document by Carl Schmidt. Schmidt notes that one would expect the parousia. within the paschal Pentecost and says of the peculiarity of situating that event outside the paschal period, “what motive has moved the author to this time determination is his secret, as it remains generally unclear whether a more definite time was really in his mind.”⁷

Nonetheless, in light of the ambiguity regarding the beginning of the year that we have seen in the Judaism of the period, we probably should not preclude the possibility that the writer of *Epistula Apostolorum* is reflecting in the second half of the second century an emerging custom of situating the turning of the year at a pole other than Pascha. If that pole opposite Pascha were a more or less definite time, it would be a custom of such late appearance that one could not, without patent anachronism, ascribe it to the risen Christ who addresses the apostles in that text. However, one cannot argue to such a conclusion from the text alone. All that appears from chapter 17 of *Epistula Apostolorum* is that its second century author did not attach eschatological expectation to Passover or to the paschal Pentecost. That consummate coming (*adventus*) in the fifth/sixth-century Latin fragments of the text) would fall between the day of Pentecost and the feast of Unleavened Bread.

By the time of the writing of *Epistula Apostolorum*, of course, parousia had already the familiar double meaning that would prove so important for homiletical and liturgical expression surrounding the turning of the year: the coming of Christ at the consummation of history, but also his first coming in the flesh at the incarnation. Irenaeus repeatedly uses the term in the latter sense,⁸ and Justin Martyr wrote:

“For the prophets have proclaimed two advents [*parousias*] of His: the one, that which is already past, when He came as a dishonoured and suffering Man; but the second, when,

⁷ Carl Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung. Übersetzung des äthiopischen Textes von Dr. Isaak Wajnberg. TU 3.13 (1919) p. 338.* Wajnberg's translation of the relevant text (p. 58, lines 1-2) places the parousia *in den Tagen des Passah- und Pfingstfestes*, a reading that disagrees with the Coptic, and with the earlier reading of the Ethiopic by L. Guerrier (*PO IX.3 [Paris 19131]*). To the ms. evidence used by Guerrier, Wajnberg adds only a Stuttgart ms. and his apparatus gives its reading as: “wenn die Tage des Passah- und Pfingstfestes vorbei sind.” He acknowledges two other Paris mss. which read, “zwischen dem Pfingst- und dem Passahfeste.” His translation, contrary to these readings, is not specifically defended.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.7.1, 4.26.1, 4.38.

according to prophecy, He shall come from heaven with glory, accompanied by His angelic host....”⁹

85

Justin refers neither of these, let alone both, to any particular point in the year, but at Rome both will continue to surround the Christian observance at the end of December as that emerges. By the fifth century, that festival is within the full light of history in the West and in much of the East, and, together with the feast of the Epiphany, constitutes the second pole of the liturgical year. Indeed, one or the other of these festivals was viewed as the beginning of that liturgical year that reached its central climax at Pascha.

3. The Earliest Evidence for Christmas

Our earliest documentary evidence for the observance of the nativity of Christ on December 25 shows it to be such a turning point of the liturgical year. This document is the Chronograph of 354, an almanac presenting (*inter alia*) lists of Roman holidays, consuls, city prefects, and two lists of burial dates, one of Roman bishops and another of martyrs, with the indication of the cemeteries in each case.¹⁰ Both of these burial lists are in calendrical order, not historical order, and the first date given in the *Depositio Martyrum* is December 25, “VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem. Iudee.” In the *Depositio Episcoporum* the first date is that for the burial of Dionysius in the cemetery of Callistus, “VI kal. Ianuarias,” December 27. The list proceeds through two other depositions in late December and continues through the months of the year in normal calendrical order to the notice of the burial of Eutychianus on December 8.

That notice is followed, however, by those of the burials of two other bishops, not in calendrical order, the first in October and the second in April. The first of these notices is that of the burial of Marcus, who died in 336; the second is of Julius, who died in 352. Since these notices fall outside the calendrical order and are in historical order (although the years of the bishops’ burials are not given), it may be safely concluded that the original calendar was prepared in 336, after the burial of Sylvester on December 31, 335, and that the notices for Marcus and Julius were subsequent additions to that original calendar. That calendar ran, as did the *Depositio Martyrum*, from December 25 to December 25, the date to which the martyrs’ list assigns the nativity of Christ at Bethlehem. From 336, then, we may say that at Rome the nativity of Christ on December 25 marked the beginning of the liturgical year.

⁹ Justin, I *Apol.* 52.3.

¹⁰ *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi, IX* (part 1; 1892) pp. 13-196.

That is the earliest clear and certain datum for the festival of the nativity. Can we get behind it? Hippolytus, we noted in Part One, took March 25 to be the actual date of the passion. This datum, recorded in the tables carved on the statue discovered in the sixteenth century near Porta Tiburtina, is repeated in Hippolytus' *Commentary on Daniel* 4.23, where the text notes as well that the nativity occurred on Wednesday, December 25. One manuscript, the oldest (tenth century), includes as well the curious phrase *pro tessaron aprilion*, just preceding that date. If the reference to December 25 represents an emendation of the manuscripts, this added phrase in the oldest of them may well be fragmentary evidence of the original reading.

