



December 6, 2024

Some History of Gift Giving at Christmas

Warm hellos once again friends, brethren, fellow laborers, spiritual family, and scattered children of God from here on the Gulf Coast of lower Alabama. My wife and I pray and hope this finds you doing well, and that again your week has been blessed.

One focus has definitely shifted in society here in the U.S. and across the globe. You'll notice that in addition to Thanksgiving Day, there seems to be even more focus on the day following Thanksgiving. It has come to be called "Black Friday". I've even noticed this day being heavily advertised when traveling in Latin America countries, vivid examples from Guatemala come to my mind.

We know it's called "Black Friday" because of the hope that stores and retailers will have many shoppers who purchase things from them and thus put their financial status in "the black." Many of the sundry items purchased will be Christmas presents. I heard one news report back in 2016 that claimed that the average amount of money spent on Christmas in the U.S. is about \$900 per person! I am sure it is much more in 2024. One article had a headline "The biggest holiday splurge in history: Sales surge 13% as stores take a record \$2 billion on Thanksgiving and hope for \$3.1 billion on Black Friday!"

When I was a young boy, most stores would have never opened on Thanksgiving. Multiple ones were open this Thanksgiving. Some stores now a days are open all night long for Friday following Thanksgiving. So yes, in my lifetime the focus has indeed shifted.

So purchasing "things", stimulating revenue from every angle, has become the norm. We also know many if not most of the purchases this time of year are for

“gifts”. We also understand that much of the purchasing of items is for the upcoming holiday of Christmas. So a question comes to mind, that I’d like to discuss.

Why do those who celebrate Christmas exchange presents with one another?

Many people claim “that giving presents comes from the history of the wise men bringing presents to the infant Jesus”.

Matthew 2 records the account of the Magi (or wise men) coming from the East seeking the recently born king. *"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."* (vv.1-2) The phrase "wise men" is translated from the word *magos*. The Online Bible Greek Lexicon says *magos* is "the name given by the Babylonians (Chaldeans), Medes, Persians, and others, to the wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, augers, soothsayers, sorcerers etc." Oh, and as a side note it does not say in scripture there were 3 wise men. It doesn’t tell us how many.

I would suspect that these men were very well likely part of the Jewish community still in Babylon. Notice the description of the gift-giving they participated in. *"And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."* (v. 11)

Notice that they did not give the gifts *to each other*! The gifts were all given to the child Jesus, whom they recognized as a potential king. It was customary when coming into the presence of a king to present him with gifts. This is why they brought and presented their gifts. They did *not* do this to somehow start a tradition of giving gifts to one another.

Here's a little history of how gift-giving became associated with December 25th taken from "Celebrations, the Complete Book of American Holidays" by Robert J. Myers, M.A.

"The custom of giving gifts to relatives and friends on a special day in winter probably began in ancient Rome and northern Europe. In these regions, people gave each other small presents as part of their year-end celebrations."

"In some areas of northern Germany, Saint Nicholas' assistant, Knecht Ruprecht (Servant Rupert), gives presents to good children. He gives whipping rods to the parents of bad ones. In Sweden, many children receive presents from the elf Jultomten, called Julenissen in Denmark and Norway.

"In Italy, La Befana brings presents on the eve of Epiphany. According to legend, the Wise Men asked the kindly old witch to accompany them to see the infant Jesus. She refused, saying she was too busy and had to clean her house, and so she missed the wondrous sight. Each year, La Befana goes from house to house, leaving gifts and looking for the Christ child."

Here's a quote from "Christmas and Christmas Lore" by Crippen: "Modern Christmas is a composite of several year-end festivals celebrated in pagan Rome. The Saturnalia, (December 17-21) was a time of "extravagant decadence" when slaves and masters traded places for a few days. It was a season of revelry where the common greeting was "bona Saturnalia."

Next came the Sigillaria-the feast of dolls-on the 22nd when toys were purchased and given to children. The Brumalia (December 25) was celebrated as the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun, when the days began to lengthen after the solstice."

I mention some of these because it certainly appears gift giving at Christmas time is not something Bible believers would want to be involved with. In fact, with plenty of historically documented research you'll find "Christians" shouldn't be

celebrating Christmas as well, for its origins are not from God or his word, and nowhere does it say Jesus was born on December 25th, in fact quite the opposite. We'll examine this topic more in the weeks ahead...

Arms up friends! Our sincere prayers and thoughts are with you daily. Thanks in advance for your heartfelt prayers for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Scott Hoefker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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