

Anonymous

De Solstitiis et Aequinoctiis
conceptionis et nativitatis Domini nostri Jesu Christi et Johannis Baptistae

On the Solstices and the Equinoxes
of the conception and nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ and of John the Baptist

*(CPL 2277)*¹

Translated by Isabella Image

2022

¹ V.1.0. This translation was made by Isabella Image at Christmas 2021. The editing, formatting, and extra comments was by Roger Pearse. This draft translation is released by them into the public domain.

Introduction

a. Synopsis

The text aims to prove that John the Baptist and Christ were conceived at the year's two equinoxes and born at the two solstices. This is done using two main texts, Exodus 23 and Zechariah 8.19. Additionally, the author assumes that Zechariah father of John the Baptist was the same as the priest mentioned in Isaiah 8, and as the author of the biblical book of Zechariah. He is taken to be High Priest, and the day when he saw the angel Gabriel (Lk. 1) was when he was offering the once-yearly sacrifice for the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur.

b. Structure.

The text is clearly structured. I have divided it into nine sections, and given each a title. The divisions and titles are purely editorial. The text is not divided in the edition, nor in those manuscripts accessible to me.

1. Scripture foretold when Christ and John would be born
2. The proof texts: Zechariah 8 and Exodus 23
3. 24th September: John's conception
4. 25th March: Christ's conception (and death)
5. 24th June: John's birth
6. 25th Dec: Christ's birth
7. Features of the autumn equinox
8. Features of the spring equinox
9. Features of the two solstices

c. Text.

On the whole I have used the Botte edition. However (as Botte himself points out) the text is extremely corrupt, so on occasion I have referred to the Troyes manuscript.² The translation is marked in angular brackets <thus>, where the reading of the Troyes manuscript has been adopted. However, difficulties remain and the sense has occasionally been deduced (e.g. for the paragraph on dating in the time of Tiberius). The section on the spring equinox (here, section 8) is particularly problematic.

d. Dates.

This text is all about four dates; the dates of the solstices and equinoxes. In this translation all these dates are given in modern form, as "25th December" and so on. But this obscures a feature of the text. In the Latin original the dates are all given in the Latin form, counting back from the end of the month. So they are all "eight days before the kalends of ...". The Latin date of "eight days before the kalends of January" is our 25th December. The solstices and equinoxes are in September (VIII kal. Oct.), December (VIII kal. Jan.), March (VIII kal. Apr.) and June (VIII kal. Jul.) respectively. By Latin reckoning, these are obviously all exactly six months apart. But when we use the modern form, because two of these months have 30 days and two have 31, two of these points are 25th of the month and the other two are in fact the 24th.

² Troyes 523, fol. 205v-210v, where it is attributed to Pontius Maximus. The colophon makes clear that the manuscript came from Clairvaux.

Passover starts on 15th Nisan; Jewish days start at sundown, so the Passover meal is eaten the night before. Hence the author's reference to the Last Supper on 14th Nisan.

The author is aware that the Jewish months are lunar. Yom Kippur is a fast day and falls on the 10th Tishri. The author also mentions the festival of Tabernacles, which is 15th to 21st Tishri.

The reader should also recall that Roman reckoning of dates is inclusive, rather than the exclusive calculations used in the English-speaking world. Thus to us a week is 7 days, while to them it is 8 days, including the day from which you start and the day on which you end.

e. Scripture.

The author's citations of Scripture are highly tendentious throughout. Where possible I have given another early author who uses that variant, but I have not always found direct equivalents. The text of the Latin bible was not standardised at this period.

II

On the Solstices and the Equinoxes of the conception and nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ and of John the Baptist

1. Scripture foretold when Christ and John would be born

My brethren, I don't know if anyone has dared before to understand the mystery of Christ's birth, or has worked out the course of hours, days and nights by which solstices and equinoxes would be recognized. After all, God said to the famous Job during his sufferings: *And tell me, he said, whether you know the path of the sun and the moon.*³ (Of course, we realize these two luminaries were created to establish day and night.) In this way, in the midst of his affliction, this eminent man was proven mortal. Faced with the renown of such a great man, who would be so shameless as to dare calculate the path of sun and moon? But now the Lord himself – who created and separated the light from the night, and is called 'sun of righteousness' in prophecy⁴ – has brought light to the world! He was made flesh for the sake of fleshly beings, and mortal for mortal beings.