The commentary has been known in fragments since the seventeenth century, but the complete work became available only in the nineteenth century and received its critical edition from Bonwetsch in 1897.¹¹ In that same year, Hilgenfeld offered the opinion that the reference to December 25 was a subsequent interpolation.¹² Louis Duchesne admitted the text to be of doubtful authenticity,¹³ and that assessment seems to have been shared by most patrologists. More recently, Jean Michel Hanssens has provided a slightly simplified but thoroughgoing analysis of the important manuscript data.¹⁴ Hanssens, himself convinced of the inauthenticity of the text, finally left the question just barely open. However, there seems no basis at present on which we can depend on the fourth book of Hippolytus' *Commentary on Daniel* for help in establishing the origin of the feast of the nativity of Christ on December 25.

A rather more useful observation was made by Gottfried Brunner in 1936 and repeated by Hans Lietzmann in his *History of the Early Church*.¹⁵ These noted that Augustine, in an Epiphany sermon (Sermon 202), says that the Donatists, having despised the unity of the Church, do not celebrate "with us" the feast of the Epiphany.

¹¹ G.N. Bonwetsch., *Hippolytus Werke, I*. GCS (Berlin 1897).

¹² A. Hilgenfeld, *Berliner philologische Wochenschrift XVII (1897) 1323-1326*, cited from H. Leclercq, DACL 121, col. 909.

¹³ L. Duchesne, *Christian Worship, Its Origin and Evolution* (London 1949) p. 258.

¹⁴ J.-M. Hanssens., *La liturgie d'Hippolyte. OCA 155* (Rome 1959) pp. 270-282.

¹⁵ G. Brunner, "Arnobius ein Zeuge gegen das Weihnachtsfest?" *JLW* 13 (1936) pp. 178-181; H. Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church. III: From Constantine to Julian* (Cleveland and New York 1953) p. 317. K. Holl (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, II. p. 141, n. 1) assigns this observation to a 1916 review by Jülicher not available to this study.

“With good reason have the heretical Donatists never wished to celebrate this day with us: they neither love unity, nor are they in communion with the Eastern Church where that star appeared. Let us, however, celebrate the Manifestation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on which He harvested the first fruits of the Gentiles, in the unity of the Gentiles.”¹⁶

87

This sermon makes it clear that the festival in question is the celebration of the visit of the Magi. Augustine makes no similar claim against the Donatists with regard to Christmas, however, neither in that sermon nor in any other, a peculiar circumstance given the greater importance of the nativity itself. Since in North Africa as at Rome it seems certain that Christmas was established before the Epiphany, one is left with the strong sense that the Donatists did celebrate Christmas. In such a case, that festival must antedate the Donatist schism, and the date of its establishment would thus be earlier than 311. Indeed, some have supposed that its observance could date from as early as 300 or even earlier and that the place of the origin of the festival could well have been North Africa, rather than Rome as has most commonly been presumed.¹⁷

4. Christmas and the History of Religions

A date before 312 would place Christmas prior to the Church's enjoyment of the protection of Constantine, and that would set the most frequently encountered explanation of the origin of Christmas in a new and more problematic context. That most common explanation has been, and probably is today, the derivation of the feast of the nativity from a Roman pagan festival on the winter solstice, set on December 25 in the Julian calendar at its institution in 45 B.C.

It would be difficult to find in the ancient world a religious tradition that was not sensitive to the movements of the sun, and of other celestial bodies as well. That this was true of Judaism, for example, is shown by the well-known zodiac mosaic of the synagogue of Beth Alpha. While the spring equinox may have generated more religious symbolism (and perhaps more religious fervor) than the other quarter-tense days, it is by no means difficult to discern the religious response to the winter solstice in the literary and monumental remains of the beginning of our era. The civic festivals, the rites of the

¹⁶ Thomas Comerford Lawler, trans., *St. Augustine: Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany. Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 15. (Westminster, Md. 1952), p. 170.

¹⁷ So, e.g., Leonhard Fendt, “Der heutige Stand der Forschung über das Geburtsfest Jesu am 25.XII und über Epiphaniastage,” *TL* 78.1 (January 1953) cols. 1-10; also, M. H. Shepherd, Jr., “The Liturgical Reform of Damasus I,” *Kyriakon. Festschrift Johannes Quasten, II*, p. 854.

various mysteries, Judaism, and Christianity all manifest in their several ways their sensitivity to the changing of the seasons. Behind this sensitivity surely lies a tradition that had its origins in agricultural concerns, but this sensitivity went beyond the concerns of the farmer. Humanity itself exists in a temporal frame of which the turning of the seasons is a particularly eloquent sign. We cannot oppose Christian belief in a

88

transcendent deity to pagan veneration of nature itself in such a way as to imply that Christians were insensitive to natural phenomena such as the changing seasons. While it seems likely that the first generation of Christians invested relatively little energy in chronological computations, standing as they did in expectation of the imminent consummation of history, the break between Christians and the synagogues during the final decade of the first century entailed isolation from the necessary authoritative intercalation of the lunar calendar, now regulated by the Babylonian sages. Therefore, with that break came dependence on the Julian solar calendar, which would lead to the determination of solar equivalents of old lunar dates such as Passover, and also a heightened awareness of the turning of the seasons, as marked by the quarter-tense days, the solstices and equinoxes.

From the time of Paul Ernst Jablonski and the Bollandist Jean Hardouin, both in the eighteenth century, it has been common to account for the Christian celebration of the nativity of Christ on December 25 as a Christian adaptation of the Roman winter solstice festival, the *Natalis solis invicti*. That festival was established on December 25 by the emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274, and it seems likely that the same date was the occasion of Aurelian's dedication of a temple to the sun god in the Campus Martius.

