

Feature Article: JAF3352

## BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

by David W. T. Brattston

This article first appeared in CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 35, number 02 (2012). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

---

Jehovah's Witnesses believe it is a sin to celebrate birthdays, which they dismiss as heathen superstition or rooted in "ancient false religion." The prohibition can be found in the Watchtower Society's *Reasoning from the Scriptures*,<sup>1</sup> *What Does God Require of Us?*<sup>2</sup> and *What Does the Bible Really Teach?*<sup>3</sup>

### INADEQUACY OF WATCHTOWER LITERATURE

A major problem with Watchtower literature I found on its website is that no personal author is ever identified, which disables the reader from checking his or her qualifications or standing in the scholarly community. Another shortcoming, at least for the moral permissibility of birthday parties, is that it provides only the names of a non-Witness book or author, for example, *The World Book Encyclopedia* in *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* paragraph 7.

Another problem is that the non-Witness sources it cites are too old to still be authoritative or available. For example, *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (1989) relies on books published in 1848, 1874, and 1952.<sup>4</sup> Because previously lost early Christian writings are discovered every two decades or so, we today know far more about the early faith than previous modern generations. Significant new insights of the ancient church are provided by such recent discoveries as the *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* and the *Toura Manuscript* in our own time.

Actually, the *Reasoning* book is scholarly and well documented in comparison to *What Does God Require of Us?* and *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* They provide no specific references except the Bible, not even names of authors or titles, or any indication that better evidence lies behind them. The Witness teaching is presented as the only uncontroverted truth, and asks the reader to abandon their present version of Christianity, and condemn whole families of denominations, on the basis of a few lines of uncorroborated text. Most Watchtower publications state merely "early Christians did..." without citing specific ancient Christian authors or other supporting references. No source or direction is identified that the reader can consult for questions or explanations.

## THE PROPER DATABASE

To avoid error, there is no substitute for examining the original documents from the early centuries, and let the ancients speak for themselves. The present article accordingly examines the entire extant body of Christian literature before the persecution, mass apostasy, and epidemic of AD 249–251. At present, this contains about five hundred works by about one hundred authors.

Ethical objections in early church history to celebrating one's birthday are found in only one of these hundred-odd Christian authors. Even he stands alone in his opposition, which would indicate that other Christians did not consider birthdays to be the issue or sin that Witnesses do. Origen was a Bible scholar, commentator, and preacher who wrote more on Christianity than anyone else before the invention of printing. Of the forty-some works that have come down to us, only four of Origen's Bible commentaries and collections of sermons even mention birthday celebrations.

According to Origen's *Commentary on Matthew 10.22*, Christians should not observe birthdays because the only individuals in Scripture who did so also put people to death on that day: the Pharaoh of Joseph executed his chief baker (Gen. 40:20–22), and King Herod had John the Baptist killed because of Herod's rash oath to reward the dancer who provided entertainment at the festivities (Matt. 14:6–10). Without mentioning Origen, Jehovah's Witnesses heavily rely on these two incidents. Origen surmised from the Gospels that Herod was fond of matters connected with birthdays and that "the lawless word" reigns on such occasions.

Origen began *Commentary on Matthew 10.22* with, "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."<sup>5</sup> Origen's predecessor who wrote about Pharaoh's birthday party was not a Christian, but a member of what Jehovah's Witnesses like to condemn as "false religions." The teaching originated in Philo the Jew's *On Drunkenness*.<sup>6</sup> Even here, the objection is not to birthday parties *per se* but to drunkenness, citing Pharaoh as an example. Curiously, *Reasoning from the Scriptures* contains no entry on alcohol or drunkenness.

## Jehovah's Witness Inconsistency

*Homilies on Leviticus 8.3.2* presents several lines of text on the unchristian nature of celebrating one's own birthday or that of one's child. However, it contains a few distasteful surprises for Jehovah's Witnesses. Citing the examples of Jeremiah, Job, and believers in his own day, Origen preached that the proper Christian activity for one's birthday is to curse it, but I doubt that Witnesses pass the day in this activity. Origen considered both such cursing and refraining from birthday parties to be inextricably linked to the doctrine of original sin, which is the belief that the sin of Adam taints the whole human race. For this reason, said Origen, the church baptizes infants—something Witnesses roundly oppose.

*Homilies on Genesis* 7.1 touches in passing on observing one's birthday, without comment on its desirability or not, while *Homilies on Samuel* 1.8 merely mentions that people in Origen's day held birthday parties for their children, without Origen condemning the practice. Origen mentioned the topic in these paragraphs only secondarily to his observation that, for his infant son Isaac, Abraham celebrated not the day of birth or anniversary thereof but the day he was weaned (Gen. 21:8). To be consistent exegetes of Scripture, Witnesses ought to hold parties for weanings on the same authority that they shun birthdays. Yet this is not advocated in their publications.

The same Origen who prohibited observing the anniversaries of one's birth also discountenanced the practice, recent in his time, of designating and maintaining separate buildings exclusively for Christian public worship, be they called "churches" "meeting houses," or "kingdom halls."<sup>7</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses should examine the entire scope of Christian antiquity before damning the innocent and community-building gatherings of Christians.

Indeed, *Reasoning from the Scriptures* concedes that "wholesome gatherings of family and friends at other times to eat, drink, and rejoice are not objectionable."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the activities accompanying the celebrations are not harmful in themselves, but only on a particular day, just like commemorating Christ's coming into the world is laudable and encouraged on any day except December 25.

In conclusion, both Origen and the Witnesses purport to root their opposition to birthday celebrations in their interpretation of the Bible, yet no Bible passage can be found forbidding it. Witnesses raise the further argument from ecclesiastical history, but this in turn can be traced to nobody but Origen, himself singular in the minority, and JW literature diverges from Origen on such matters as weanings, child baptism, and Christian houses of worship. The Witnesses therefore are inconsistent in their approach both to Scripture and church history, and have no good grounds for their rejection of birthday celebrations.

**David W. T. Brattston, J.D.**, is a retired lawyer residing in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada. His articles on early and contemporary Christianity have been published by a wide variety of denominations in every major English-speaking country.

---

## NOTES

- 1 *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985, rev. 1989), 68–70.
- 2 *What Does God Require of Us?* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, [n.d.]), chap. 11: Beliefs and Customs That Displease God, 4.
- 3 *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2005), chap. 16. par. 7–8, 157.
- 4 The Witnesses cite (incompletely) Augustus Neander, *The History of the Christian Religion and Church, During the First Three Centuries*, trans. Henry John Rose (New York: 1848); Patrick Fairbairn, ed., *The Imperial Bible Dictionary* (London: 1874); Ralph and Adelin Linton, *The Lore of Birthdays* (New York: 1952).
- 5 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.22, as translated in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. American rep. ed. by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885–96; continuously reprinted Edinburgh: T and T Clark; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson), vol. 10, 428f.

- 6 *Ibid.*, 50.208–9.
- 7 *Against Celsus* 1.5, 3.34.
- 8 *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1985, rev. 1989), 70.