He appeared as mortal so that he could use his mortality to conquer death. This is why the heavenly powers cry out: *Death, where is your sting? Where, O Death, is your struggle?*⁵ In saying this, they prove that Christ conquered Death. Thus we too, who are still in Death's grip, may seize immortality if we follow his noble example, and if we set aside works of darkness and follow the way of light. He is our light, the True Light, who came into this world and enlightened our hearts.

Not only were his coming and suffering foretold by Moses and the Prophets; they even indicated the timing of his conception and birth. That is why the Lord said to the Jews: *You examine the Scriptures that you think bring you eternal life; these very texts testify about*

³ Cf. Job 38:19-20, 33; found in this form in Quintus Julius Hilarianus, *Expositum de die Paschae et Mensis*, 3. CPL 2279. Ed. PL 13, col.1108B. Hilarianus wrote ca. 397.

⁴ Mal. 4:2.

⁵ 1Cor. 15:55.

me.⁶ He also said to them: *Hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of the sky and the earth; why can you not interpret time?*⁷ So there was a way of interpreting time too, if they wished to know him; as I have said, not only had he indicated his coming, but he had even disclosed the timing of his conception and birth, if they had trusted in Moses and the prophets.

These indicate the conception and fleshly birth not only of the Lord and Saviour, but also of his forerunner John. Scripture says of him: *Behold I am sending my angel ahead of you, to prepare your way.*⁸ When he came, John taught: *Prepare the way of the Lord! Make the highways of our Lord straight.*⁹ John also foretold another: *The one coming after me is greater than me; I am not worthy to untie his shoe laces.*¹⁰ This John came to testify to the truth, as the Lord Christ says: *You sent to John, and he bore witness to the truth.*¹¹

God himself extolled John's birth and said: *Among those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist.*¹² We may observe that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and many other patriarchs were no less deserving! But even if they had been more deserving, they still didn't have their conception or birth foretold. The timings of these for John, and also for Christ, were predicted by Moses and the prophet Zechariah, whose bloody gore will remain forever staining the temple's marble.¹³

2. The proof texts: Zechariah 8 and Exodus 23

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord calls Zechariah to witness: *Give me loyal men as witnesses, Uriah and Zechariah the son of Berechiah. The prophet approached the prophet's wife (it says), and she conceived and bore a son.*¹⁴ This is the same Zechariah son of Berechiah whom the Jews killed between the temple and the altar.¹⁵

Among Zechariah's other prophecies is the following: *The fourth, seventh and tenth fasts will become joy and happiness for the house of Judah, pleasant rituals and continual feast days; and you will be delighted, and you will love peace and delight.*¹⁶ Now, we do not find anywhere that the Jews observed these three fasts. They never fasted on a fourth or tenth day, nor on the seventh which is also called the Sabbath. (This is not quite true; they did fast on the Sabbath, but it was by necessity and not to obey the law.)

So, dearest brethren, we must ask what 'fourth', 'seventh', 'tenth' refer to. The prophet does not provide a starting point, so that we could count the fourth something or the seventh or tenth. But borne aloft through the Holy Spirit, the prophet was right not to give

⁶ Jn. 5:39.

⁷ Lk. 12:56.

⁸ Ex. 23:20.

⁹ Isa. 40:3, Jn. 1:23.

¹⁰ Jn. 1:27.

¹¹ Jn. 5:33.

¹² Mt. 11:11.

¹³ Mt 23:35, Lk. 11:51.

¹⁴ Isa. 8:2-3.

¹⁵ Mt. 23:35.