The cult of the sun was not, of course, first introduced to Rome by Aurelian. In his study of *The Cult of Sol Invictus*, Gaston Halsberghe has traced earlier manifestations of sun worship at Rome.¹⁸ Contending against Wissowa and others that there was at Rome an autochthonous sun cult, independent of Greek influence, he cites festivals marking the dedication of two temples. In *Fasti* of the first century B.C., there is the indication against the date of August 9: *Soli indigiti in colle Quirinali*. It was here on the Quirinal that the indigenous Roman sun cult was focused, maintained by the *gens Aurelia*. Again, following his conquest in Egypt, Augustus sent to Rome two obelisks, which were set up and dedicated to the sun. One of these was placed in the Circus Maximus, where the chariot races were under the protection of the sun (for the *quadrigae*, four-horse teams) and the moon (for the *bigae*). At Circus Maximus there was also a temple of the sun, the

¹⁸ Gaston Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden 1972).

festival of its foundation on August 28. This indigenous sun cult at Rome does not seem to have been especially sensitive to the winter solstice or

89

to any of the other quarter days. The second obelisk was set up in the Campus Martius, but there is no indication of the relation of that obelisk to the later temple built in the eastern part of that area by - Aurelian.

That autochthonous cult of Sol fell into eclipse at Rome in the second Christian century, and eastern sun cults, Mithraism and the cult of Sol *Invictus Elagabal*, came to predominate. Neither of those cults has been shown to have supported a public festival on the day of the winter solstice, however, and the distinctive importance of that day must be assigned finally to the attempt of Aurelian to refound the cult of Sol *Invictus* as a genuinely Roman religion, by contrast to the bizarre (by Roman standards) orientalism of the Syrian Sol *Invictus Elagabal*, brought to Rome by the adolescent Heliogabalus as emperor. Indeed, Halsberghe, without suggesting that there was already a Christian festival on December 25, presents the probability that one item in Aurelian's religious agenda was the provision of an authentically Roman alternative to the increasingly successful Christian mission. What seems clear is that his cult of Sol *Invictus* was promulgated, in the words of Henry Chadwick, "as a comprehensive monotheism which could embrace all the cults of the empire,"¹⁹ a religious component of the program for restoration of the unity of the empire that earned Aurelian the epithet "Restorer of the World." The syncretistic threat posed by Aurelian's solar monotheism was the single disruption of the peaceable circumstances in which the Church found herself between the extension of toleration by Gallienus (260-261) and the beginning of Diocletian's persecution in 303.

Given the well-documented devotion of Constantine to the cult of the sun, exemplified, inter alia, by his dedication of his life to Apollo while on the way to his encounter with Maxentius at Ponte Milvio, it is easy to believe that his reign would allow a blending of solar and Christian pieties. A devotee of Sol *Invictus* like his father before him, it is virtually certain that Constantine's restrictions upon certain occupations on Sunday had little to do with the Christian significance of that day, and was rather an expression of his Own solar piety. That same influence surely enhanced the popularity Of the festival of December 25, but if Sunday was observed by Christians prior to Constantine, we must allow the question of whether that was not true as well of the festival of December 25.

¹⁹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth 1967) p. 120.

If we take the point of Brunner and Lietzmann and place the establishment of the nativity of Christ on December 25 prior to the Donatist schism, and therefore prior to Constantine's victory over Maxentius and the ensuing protection of the Church, it becomes much more difficult to understand the adoption by a still only tentatively tolerated Church of a relatively new pagan festival, a festival observed for only around a quarter century, and one that had had significant counter-Christian associations. The likelihood of such adoption of Aurelian's festival would surely become still more remote after the beginning of Diocletian's persecution in 303. Given the slight space between the end of that persecution and the troubles leading into the Donatist schism, we must, if we suppose that the Donatists continued to observe the nativity on December 25, view with a much more cautious eye the standard explanation that the nativity of Christ on December 25 is only a Christian adoption of the pagan Roman *Dies natalis solis invicti*. Even if adapted to be the *natalis solis iustitiae*, such a festival would nonetheless represent the Church's accommodation to less than friendly imperial religious sentiment, however successfully bent to the uses of the gospel.

That association of Christ with the "sun of righteousness" of Malachi 4.2 was by no means only a function of the establishment of the nativity of Christ on the winter solstice. The popularity of that text was assured both by its eschatological content and by the association of the resurrection with dawn. In fact, we have an important text that associates Malachi 4.2 with the birth of Jesus from the time before the establishment of Aurelian's festival. This is the opusculum *De pascha computus* spuriously ascribed to Cyprian. The work, which seeks to correct the paschal tables of Hippolytus, was issued in 243, probably in North Africa. As did Hippolytus, the author takes March 25 to be the historical date of the passion, a Friday that was also the fourteenth day of the moon. That date being Pascha (and also the spring equinox), the author takes it to be also the first day of creation. It was only on the fourth day, however, that the sun and moon were created; therefore, the incarnation, assigned to Wednesday, March 28, coincides with the creation of the sun.

