

Addis Ababa Bible Training Institute Report

Christmas, Cultures, Calendars, and Tradition



The students of the AABTI are on a break from December 15 until January 18, 2025. They have been working hard and will certainly enjoy this break. As in the US, this break time includes the Christmas holiday period. Yet, Christmas in Ethiopia is celebrated on our January 7th rather than December 25th as we do here in the US. This brings up the question in the Western mind as to “Why January 7th?” Most westerners would think it is just a different tradition.

Tradition is a significant factor in all things related to Christmas and many other religious practices within the broader Christian community. Anytime “tradition” is the driver behind a particular Christian practice, caution is warranted. We won’t explore this further beyond the recognition that “Christmas” is all about tradition.

Are the differing dates for Christmas simply a matter of differing traditions? Well, yes, and no. If a particular culture’s choice regarding which Calendar system to use can be considered “tradition,” then, yes. But if that does not fall into your idea of “tradition,” then, no.

What is this issue of different “Calendar” systems. It has to do with the different methods of dealing with “time” in relation to the

discrepancies between the lunar and solar cycles. Under no calendar system presently used, do the lunar and solar cycles “match” perfectly. Thus, adjustments must be made to keep some semblance of “regularity” in our calendar’s accounting for the lengths of months versus the length/s of each year.

In the “Western” tradition, we use a “Gregorian” calendar which was instituted in 1582 under the Catholic Pope Gregory. Previously, the “Julian” calendar was used. It was instituted in 46 BC under the reign of Julius Caesar. It overestimated the length of the solar year by about 11 minutes every year. Thus, when the “Gregorian” calendar was instituted in 1582, the Julian calendar’s December 25th was on the Gregorian calendar’s January 7th and so it has remained. But they do celebrate Christmas on December 25th in Ethiopia – but, based on Julius Caesar’s 46 BC calendar (with further adjustments for Ethiopia’s use of the Julian Calendar)!

OK, that’s more than you wanted to know about Calendars, Lunar cycles, and Solar cycles. Back to Cultures and Traditions. We are all aware of the sketchy past regarding the development of Western Christmas traditions. Go to History.com and search for “history of Christmas” if you want to be reminded of some of those.

Like the history of “Western” Christmas, Christmas traditions in Ethiopia have some sketchy aspects. But overall, their Christmas traditions are often more wholesome and less commercial than those in our Western tradition.

Don’t let these reflections detract from whatever traditional “enjoyment” you and your family have for your Christmas traditions.

Blessings in Him,

Jim Wilson