¹⁶ Zech. 8:19. Cf. Philastrius of Brescia, *Catalogue of Heresies* 149, CPL 121. Ed. PL 12, col. 1283-4.

the starting-point for counting the fasts; that way, when we research the starting-point for these fasts, we will both find their true meaning and revise the commands of Moses.

The Lord gave sufficient information to Moses about March: *This month will be your starting-point, the first month of the year for you.*¹⁷ So if that is the start of the year, then we count June as the fourth month, September as the seventh, and December as the tenth. These are the months that the Lord told Moses of: *Three times a year you will hold a festival for me.*¹⁸ He then adds a fourth celebration saying: *And you will keep the festival of the Unleavened Bread; for seven days you will eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the month of new things.*¹⁹

These are the very months in which our Lord and John the Baptist were conceived and born! The turning of the year is known by these very four seasons, namely spring, summer, autumn and winter. That is why the prophet says: *The acceptable year of the Lord.*²⁰

Again, in the same Exodus passage where the Lord discusses through Moses the ‘fourth’, ‘seventh’ and ‘tenth’ fast, he specifies that these refer to months: *The beginning of the month of grain, and of the grape harvest, and of oil will be joy and gladness for the house of Judah, with many festivals.*²¹ This phrase I just used, ‘the beginning of the month of grain’, denotes the fourth month from March when the year turns; so it refers to June. The Lord spoke of it with his disciples: *Isn’t it the fourth month, and you say that the harvest is already upon us?*²² The month of the grape harvest is September, which is the seventh from March. And the tenth month is December, which is the month when ripe olives are pressed.

But how can I prove that Christ and John were conceived and born at these four points? The Lord himself says: *Every learned scribe will be like a paterfamilias who brings treasures new and old out of his treasure-store;*²³ so everything prefigured in the prophets and declared by Moses is revealed in the gospel.

3. 24th September: John’s conception

These four times were the ones when Zechariah, John’s father, ministered the Jewish priesthood; this was as commanded by the Law and also by the prophecy of Jonah. That prophecy announced to the people of Nineveh that their city would be overturned in three days, but they repented and earned God’s mercy. In Jonah’s memory²⁴ the Jews ever since have observed a fast in the month of September; they call it *Metellitus* or *Scenopegia*.²⁵

¹⁷ Ex. 12:2.

¹⁸ Ex 23:14.

¹⁹ Ex 23:15.

²⁰ Isa. 61:2; Lk 4:19.

²¹ Cf. Ex. 23:15-16; *Liber Pontificalis* 17 (on Callistus). CPL 1568. Ed. L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis*, (1886) p.141.

²² John 4:35.

²³ Mt. 13:52.

²⁴ cf. Jonah 4:5.

²⁵ The first is a transliterated Syriac word, the second is the Latin form of the Greek σκηνοπηγία, both meaning the Jewish feast of Tabernacles. See Karl Gerlach, *The Antenicene Pascha*, Peeters (1998), p.300 n.126.

So in those days the priests would offer sacrifices to God for the sins of the people at that time of year, in September, as commanded by the Law. When Zechariah made his offering at the altar, he did not declare immediately that he was a priest, nor that he would be good enough to pray for the sins of such a wicked people; rather, he remembered that there would only be one true priest, Christ himself. As his Father told him: *You are a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek*. Only this True Priest offers an acceptable offering to God for the sins of all.²⁶

Evidently Zechariah prayed for the coming of that Priest. I say this with confidence, because by Gabriel's answer we discover Zechariah had been praying for something. The angel Gabriel said to him: *Zechariah, your prayers have been heard*.²⁷ And of course, when prayers are heard, that means the thing prayed for or desired has been heard. When anyone makes intercession to him, God grants them what they desire or have asked for him. Christ our Saviour says so: *Which of you, he said, would only give your son a stone if he had asked you for bread? Or if he asks for a fish, would give him a snake?* Christ then goes on: *You are wicked, but you still know how to give good things to your children; how much more, he said, will your father in heaven give you good things when you ask for them?*²⁸ He will give to those who make intercession to him as long as they do his will. John best-beloved of Christ understood in his epistle: *We know, he says, that what we have asked for him will be granted, when we observe his commands and do what is pleasing in his sight*.²⁹