"O how admirable and divine is the providence of the Lord, that on that day on which the sun was made on the same day was

Christ born, the fifth of the kalends of April, the fourth day of the week, and so rightly did the prophet Malachi say to the people: ‘the sun of righteousness shall rise upon you, with healing in his wings.’”²⁰

The author does not tell us the source of that March date for the nativity, but it is clear that he sees it already as *natalis solis iustitiae*, over three decades before the establishment at Rome of the *natalis solis invicti*. The appearance of *De pascha computus* in 243 probably establishes a *terminus post quem*, of course, for the observance of the nativity of Christ on December 25. If we suppose that that festival was kept by the Donatists, we may place its establishment between 243 and 311; otherwise, the *terminus ante quem* would be 336.

That association of Christ with the sun on the basis of the prophecy of Malachi, however, might be understood to encourage still further the Christian adoption of the festival of Aurelian once it was established. There can be no doubt that in time the association of the nativity of Christ with the day of *sol invictus* did occur, as we shall see. Whether it was that association that in the first instance suggested December 25 as the date of the nativity of Christ is another and more controverted question.

5. The Computation of the Nativity from the Passion

An alternative explanation for the date of December 25 was presented by Louis Duchesne late in the last century. Noting that March 25 was taken as the historical date of the passion, he suggested that that same date’s association with the annunciation was not based on computation backward from December 25 to the date of the conception, but was an aspect of the paschal date itself. We noted above in Part One, section 2, that the themes of Pascha included not only the passion and resurrection, but the incarnation itself, and quoted passages showing that theme in the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis. There, in all likelihood, the paschal date was April 6, and Duchesne suggested that such a paschal date (as noted for the Montanists by Sozomen) would put the nativity on January 6. As Duchesne put it, “fractions are imperfections which do not fall in with the demands of a symbolical system of num-

²⁰ *De pascha computus* 19. Hartel, ed., CSEL 3.3, 266: “O quam praeclara et divina Domini providentia, ut in illo die quo factus est sol in ipso die nasceretur Christus V kl. Apr. feria IIII. et ideo de ipso merito ad plebem, dicebat Malachias propheta: orietur vobis sol iustitiae, et curatio est in pennis eius.”

bers”; therefore the date of the death of Jesus would be taken as being that of his conception as well. To that hypothetical suggestion he added:

“This explanation would be the more readily received if we could find it fully stated in some author. Unfortunately we know of no text containing it, and we are therefore compelled to put it forward as an hypothesis, but it is an hypothesis which falls in with what we may call the recognized methods in such matters.”²¹

He further wrote in the same place, “I would not venture to say, in regard to the twenty-fifth of December, that the coincidence of the *Sol novus* exercised no direct or indirect influence on the ecclesiastical decisions arrived at in regard to the matter.”

Four years before Duchesne’s death, Andre Wilmart published a study of the collection of thirty-eight Latin homilies spuriously ascribed to Chrysostom, one of which gives precise support to Duchesne’s hypothesis, as Wilmart carefully noted.²² That work is the tractate entitled *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae*, more briefly designated *De solstitiis et aequinoctiis* in the literature. Although it had been embedded in some of the very early printed editions of the works of Chrysostom, this tractate had remained relatively unknown and was clearly not known to Duchesne. Following that notice by Wilmart (which named an otherwise unknown Pontius Maximus as the author), the tractate received its standard edition by Bernard Botte, who included it as an appendix to his historical study of the origins of Christmas and Epiphany.²³

Botte’s study of the tractate showed that the Latin scripture citations in it contain variants peculiar to African authors, and he concluded that the work in its present form must have been produced there. In another instance, however, he recognized in the form of the angelic annunciation to Mary a clear semiticism, the substitution of *pax tecum* for the *chaire* of the Greek New Testament. *Pax tecum* is the Latin equivalent of *shlom lek* in the Peshitto.

Two decades after the appearance of Botte’s edition, Hieronymus Engberding called attention to a further semiticism: in line 118 of Botte’s edition we encounter the phrase,

²¹ Louis Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien* (Paris 1889) pp. 250f. The quotation here is in the translation of the fifth edition by M. L. McClure, *Christian Worship: Its Origin and Evolution* (London 1949), pp. 263f.

²² A. Wilmart, “La collection des 38 homélies latines de Saint Jean Chrysostome,” *JTS* xix (1917-1918) pp. 305-327, esp. 316f.

²³ Botte, pp. 88-105.

metellitum sive scaenophegiam, and in line 305, *scaenophegiae sive metellitidem*. These alternatives to *scaenophegia* (the Latinized form of the Greek term for

93

“booths”) are unknown in Latin; they are, on the contrary, rather clumsy transliterations of *metalle*, the Syriac term for the booths of the feast of Tabernacles. These semiticisms suggested to Engberding that the extant text is a North African Latin version of a work written in a Syriac-speaking region, most probably Palestine or Syria.²⁴

That latter suggestion seems unlikely, however. The more probable explanation for those Syriac symptoms is simply that the Latin author had a Syrian (or at least Syriac) background. There is, in any case, good reason for doubting that the tractate was written in Syria. The document rests a good bit of its argument on Roman month names based on counting March as the first month, rather than April as was customary in Syria. March is here designated the first month because it is the month in which Pascha occurs, and Exodus 12.2 is cited; from this, therefore, *numeraremus et septimum septembrem et decimum decembrem*. (These month names, of course, are much older, dating from a time-perhaps the fifth century B.C.-- when the Roman calendar had but ten months covering the agriculturally active part of the year and ignoring the rest.²⁵) *Apostolic Constitutions* V.13.1, by contrast, orders the celebration of the nativity on the twenty-fifth day of the *ninth* month, revealing a tradition that associated the Pascha with April, making that the first month of Exodus 12.2. The paschal date in question here is surely that which we examined in Part One, April 6, adopted as the solar equivalent to 14 Nisan in the Asian calendar (Artemisios 14). It would be difficult indeed to fit the argument of *De solstitiis* into that Syrian environment, whatever its (probably African) author’s semitic background.

