

Nativity

The feast of the Nativity of Christ is kept by the Coptic Church on 29 Kiyahk.

The obligation to observe this feast was stipulated in the *Apostolical Constitutions* 5.13: “Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate,” where it is described as a public holiday to all, including slaves and servants: “Let them rest on the festival of His birth, because on it the unexpected favour was granted to men, that Jesus Christ, the Logos of God, should be born of the Virgin Mary, for the salvation of the world.”

Many references to the feast of the Nativity occur in the writings of various fathers. ORIGEN (c. 185-254) speaks of the cave at Bethlehem where He was born: “this sight is greatly talked of in surrounding places, even among the enemies of the faith” (*Against Celsus* 1.51). He also refers to the festivals kept in commemoration of the Nativity, Epiphany, the Resurrection, and Pentecost (*Against Celsus* 8.22).

During the first three centuries of the Christian era, it seems that the celebration of Christ’s nativity and the Epiphany took place on one and the same day, 6 January. Thereafter, from the fourth century onward, the two occasions have been celebrated separately in all churches of Christendom except the Armenian.

There is no indication in any of the Gospels as to the exact day of the week or time of year on which Christ was born, and, therefore, the time could not be determined with any accuracy. Referring to the lack of agreement on the subject, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (c. 150-215) states: “. . . there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and on the twenty-fifth day of Pachon. . . . Further, others say that he was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth

of Pharamuthi” (*Stromata* 21).

The [Constitutions of the Holy Apostles](#), however, strike a note of certainty: “Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of the ninth month.” The month in question here is the ninth of the Hebrew calendar.

The difference of opinion also applies to the year of Christ’s nativity. To Irenaeus (c. 130-200), it was the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus, A.U.C. 751 or 3 B.C., an opinion shared by Tertullian (c. 160-200). Other historians held the view that Christ’s birth took place in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, the twenty-eighth year after the [conquest](#) of Egypt, A.U.C. 752 or 2 B.C. To this school of thought belongs Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215), Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170-236), EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA (c. 260-340), and EPIPHANIUS, bishop of Salamis (c. 315-403).

Another ecclesiastical writer, Dionysius Exiguus, the Scythian monk who lived in [Rome](#) toward the end of the [fifth century](#) and in the first half of the sixth and was the first to introduce the system of using the year of the Incarnation as the beginning of the Christian era, fixed the year A.U.C. 753 or 1 B.C. as the year of Jesus’ birth.

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