So when Zechariah prayed for this, the angel Gabriel answered: *Zechariah, your prayers have been heard. Lo, your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call him John. He will bring you joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. He will be great before the Lord, and he will not drink wine or alcohol. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he comes out of his mother's womb, and he will turn many children of Israel to the Lord their God; and he himself will go before him*.³⁰

Now all this happened before Tiberius became Caesar, at the eleventh sunset of the lunar month, when the Jews were supposed to celebrate their fast for Tabernacles. <Afterwards, in the ninth year of Tiberius Caesar>,³¹ the timing of the moon was compiled; and it was discovered that Tabernacles in that particular year had been on 24th September, the equinox, when the night starts to be longer than the day.³²

²⁶ Ps. 110:4, Heb. 7:20, 27.

²⁷ Lk. 1:13.

²⁸ Mt. 7:9-11.

²⁹ 1Jn. 3:22.

³⁰ Lk 1:13-17.

³¹ The wording of the Troyes manuscript suggests that the moon calendar was compiled in the reign of Tiberius and not by Tiberius himself, which seems more likely.

³² This passage is rather obscure. There seem to be two possibilities. (a) The new work on the moon revealed that the 24th Sep had been an equinox. This alternative would suggest a Roman work. But Romans already knew that 24th was an equinox. Alternatively (b) the new work on the moon revealed that Tabernacles in the Jewish calendar in that year had been on 24th Sep /equinox in the Roman calendar. This seems more likely, since Jewish texts of that period were concerned about the relation between solar and lunar counting, and moreover it would have made sense to have Jewish-Roman calendar harmonies. Unfortunately the Troyes manuscript is also unclear here, and then moreover misses out the next 300 words of Latin.

*He must increase, and I must decrease.*³³ The day ‘decreased’ compared to the night, which represents the period when the Jews offered God sacrifices according to the Law and Prophets. This period was the one when John was conceived, and when the Lord found fault with sacrifices. As the prophet Isaiah says, *What use to me are your heaps of sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams; I do not want the fat of bulls and goats.*³⁴ These were the animals that used to be offered for the sins of the people; they were to end when John the Baptist was conceived.

And that is why his father Zechariah, priest of the Jews, was struck dumb: because the priests’ sacrifices for the people’s sins were now to stop and ‘be struck dumb.’ For a priest had come who alone would offer a sacrifice to God of the only spotless lamb, for the sins of all. That is why John pointed him out to the Jews: *Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.*³⁵ It states very clearly that Zechariah, priest of the Jews, was struck dumb; this is because he offered the sacrifices according to the Law and Prophets. This meant that, now Christ had come, the Law and Prophets were fulfilled and the sacrifices would fall silent. So the Law and Prophets held sway until John, and specifically until his conception.

Elizabeth hid herself away for five months of pregnancy; she was amazed that God should wish her to bear a child, despite the fact that she was elderly and sterile.

4. 25th March: Christ’s conception (and death)

After another month – that is, in Elizabeth’s sixth month of pregnancy – again *the angel Gabriel was sent to Galilee to a virgin betrothed to a man called Joseph;*³⁶ he was a righteous man.³⁷ For the Church was destined for a Groom who is a righteous man, as John said: *Whoever has a bride is himself a bridegroom.*³⁸ David said something similar: *He is like a bridegroom emerging from his bedroom.*³⁹

John’s conception was on the 24th September. Six months after this brings us to March. March starts the year, since the month of Christ’s conception and passion is the best month and first among all of them.⁴⁰ Paul testified to this: *He is the first-born of creation, he says, because everything in heaven and earth was established in him.*⁴¹ Moses was often concerned to commend this month to the Jews as a solemnity and passover, saying: *This month will be the first month of the year for you.*⁴² For in this month were conceived the first of God’s children,⁴³ and the <restoration> of humanity.