A semitic background (however imprecise the author’s treatment of Jewish liturgical times) could, perhaps, have contributed to a feature of *De solstitiis* and of Duchesne’s “computation hypothesis” that has seemed to many to be contrived, namely, its setting the beginning and the end of Christ’s earthly life on the same day. We have seen above that rabbinic thought had a tendency to set the births and deaths of the patriarchs on the same day, either Passover in Nisan or Tabernacles in Tishri. Still, *De solstitiis* represents a significant departure from that rabbinic habit of fixing the beginning and end on the

²⁴ H. Engberding, “Der 25. Dezember als Tag der Feier der Geburt des Herrn,” *ALW* 11 (1952) 2543, esp. p. 36. Cf. the review of this essay by Botte, *Bulletin de Theologie ancienne et médiévale* VII (1954-1957), no. 918, P. 198.

²⁵ Lines 78-84 in the edition of Botte cited above. For the Roman numbering of the months from March, see E.J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (London 1968) pp. 44f.

same festival. Here all the four seasons are valorized in relation to the conceptions and births of the Forerunner

94

and the Redeemer. The coincidence is not of Christ's birth and death, as with the patriarchs, but of his conception and death. The birth of Christ is nine months after that spring equinox, on the winter solstice.

The argument of *De solstitiis* begins, however, with the conception of the Baptist, identifying the time of the annunciation to Zechariah by reference to his priestly duties in connection with the festivals of Tishri. This sets the conception of the Baptist at the autumnal equinox, and that is the "historical" anchor of the entire scheme. That autumnal conception places the birth of John at the summer solstice. However, since Gabriel at the annunciation to Mary announced that Elizabeth was in the sixth month of her pregnancy (Luke 1.36), the conception of Jesus was six months from the Baptist's conception, that is, at the spring equinox. The birth of Jesus, therefore, was nine months later, at the winter solstice.

Of the occurrence of Christ's conception and death on the same day, the tractate expresses itself almost laconically, without labored argument:

"Therefore, our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the kalends of April in the month of March, which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on the day that he was conceived on the same he suffered."²⁶

At that point, however, it quotes Exodus 34.25-26, which, in connection with Passover regulations, forbids boiling a kid in its mother's milk, since Christ, the Paschal Lamb, was immolated at the very time of his mother's lactation. It is interesting to find this text appealed to at this point, since the same image appears in a text of Augustine cited by Duchesne, *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum* 11.90 (PL 34.629), as a late exemplification of the principle of his hypothesis.

The tractate has relatively little to say about the nativity of Jesus, apart from assigning that to the winter solstice, until toward the end of the work. Botte suggested that the purpose of the work was to aid in the promulgation of Christmas in Africa in the early years after its institution at Rome. That seems highly unlikely in view of the absence of reference to any Christian festival at any of the quarter days, and the modest attention given to the nativity itself.

²⁶ Translated from Botte's edition, lines 230-233.

The major discussion of the nativity of Jesus is in the following lines:

“But the Lord was born in winter, in the month of December, on the eighth of the kalends of January when the mature olives are pressed so that the ointment, that is crisma, is produced, to which yield other herbs are mixed; when the bleating lambs are born, the vine branches are cut back with the scythe so that the sweet vintage is brought forth from which the apostles were inebriated with the Holy Spirit: for he said, ‘I am the vine and my Father the vinedresser; therefore every branch of mine that does not bear fruit is cut away and cast into the fire.’ But also they call it the birthday of the unconquered. Who, surely, is so unconquered as our Lord who triumphed over conquered death? Assuredly, what they dedicate to be the birthday of the sun is himself the sun of righteousness of whom the prophet Malachi said: ‘To you who fear his name the sun of righteousness shall rise and healing is in his wings.’”²⁷

In contrast to the earlier appeal to that Malachi text in *De pascha computus*, here the *sol iustitiae* is identified with the *solis natalem* at the winter solstice, while Christ’s victory over death identifies him as the *invictus* whose *natale* is this day. There is no explicit reference here to any public festival, but there is no reason to doubt that the text was written after the institution of Aurelian’s *Dies natalis solis invicti*.

Given the equal or greater emphasis laid on the other quarter days, the summer solstice and the autumn and spring equinoxes, it is difficult to see this work as concerned solely or even primarily with the winter solstice. Further, if it does not take the starting point of its argument from the identification of the death date of the Lord with the day of his conception, nonetheless that notion is clearly and repeatedly stated and gives full substantiation to Duchesne’s hypothesis. The computation of the day of Christ’s nativity from that of his death and conception, and the historical validation of that conception date by computation from the annunciation of the conception of Elizabeth, all this is argued from biblical sources (however ill used) and without reference to pagan Public celebrations.

