



Festivals of Light

The Deluge and the seven days of brilliant light immediately preceding it were a universal experience, and they left indelible memories. Many of the religious rites and observances of all creeds go back to these events of the past in which the celestial gods Saturn and Jupiter were the main participants. Among the most ancient of all such observances were festivals of light of seven days' duration, held in honor of Saturn. The "seven days of light" just before the Deluge overwhelmed the Earth are recreated in these feasts. [\(1\)](#)

Herodotos describes a nocturnal light festival held each year at Sais in commemoration of Osiris' death and resurrection. It was called the Feast of Lamps:

There is one night on which the inhabitants all burn a multitude of lights in the open air round their houses. . . . These burn the whole night. . . . The Egyptians who are absent from the festival observe the night of the sacrifice, no less than the rest, by a general lighting of lamps; so that the illumination is not confined to the city of Sais, but extends over the whole of Egypt. [\(2\)](#)

In Rome the feast of light was named Saturnalia. According to tradition the Saturnalia had been established in honor of Saturn when, all of a sudden, after a lengthy and prosperous reign, "Saturn suddenly disappeared." [\(3\)](#) Macrobius wrote that in celebrating the Saturnalia the Romans used to honor the altars of Saturn with lighted candles . . . sending round wax tapers during the Saturnalia." [\(4\)](#) In his time the festival was celebrated for three consecutive days but, Macrobius wrote,

And yet in fact among the men of old there were some who supposed that the Saturnalia lasted for seven days . . . for Novius . . . says: 'Long-awaited they come, the seven days of Saturnalia' ; and Mummius too . . . says: 'Of the many excellent institutions of our ancestors, this is the best—that they made the seven days of the Saturnalia begin when the weather is coldest.' [\(5\)](#)

Hannukah and Christmas are both feasts of light and, like the Saturnalia, both can be traced to the days of the Universal Deluge. The Hebrew tradition that Hanukkah was established to commemorate the "miracle with the oil" that was found undepleted and sufficed for seven days, is a poor rationalization. A better ground for a re-establishment of a holiday, so similar to the Saturnalia, in Judea, was in the fact that in the middle of the second century before the present era Rome conquered Greece, and about the same time in the rebellion of the Hashmanaim (better known by the name of one of the sons, Judah Maccabi) against Hellenistic rule, the people of Palestine were drawing near the Roman world with its usages. It appears that the Romans fomented the revolt in the Hellenized provinces at the time of their conquest of Greece. Thus the feast of Hanukkah seems to be an adaptation of the Roman Saturnalia. [\(6\)](#)

The observation of this festival was later taken over by the festival of Christmas, which was originally observed for seven days, from the 25th of December until the first of the New Year.

1. [The earliest of the festivals of this type that we know of was the yearly seven-day-long celebration commemorating the inauguration of the temple of Ningirsu in Babylonia in the time of Gudea (before ca. 2000 B.C.). For this and other similar festivals, see P. Bourboulis, *Ancient Festivals of "Saturnalia" Type* (Salonica, 1964). Ningirsu was "he who changed darkness into light," the same as Ninib, or Saturn (M. Jastrow, *Die Religion Babyloniens und Assyriens*, ch. IV, pp. 56ff). In Athens the feast in honor of Saturn was called the *Kronia*. See H. W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians* (London, 1977), pp. 29-30. It would appear that the main idea behind the Saturnalia-type festivals, so widespread in antiquity, was a re-enactment of the conditions that existed during the Golden Age when Saturn reigned. The celebration of the Roman Saturnalia, which, according to Macrobius, pre-dates the founding of Rome by many centuries (VII. ??), was marked by a reversal of social relations, the release of the statue of Saturn that stood in the Forum from its bonds (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* VII. ??), the crowning of a mock-king (apparently representing Saturn) whose every command had to be strictly obeyed (Tacitus, *Annales* 13, 15; Epictetus, *D*, I. 25. 8; Lucian, *Saturn.* 2. 4. 9), and who was later sacrificed on the altar of Saturn. Some details of such a sacrifice are given in *Acta Sancti Dasii*, ed. by F. Cumont in *Analecta Bollandiana* XVI (1897). See also Cumont, "Le roi des saturnales," *Revue de Philologie* XXI (1897), pp. 143-153. Porphyry reports the existence of a similar festival on Rhodes during which a man was sacrificed to Kronos (*De Abstinencia* II. 54). A similar Persian festival was the Sacaia (Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* IV. 66). A possible parallel in Mexico may be the festival Atemoztli, "Coming Down of the Waters," described in a manuscript reproduced in Kingsborough, *The Antiquities of Mexico*: "On the XXI of December they celebrate the festival of that god who, they say, was the one that uncovered the earth when it was annihilated by the waters of the Deluge."].
2. Herodotos II. 62, transl. by George Rawlinson. Cf. J. G. Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, second edition (London, 1907), pp. 300f.
3. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I. 7. 24: subito non comparuisset. [It was then, according to Macrobius, that Italy came to be called Saturnia in honor of the planet. Cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanorum* I. 6; Ovid, *Fasti*, VI. 1. 31.]
4. (*Saturnalia* I. 7. 31-32, transl. by P. Davies, 1969). Macrobius noted also the opinion of those who "think that the practice is derived simply from the fact that it was in the reign of Saturn that we made our way, as thou to the light, from a rude and gloomy existence to a knowledge of the liberal arts." [Cf. above, "Tammuz and Osiris," n. 9 on the Egyptian light festival in honor of Osiris.]
5. *Saturnalia* X.
6. Similarly, the way of praying with covered head appears to be a taking over of the Roman usage—the Greek custom was to pray with an uncovered head.