Calculating from the day of John’s conception on 24th September, this means it was the 25th

³³ Jn 3:30.

³⁴ Isa 1:11.

³⁵ Jn. 1:29.

³⁶ Lk. 1:26-7.

³⁷ Mt. 1:19.

³⁸ Jn. 3:29.

³⁹ Ps. 19:5

⁴⁰ The world was created in the month of Nisan: Talmud, *Rosh ha-Shanah* 10b-11a.

⁴¹ Col. 1:15-16.

⁴² Ex. 12:12.

⁴³ Adam and Eve.

March when *the angel Gabriel approached Mary and greeted her and said: Peace be with you, for you have found favour with God. When Mary heard this she was troubled, and wondered what this greeting could mean. The angel said to her: Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favour with God. Lo, you shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be called Great, and Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the seat of his father David, and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and his kingdom shall never end. Mary answered him: How can I know this, since I have never known a man? And the angel said to her: The Holy Spirit will come over you, and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you; so the child to be born will be holy, and will be called Son of God. Then Mary trusted his words and said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it happen to me as you have said.*

As I have said, it was the 25th March when the angel announced this to Mary. That day is also the equinox, when the days start getting longer. For the gloom was now scattered from the world and light was coming to the world. As John says in his epistle: *The darkness is passing away and the True Light is already shining.*⁴⁴ This light is also mentioned in the gospel: *That was the True Light, which gives light to everyone who comes into this world.*⁴⁵

So our Lord was conceived on the 25th March; it is the day of the Passover and of the Lord's suffering as well as his conception. He suffered on the very same day that he was conceived. That is why the Lord gave Moses this command for the sacrament in the book of Exodus: *Do not kill the blood of my sacrifices in addition to unleavened bread; the day of its slaughter is a solemn passover. Bring the firstborn of every creature to the house of your God. Do not slaughter a lamb in its mother's milk.*⁴⁶ All these spotless lambs which had to be offered as a sacrifice to God signified that he was not to be killed in his mother's womb, in his first 'passover' when he was conceived. And that is why, when Joseph discovered his wife was pregnant, he decided to divorce her discreetly so that she would not be stoned as a loose woman or an adulteress: a blameless lamb should not be slaughtered in its mother's milk.

5. 24th June: John's birth

At this time, it says that Mary went to visit Elizabeth in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Then John was filled with the Spirit, and Mary stayed with Elizabeth three more months.

After nine months had passed she bore John on 24th June, the ninth month from September and the fourth from the year's start in March. This is what the prophet Zechariah refers to in saying that the *fourth fast would be a joy and delight to the house of Judah.*⁴⁷ And those present at the birth were indeed joyful.

But why does the prophet speak of the fourth fast, and not the fourth month? Because a fast represents that the bad things we needed to be born out of. Moses clearly meant months, because he spoke of the beginning of grain month.

⁴⁴ 1Jn. 2:8.

⁴⁵ Jn. 1:9.

⁴⁶ Cf. Ex. 23:18-19

⁴⁷ Zec. 8:19.

Later, the time of John's birth was discovered to be the world's first solstice. The summer solstice is also called Torch Day.⁴⁸ He was the torch of Christ's light, and took his flame from Christ when he was still in his mother's womb. When Elizabeth greeted Mary the baby leaped in his mother's womb. From that day, the light decreased and the night increased.

John was conceived on the Day of Atonement; people had carried out religion in a fleshly way since Adam, following the law. (The things they do in a fleshly way are different from those in whom *the flesh struggles against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh*⁴⁹). So the light within them decreased.

6. 25th Dec: Christ's birth

As for Christ, he was conceived in a virgin womb three months before John's birth; so another six months remained to complete the nine months of human pregnancy. Between 24th June and 25th December are six months. When these months had passed, on the turn of the tenth month, Christ was born. This happened during the first census of the whole human race, at the time when Cyrinus was governor of Syria;⁵⁰ his name means 'lord'. For the Lord of the whole world came, to 'take a census' or take stock of our lives.