²⁷ Lines 426-439: “Sed et dominus nascitur mense decembri hiemis tempore octavo kalendas ianuaras quando oleae maturae premuntur ut unctio, id est crisma nascatur, quo seges ab herbis extraneis seritur, cum agni balantes nascuntur, vineae falcibus sarmenta amputantur ut mustum suavitudinis adferant ex quo inebriati sunt apostoli sancto spiritu: Quia ego *sum inquit vitis et pater meus agricola: omne igitur sarmentum in me non adferens fructus excidetur et in ignem mittetur*. Sed et invicti natalem appellant. Quis utique tam invictus nisi dominus noster qui mortem subactam devicit? Vel quod dicant solis esse natalem ipse est sol iustitiae de quo malachias propheta dixit: Orietur vobis timentibus nomen ipsius sol iustitiae et sanitas est in pennis eius.”

At the same time, the solar theme already taken up in *De pascha computus* is here extended to reveal the four seasons of the annual

96

cycle as sacramental signs of the coming of the Messiah. It is no longer Pascha alone which gives significance to the year. The annual cycle, by the very turning of the seasons, speaks to the author of *De solstitiis* of the mysteries surrounding the incarnation: the conception of the Forerunner at the autumnal equinox and his birth at the summer solstice, the conception of the Redeemer at the spring equinox (the day of his passion) and his birth at the winter solstice. While there is no indication in the tractate that these times are observed as Christian festivals, all did come to be such and are such still, although the Conception of St. John is no longer observed in the West. That festival, normally observed on September 24, was celebrated at Constantinople on the previous day, September 23, the old beginning of the civil year at Constantinople and throughout Asia Minor. In the typikon of Hagia Sophia in the tenth century, the feast of the conception of the Baptist is still called "New Year," and marked the beginning of the course reading of the gospel of Luke, although the beginning of the civil year had been shifted to the beginning of September in the fifth century.

Augustine's awareness of this computation by identification of the day of Christ's death with that of his conception has already been noted above (*Quaest. in Heptateuchum* 11.90), but he expresses it again in *De Trinitate* IV.5:

"Not without reason is the number six understood to be put for a year in the building up of the body of the Lord, as a figure of which he said that he would raise up in three days the temple destroyed by the Jews. For they said, 'Forty and six years was this temple in building.' And six times forty-six makes two hundred and seventy-six. And this number of days completes nine months and six days, which are reckoned, as it were, ten months for the travail of women; not because all come to the sixth day after the ninth month, but because the perfection itself of the body of the Lord is found to have been brought in so many days to the birth, as the authority of the church maintains upon the tradition of the elders. For he is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried,

97

wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th. If, then, you reckon from that day to this you find two hundred and seventy-six days which is forty-six times six" (NPNF I.III, p. 74).

Both *De solstitiis* and these texts from Augustine take the date of the passion and conception to have been March 25. Other texts from the East, however, reveal vestiges of the similar association of these with April 6, the Quartodeciman paschal date reported by Sozomen for the Montanists. Chrysostom, in his sermon on the nativity (PG 49-351-362), a sermon preached on the December festival, reproduced the computation of the conception and birth dates of Christ from the conception of the Baptist, as we have seen it in *De solstitiis*. However, he does not refer to the solstices or equinoxes, and, significantly, presses the argument slightly (by twelve days?) to put the annunciation to Mary in April, the Antiochene Xanthikos (Aprillios, *hos esti Xanthikos*), which, we have noted on the basis of *Apostolic Constitutions V.13*, was remembered as the paschal “first” month in Syria. This slight variant in Chrysostom’s presentation of the computation of Mary’s conception from that of Elizabeth (PG 49.358) shows that Mary’s conception was already associated with April, the paschal month, at the time when the nativity of Jesus was still assigned to January 6. Chrysostom’s attempt to adopt the western computation of the nativity, rooted in the angelic announcement to Zechariah at the time of Tabernacles, should have brought Mary’s conception to March. It is possible that his placing the conception in April rather than March reflects a distinct celebration of the annunciation on April 6. Chrysostom does not relate that month to the passion, however, beyond referring to it as the “first month.” This bending of the computation to protect the association of the annunciation with April most probably reflects a vestige of the Asian fixed paschal date, April 6, although Chrysostom, of course, did not observe that quartodeciman date.

Chrysostom, concerned primarily with the December nativity date, only alludes in passing to the conception in April. A text ascribed to Epiphanius, however, is more precise. This is a commentary on Luke preserved in an Armenian manuscript in the library of San Lazzaro in Venice. Although the manuscript is late (1750),

98

Conybeare reported that the Armenian version is in the classical idiom, of the fifth century, and, while allowing for interpolation by Armenian scribes, he supposed the ascription to Epiphanius to be genuine. Folio 74 builds the computation on the annunciation to Zechariah, as had Chrysostom and *De solstitiis*:

“Zachariah remained until the completion of the two feasts, twelve days, and it was on Tisri 22, on the fifth day of the week [that he fell dumb], and on the Friday (*urbath*) he went home and came in to his wife Elisabeth and she conceived at eventide of Urbath the lightgiving torch which was to precede the sun of righteousness. So that from that day until Nisan, the 6th of April there are 5-1/2 months, a point set forth by the holy archangel when he said ‘In the sixth month.’”

