

REFERENCE WORK TO BIRTHDAYS

The Lore of Birthdays (New York, 1952) by Ralph and Adelin Linton

“Originally the idea [of birthday greetings and wishes for happiness] was rooted in magic. The working of spells for good and evil is the chief usage of witchcraft. One is especially susceptible to such spells on his birthday, as one’s personal spirits are about at that time. Birthday greetings have power for good or ill because one is closer to the spirit world on this day. Good wishes bring good fortune, but the reverse is also true, so one should avoid enemies on one’s birthday and be surrounded only by well-wishers. ‘Happy birthday’ and ‘Many happy returns of the day’ are the traditional greetings”

The giving of birthday gifts is a custom associated with the offering of sacrifices to pagan gods on their birthdays. Certainly the custom was linked with the same superstitions that formed the background for birthday greetings. “The exchange of presents... is associated with the importance of ingratiating good and evil fairies... on their or our birthdays”

The traditional birthday cake and candles also have their origin in ancient pagan idol worship. The ancients believed that the fire of candles had magical properties. They offered prayers and made wishes to be carried to the gods on the flames of the candles. Thus we still have the widely practiced birthday custom of making a wish, then blowing out the candles. The Greeks celebrated the birthday of their moon goddess, Artemis, with cakes adorned with lighted candles...

The Greeks believed that everyone had a protective spirit or daemon who attended his birth and watched over him in life. This spirit had a mystic relation with the god on whose birthday the individual was born. The Romans also subscribed to this idea. . . . This notion was carried down in human belief and is reflected in the guardian angel, the fairy godmother and the patron saint. . . . The custom of lighted candles on the cakes started with the Greeks. . . . Honey cakes round as the moon and lit with tapers were placed on the temple altars of [Artemis]. . . . Birthday candles, in folk belief, are endowed with special magic for granting wishes. . . . Lighted tapers and sacrificial fires have had a special mystic significance ever since man first set up altars to his gods. The birthday candles are thus an honor and tribute to the birthday child and bring good fortune...”

Herodotus, Persian Wars, Book II, ch. 82

“The Egyptians... discovered to which of the gods each month and day is sacred; and found out from the day of a man’s birth, what he will meet with in the course of his life, and how he will end his days, and what sort of man he will be”

Wikipedia. Birthdays. July 12, 2007 version.

It is thought that the large-scale celebration of birthdays in Europe began with the cult of Mithras, which originated in Persia but was spread by soldiers throughout the Roman Empire. Before this, such celebrations were not common; and, hence, practices from other contexts such as the Saturnalia were adapted for birthdays. Because many Roman soldiers

took to Mithraism, it had a wide distribution and influence throughout the empire until it was supplanted by Christianity.

(Josephus. *Against Apion, Book II, Chapter 26*)

“Nay, indeed, the law does not permit us to make festivals at the birth of our children, and thereby afford occasion of drinking to excess.”

Encyclopedia Judaica (vol. iv, p. 1054)

“The celebration of birthdays is unknown in traditional Jewish ritual” (vol.4, p.1054)

Ante-Nicene-Fathers Vol-9-p669

For Herod having laid hold on John bound him and put him in prison, not daring to slay him outright and to take away the prophetic word from the people...And up to this point I think that the movements of the people of the Jews, which seem to be according to the law, were nothing else than the movements of the daughter of Herodias...And on birthdays, when the lawless word reigns over them, they dance so that their movements please that word.

*Some one of those before us has observed what is written in Genesis about the birthday of Pharaoh, and has told that the worthless man who loves things connected with birth keeps birthday festivals; and we, taking this suggestion from him, **find in no Scripture that a birthday was kept by a righteous man.***

The Catholic Encyclopedia states:

Origen, glancing perhaps at the discreditable imperial Natalitia, asserts (in Lev. Hom. viii in Migne, P.G., XII, 495) that in the Scriptures sinners alone, not saints, celebrate their birthday (Martindale C. Christmas, 1908).

..of all the holy people in the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners (like Pharaoh and Herod) who make great rejoicings over the day on which they were born into this world below (Origen, in Levit., Hom. VIII, in Migne P.G., XII, 495)

The World Book Encyclopedia (volume 3, page 416) states:

“The early Christians did not celebrate His [Christ's] birth because they considered the celebration of anyone's birth to be a pagan custom.”

(“The Strange Origins of Our Modern Birthday Customs,” August 13, 2008).

“During the Christian era, the early followers of Christ didn't believe in celebrating birthdays, preferring—as was the case in earlier eras—of honoring one's death. Their belief was that only in death was there true deliverance worthy of honoring one's 'death day' [a

reference to Ecclesiastes 7:1, where Solomon asserts that the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth]. They also believed that Egyptian and Greek birthday celebrations were pagan festivals and should not be duplicated”

Schneider goes on to observe that by “the fourth century, Christians—having generally agreed on the date of Christ's birth—began celebrating the event, ergo Christmas.”

Compiled by Clinton R. Smith