So magi came from Sheba, attracted by a shining star; they were holy men, kings, elders. They knew the Scripture which says: *A star shall come out of Jacob, and a prince rise out of Israel*.⁵¹ So they came to the land of Israel, or rather they were led by the star's light to Judah, and asked for the king in the city of Jerusalem. They found him in an inn, or rather in a stable, placed in a manger and wrapped in cloths; these represent the sins of our flesh.

As personal gifts they offered gold, incense and myrrh, a mystery of the sacrament. Gold represents a spotless body which is not destroyed when tested in fire. The book of Revelation speaks of such as these: *They have not defiled their garments* – that is, they have kept their flesh undefiled – *so they walk with the Lamb*.⁵² Incense signifies the prayers of the saints. Myrrh preserves the body; this represents good deeds, which preserve the human body and soul. As Revelation says: *Their works shall accompany them*.⁵³

7. Features of the autumn equinox

But now, beloved brethren, we must examine what these seasons are like, and the customs associated with them.

To start with there is the disloyalty of the Jews, who were always rebelling against God and

⁴⁸ The "dies lampadarum" or possibly "dies lampas" on June 24 is known from a handful of late sources. It is mentioned in Fulgentius, *Mitologiarum* 1.11 (p.22f. Helm); Pseudo-Fulgentius, *Sermones* 56 (PL 65, col. 926); Chronography of 354, Tetrastich on June, line 3 (Divjak/Wishmeyer, *Das KalenderHandbuch von 354*, Bd. 1, p.337); and alluded to in Augustine, *Sermo* 293B (PL 46, col. 994 f.), c.5.

⁴⁹ Gal. 5:17.

⁵⁰ Quirinius; Lk. 2:2.

⁵¹ Num. 24:17.

⁵² Rev. 3:4.

⁵³ Rev. 14:13.

against Moses. According to Moses, God decreed that March was the first month of their year; but they exerted their own wickedness and pride, and assigned their New Year to September. In that month they elected magistrates whom they called *archontes*, at that solemn festival of Tabernacles when John was conceived. They light many lamps for the festival; <a light was even the sign given to Abraham>.⁵⁴ These represent the day of John's conception. The Lord himself said so: *He was a burning, shining lamp, and you wished for a while to rejoice in its light.*⁵⁵

The numerous utterances of children are considered to be precious and delightful. Of course they are supremely precious: through them we discover life! Soldiers consulted John about this and tax-collectors asked him what they should do to obtain life. He pointed out the True Way to them. He told the soldiers: *Do not strike anyone, do not slander anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.*⁵⁶ Similarly he encouraged the tax-collectors not to demand more than was permitted by law. But John himself also brought them joy; his purpose was to be born and point out Christ to us. This is as the angel had said to his father Zechariah: *He will bring you joy and mirth, and many will rejoice at his birth.*⁵⁷

It was autumn when John was conceived. This is the season when the field is ploughed into furrows and prepared for the seed to come. This is the month when old husbandmen give way to new; in other words the time is up on the earlier written contracts, so the old records are broken up and a new contract⁵⁸ is given to new farmers.

The Lord talks about this through Jeremiah: *I shall give them a spiritual law, different from the one I gave their fathers when I led them from the land of Egypt.*⁵⁹ This passage refers to the husbandmen who were given a vineyard to manage, and did not pay the due debts on time. They harassed the servants sent to them in various ways, slaughtering some and even stoning others.⁶⁰ What is more, the father sent his son and they knew that he was the father's heir; but they thought they would take over the household inheritance, so they seized his son, abused him most shamefully, and killed him. In response the householder had to dismiss the wicked ones, and substitute other husbandmen in their place, who paid their debts on time.