That text does not identify the day of Nisan according to the lunar cycle, but a preceding passage does associate the conception day with the Passover ritual, albeit with the *tenth* day of Nisan, the day for the selection and setting apart of the paschal lamb, according to Exodus 12.3:

“So then on the sixth of April according to calendarial art, and according to the lunar numbering of the Jews on the tenth of the moon, the day on which they shut up the lamb hidden with divine mystery, whence also by supernal command these two met on one and the same day, on the sixth of April, and the tenth of the moon, and the image of the day is Kyriake, the lamb was shut up in the spotless womb of the holy virgin, he who took away and takes in perpetual sacrifice away the sins of the world.”²⁸

Epiphanius was a Palestinian, and his chronology of the passion, we may suppose, was rooted (as was that of Jerusalem) in the Matthean tradition, which placed the crucifixion on 15 Nisan, following the Passover eaten by Christ and the twelve in the night from Thursday to Friday. The identification of the tenth of Nisan with Sunday (Kyriake) in the above text would correspond to that pattern, putting 14 Nisan on Thursday. Such a synoptic passion chronology, of course, required a revision of the tradition rooted in the Quartodeciman Johannine chronology, which, Duchesne argued, had identified April 6 as the day of both the conception and the passion. Even where, as at Jerusalem, a different passion chronol-

99

ogy was followed, that day continued to mark the annunciation, and the nativity was celebrated nine months later. In spite of that synoptic dating of the passion, Epiphanius in this text seeks to retain the relation of the annunciation to Passover. (Among the Armenians who preserve today much of the old Jerusalem calendar, the nativity of Christ is still celebrated on January 6, but the annunciation is now kept one day later than Epiphanius' date, on April 7.)

The argument for the western nativity date by computation from the annunciation to Zechariah at Yom Kippur was repeated again by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century (PG 88.196). While all of these testimonies are late, it is noteworthy that none of them refers to the coincidence of the conception days of the Forerunner and the Redeemer with the equinoxes. Indeed, those reflecting the oriental date for the conception of Christ (April 6) could hardly do so. Rather, taking Tabernacles (including

²⁸ F.C. Conybeare, “The Gospel Commentary of Epiphanius,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 7 (1906) pp. 318-332. The latter of the passages quoted is on p. 324; the former from folio 74 is on p. 325. On p. 325 the writer acknowledges that some take the day of the week on which the annunciation occurred to have been Wednesday, but reasserts his contention that it was Sunday.

Yom Kippur) as the time of the annunciation to Zechariah, they seek to establish the historical dates of the conception of the Forerunner and the conception and birth of Christ. While many of these texts relate Mary's conception date to Passover, the identification of that date with the crucifixion on 14 Nisan presumes the Johannine chronology, and we encounter variants in areas that follow the synoptic chronology.

In any case, the argument of these texts (apart from *De solstitiis*) is independent of solar symbolism. Nonetheless, given the traditional appeal to "the sun of righteousness" of Malachi 4.2 as we saw it already in *De Pascha Computus* and still in the commentary of Epiphanius just cited, it is not surprising that the western tradition Of computation from the primitive paschal date, March 25, became suffused with solar symbolism.

6. Solar Symbolism at Christmas

If, however, this Christian solar symbolism is independent in its Origins from Aurelian's cult of *Sol invictus*, and even if we suppose the festival of the nativity to have been established prior to the accession of Constantine, there is no doubt that the altered circumstances of the Church under his protection did bring about an interplay between Christian and pagan pieties such as has been

100

taken to be the origin of Christmas by those who argue from the history of religions.

The tension between solar symbolism and the old solar worship is in full view in the preaching of Leo. On the one hand, he is sensitive to the astronomical significance of the solstice, and is appreciative of the natural change it marks. In the third of his sermons on the nativity (*Sermo XXIII*), he speaks of the delight afforded to unimpaired eyes by the light on this day as analogous to the joy given to sound hearts by the Savior's nativity (PL 54.199B). Again, in the sixth of those sermons (*Sermo XXVI*), he says:

"But this nativity which is to be adored in heaven and on earth is suggested to us by no day more than this, and by the new light, even now shining in its beginning, the splendor of this wonderful mystery (*sacramenti*) pours in upon our senses" (NPNF II.XII, P. 137).

On the other hand, Leo is uncompromising in his opposition to any confusion of the sun with its Creator. The second sermon on the nativity (*Sermo XXI*) attacks, "the pestilential notion of some to whom this our solemn feast day seems to derive its honour, not so much from the nativity of Christ as, according to them, from the rising of the new sun" (PL 54.198B). That this was not simply an attack on the absent faithless is indicated in the seventh nativity sermon (*Sermo XXVII*) where he rails against,

“the ungodly practice of certain foolish folk who worship the sun as it rises at the beginning of daylight from elevated positions: even some Christians think it is so proper to do this that, before entering the blessed Apostle Peter’s basilica, which is dedicated to the One Living and true God, when they have mounted the steps which lead to the raised platform, they turn round and bow themselves towards the rising sun and with bent neck do homage to its brilliant orb. We are full of grief and vexation that this should happen, which is partly due to the fault of ignorance and partly to the spirit of heathenism: because although some of them do perhaps worship the Creator of that fair light rather than the light itself, which is his creature, yet we must abstain even from the appearance of this observance: for if one who has abandoned the worship of gods, finds it in our own worship, will he not hark back again to

101

this fragment of his old superstition, as if it were allowable, when he sees it to be common both to Christians and to infidels?” (NPNF H.XII, p. 140).