*And thus a Law shall come from Zion, it says, and God's Word from Jerusalem; and it shall redirect many people, and beat their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning-hooks.*⁶¹ Everyone living a life of war would be forced to change. This undoubtedly reveals a mystery of the sacrament. The prophet says *they shall beat their swords into ploughs*, but swords are made of iron while ploughs are made of wood. How can iron become wood? Why doesn't the prophet say, they will beat swords into 'ploughshares' rather than

⁵⁴ A Jewish tradition held that Abraham was the first to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (e.g. *Jubilees* 16:10-31). Further, *Apocalypse of Abraham* 15.5-6 holds that he saw a great light before having a vision, on an occasion with imagery associated with the Day of Atonement. See D. Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 2003), p.79, 81, 92-4.

⁵⁵ Jn. 5:35.

⁵⁶ Lk. 3:14.

⁵⁷ Lk. 1:14.

⁵⁸ Lit. "law".

⁵⁹ Jer. 31:31-2.

⁶⁰ Lk. 20:9-16.

⁶¹ Isa. 2:3-4, Mic. 4:2-3.

'ploughs'? But life is given to us through wood; so now that the war is already past we are reminded of wood through the plough, which tears the thorns and thistles away from our hearts. The earth represents humans who accept the seed of God's Word, which returns thirtyfold, or sixtyfold, or a hundredfold.⁶²

8. Features of the spring equinox

After the autumn equinox, let us now also consider March, in the spring. <This is the greater, brighter equinox>, which delights everybody as they shake off sleep from heavy sluggish eyes. As Scripture says: *Until when will you sleep, you sluggard? How long will you will you fold your hands on your chest in sleep?*⁶³ *Rise up, and reach for Christ your Lord!*⁶⁴

In March, <a seafarer's command rang out to hold the waters safely back>; the Red Sea opened, then it closed over Pharaoh and he was engulfed with a great howl of anguish, and his army with him. Now free from Pharaoh, Moses sang out in delight with his troops echoing the song in reply. He warned his people to commemorate the event to God, saying: *Remember this day when you were freed from a house of slavery.*⁶⁵ But they were not yet free because they were infected again by works of sin, works of Egyptian slavery. That is why the Lord said to them: *When the Son frees you, then you really will be free.*⁶⁶

<In March countryfolk now rejoice in hope. Now the thick crowns of leaves lost from the trees replenish anew; Adam had taken them to cover his nakedness.> *For a rod shall come from the root of Jesse, and a flower will appear on that rod.*⁶⁷ At this season, the husbandman's job is done: every law of physical servanthood comes to an end.

What does the Lord say in the Book of Exodus? *From the solemn day in the month, you will eat the first-fruits of all your labours which you sow in your field.*⁶⁸ For once the fleshly law of servanthood was established, it held until Christ our Lord. <But the devil's mysteries still remain, and they pay off their crimes with foul hideous clothing, and show their chains to those who have been vanquished.> One of them was the man who slept in his tomb,⁶⁹ for the one who was to vanquish them had already been born.

In March, the air is pleasing; its warmth tires out lustful flesh, but at the same time the skin shivers at its icy cool. When people say, 'Boys, go out to the field in the month of March',⁷⁰ this is thought to be common, but in fact there is good reason for it: in March, we believe, Cain called Abel out to the field, and there he was slain.⁷¹ That is why shepherds come

⁶² Mt. 13:8, 23.

⁶³ Prov. 6:9-10.

⁶⁴ Eph. 5:14.

⁶⁵ Ex. 13:3.

⁶⁶ Jn. 8:36.

⁶⁷ Isa. 11:1.

⁶⁸ Ex. 23:16.

⁶⁹ Lazarus; Jn:11.17.

⁷⁰ Is this perhaps a misunderstanding of Rome's Field of Mars?

⁷¹ There is a rabbinical tradition that Abel was slain on the same day as the later Passover lamb; cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 22.4, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* Gen. 4:3-4, *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer* 21.

together for eight days in the month of March.⁷²

But it is written: *The Word went out and stood in the field.*⁷³ The Word indeed went out to the field – which represents this world – when Mary conceived our Lord Christ through her faith. But I’ve heard others saying: ‘March in the field’, or occasionally: ‘March behind the brazier’. So indeed it was ‘in a field’ when the angel Gabriel brought word to Mary in this world that Christ was to be born in this world. But again, it was March ‘behind the brazier’, when the Lord himself was led to judgement in the month of March: *And Peter was standing behind a brazier and warming himself.*⁷⁴ For the Lord died on the same day he was conceived: the Holy Supper occurred on the 14th of the lunar calendar. He was conceived on 25th March, or the 15th of the lunar month; at exactly the same point in time, he suffered his passion.

That is why, on the festival of Tabernacles, he said: *You go to the festival, but I shall not go up because my time has not yet come.*⁷⁵ He knew it was the festival when John was conceived, and he was waiting for the time of his own conception – and suffering. It was in acknowledgement of this that he said, *The hour is coming for the Son of Man to be glorified.*⁷⁶

9. Features of the two solstices

My beloved brethren, we have looked at two equinoxes and two conceptions; but now we must also look at the two solstices, which are connected to two births.

One of them of course, as I said, is John’s on the 24th June; this is Torch Day, and the wheat harvest falls at this season. It can be shown that John too was beheaded on the same day he was born, beheaded like the harvest. He said the following about the Lord: *With his winnowing-fork in his hands, he will winnow in his threshing-floor; he will gather the grain into barns, but he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.*⁷⁷

So John was circumcised on 1st July on his eighth day, which is when the Exile occurred,⁷⁸ to show that he was conceived according to the Law and Prophets. Scripture says of him: *The Law and Prophets were until John;*⁷⁹ and when he was circumcised according to custom they were both ‘exiled’, because now John had come the Law and Prophets were ‘exiled’ from the Jews.

But the Lord was born on 25th December in the winter. This is when the ripe olives are pressed to produce ointment or *crisma*; this is the season when <the field is sown with

⁷² I.e. the week of the Passover festival. The Passover was pastoral rather than agricultural in origin. See ‘Passover’, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol.15 p.678-83 at 680; ‘Passover’, *Jewish Encyclopedia* vol.9, p.548-56 at 553-4.

⁷³ cf. Hbk. 3:5, found in this form in Gregory of Elvira *In Cantica Canticatorum* 3:28 (CPL 547: Gregorius Illiberitanus, *Tractatus V de epithalamio seu in Cantica Canticatorum libri V*, CCSL 69, ed. J. Fraipoint, p.165-210).

⁷⁴ Mk 14:54, Lk. 22:55, Jn. 18:18.

⁷⁵ Jn. 7:8.

⁷⁶ Jn. 12:23.

⁷⁷ Mt. 3:12.

⁷⁸ 2Kg. 25:8-11.

⁷⁹ Mt. 11:13, Lk. 16:16.

various seeds,> and when bleating lambs are born; this is when the vines are pruned with sickles so that they produce the sweet juice which made the <holy apostles> drunk. *I am the vine and my Father is the gardener. Every branch which does not bear fruit will be cut off and thrown in the fire.*⁸⁰

They also call it 'Birthday of the Invictus'.⁸¹ But who is invictus [unconquered] if not our Lord, who suffered death and then conquered it? Or when they call it 'Birthday of the Sun' – well, Christ is the sun of righteousness that the prophet Malachi spoke of: *The sun of righteousness shall arise for all you who fear his name; salvation is in his wings.*⁸²

He too was circumcised on the eighth day in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham, on the 1st January – which was the day of the return from Exile.⁸³ Grace and truth were 'exiled' from the Jews, because the law was given by Moses but grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ.

In Christ Jesus our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, through endless ages of ages! Amen.

⁸⁰ Jn. 15:1-2.

⁸¹ The *Chronography of 354*, in the calendar labels 25th December "Natalis Invicti", and specifies that chariot races are held, as for other holidays. This is usually assumed to indicate a festival of the Late Roman state sun god, Sol Invictus.

⁸² Mal. 4:2.

⁸³ Possibly a reference to Ezra 7:9 but this would work only by the Latin calendar, not the Hebrew one.