In this, Leo shows no awareness of the considerable early Christian tradition for prayer toward the east. He, of course, presumably would be facing east during the liturgy at St. Peter’s or the other major basilicas of Rome. The faithful, on the other hand, would not. While, therefore, the custom against which he vents his vexation may include an element from the old religion, it is entirely possible that among those who bowed toward the east before entering the basilica were Christians from other parts of the world who had mixed feelings about the Roman arrangement which put the altar at the west end of the nave. The old tradition of orientation in prayer is, of course, yet another example of solar symbolism in Christian spirituality, in this instance a tradition shared with the Essenes and rooted ultimately in the Old Testament, although abandoned by post-exilic Judaism.²⁹ More to our point, however, is Leo’s awareness of the pagan celebration of the sun on this day, and his opposition to whatever vestiges of that tradition that might yet live. He, at least, is witness against any suggestion that the festival of Christ’s nativity is derived from that Roman festival.

Such derivation is first encountered in a Syriac gloss in the margin of a manuscript of Dionysius bar Salibi, a Syrian writer who died in 1171. That manuscript, first published by Assemani,³⁰ seems most likely to have been glossed after the original writer’s death, therefore within the last three decades of the twelfth century. The unknown glossator is

²⁹ On orientation in prayer, see C. E. Pocknee, *The Christian Altar* (London 1963) pp. 88-100. Also H. Leclercq in *DACL* 122 2665-2669.

³⁰ *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 11 (Rome 1721).

concerned to explain the reason for the transfer of the celebration of Christ's nativity from January 6 to December 25. He writes:

"The Lord was born in the month of January, on the day on which we celebrate the Epiphany; for the ancients observed the Nativity and the Epiphany on the same day, because he was born and baptized on the same day. Also still today the Armenians celebrate the two feasts on the same day. To these must be added the Doctors Who speak at the same time of one and the other feast. The reason for which the Fathers transferred the said solemnity from the sixth Of January to the twenty- fifth of December is, it is said, the following: it was the custom of the pagans to celebrate on this same day

102

of the twenty-fifth of December the feast of the birth of the sun. adorn the solemnity, they had the custom of lighting fires and invited even the Christian people to take part in these rites. When therefore, the Doctors noted that the Christians were won over this custom, they decided to celebrate the feast of the true birth this same day; the sixth of January they made to celebrate the Epiphany. They have kept this custom until today with the rite of lighted fire."

The text here has been translated from the French of Dom Botte,³¹ one of the strong proponents of the derivation of Christmas from the *natalis invicti*, but he himself warns against drawing historical conclusions from such a late text and denies that it represents a genuine tradition going back to the origins of the feast, fourth-century fathers who introduced the festival in the East, such as Chrysostom, were surely convinced that December 25 was in fact, the historical date of Christ's birth, and they betray no awareness of any suggestion that the festival was derived from a pagan observance.³²

As popular as that explanation of the origin of Christmas from a pagan festival has been in the scholarly literature of the past two centuries, we are still without any clear evidence that Leo's testimony is an attempt to alter the shape of a tradition or that there was a tradition which would be at variance with his testimony. There are many reasons why such a tradition might remain inaccessible to us, but it is important to remember that the more unqualified expressions of the derivation of the Christian feast from Aurelian's solstice festival are built finally on an unverified conjecture.

³¹ Botte, p. 66.

³² Botte (*ibid.*) acknowledges this, but adds: "Neanmoins, cette glose est interessante parce qu'elle montre que l'explication est naturelle. Duchesne disait que son explication serait plus vraisemblable si on la trouvait toute faite; mais on ne la trouve pas." That statement seems inexplicable coming from the editor

Although the derivation of Christmas from the *natalis solis invicti* rests upon conjecture, its popularity in the literature is neither surprising nor unaccountable. We must be impressed with the fact that there was a Roman public festival on December 25 by the time of our clear historical evidence for the Christian festival at the same place on that same date. That itself is a datum of no small significance, especially when we note the later evidence that associates the celebration of the nativity on December 25 specifically with the Roman church. The very precision of that attribution of the festival to the city where we also find the pagan festival's institution lends a degree of verisimilitude to the supposition of interplay between

103

the two, which we cannot always accord to more generalized assertions regarding the derivation of other Christian festivals from much less well-defined pagan institutions. If, for that reason, we should exercise caution in rejecting the "history of religions" hypothesis, we should not allow that caution to blind us to other data that are independent of the hypothesis. We have seen the fourth-century texts that identify the dates of the annunciation and the passion on March 25, that date assigned to the passion already in the early third century. We have seen also that the nativity date, nine months later, stands at the beginning of the liturgical year at Rome. Further, given the testimonies of *De solstitiis* and Augustine, both African sources, we should not allow the common association of the festival with Rome to exclude from further study the possibility that its first home was North Africa.³³

[And the chapter continues with §7. "Solar Festivals in Egypt" and a discussion of similar questions in the development of Epiphany.]

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of *De solstitiis* in the volume to which he appended that document which Wilmart had earlier recognized as a definitive demonstration of Duchesne's hypothesis.

³³ See n. 17 above. O. Cullmann, "The Origin of Christmas," *The Early Church* (Philadelphia 1956), p. 22, n. 5, seems to report the computation from March 25 to the nativity on December 25 in the third-century *Chronography* of Julius Africanus, but the note is imprecise. I have been unable to confirm his suggestion from the extant fragments of the African writer (PG 10.63-94).