

# A BIBLICAL & HISTORICAL LOOK AT HALLOWEEN

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In the United States (and other countries), Halloween has become one of the most popular unofficial holidays. On the up side, retail sales boost the economy around this holiday.<sup>1</sup>

On the down side, the holiday has become a time of increased crime in many places (especially arson and other acts of violence) on Halloween night as well as the night before. Even the author's house was robbed one Halloween



by forced entry. So, although the retail industry loves Halloween, many police officers and insurance companies dread it! Of course, there is also a tremendous amount of occult activity associated with this holiday.

Kids and even many adults love getting dressed-up for Halloween. And they love the candy, of course. It's just innocent fun, isn't it—or is it? But let's think carefully and biblically about the history, nature, and impact of the holiday.

When did this holiday begin and why? Was it of pagan origins or is there something more behind it? How should Christians view this day in general? To understand these questions further, we need to go back to the roots of Halloween.

## **When Did Modern-day Halloween Get Started?**

In the early 1900s, the migrating Irish and Scots brought Halloween traditions to the United States. Over time, Halloween catapulted into mainstream culture.

The holiday, though, has roots reaching much

further back. Some researchers claim that the holiday can be traced back about 2,000 years to the Celts of Europe, who occupied parts of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and northern France.<sup>2</sup> It was a pagan festival called “Samhain” (pronounced “sow-in”) that celebrated more or less the honor of the dead and involved the offering of large sacrifices of crops and animals.<sup>3</sup>

Although no original written accounts of this festival exist today from the ancient Celts, there is some reference to it in Roman records from when the Romans conquered Celtic lands around AD 43. Under Roman rule, the day of Samhain was influenced by Roman festivals of the time. The first was called “Pomona,” which was a type of harvest festival, and the next was “Feralia,” the Roman day of the dead. Interestingly, both Feralia and Samhain were festivals of the dead and celebrated at the end of October.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Name “Halloween”**

Around AD 600, Pope Boniface IV created All Saints’ Day, and Pope Gregory III later moved this holiday to November 1 in an effort to give a Christian alternative to this pagan celebrations.<sup>5</sup>

Christians who did not want to celebrate pagan festivals celebrated something of positive spiritual value—in this case honoring the saints and martyrs. With the overwhelming expansion of Christianity in Europe, All Saint's Day became the dominant holiday.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, the current name of "Halloween" originates from the day before All Saint's Day, which was called "All Hallow Evening"; this name was shortened to "All Hallow's Eve" or "All Hallow's Even." The name changed over time and became "Hallowe'en."

A couple hundred years later, the Roman Church made November 2 All Souls Day to honor the dead. This may well have been influenced by the continued persistence of the day of the dead by the ancient Irish, Scots, and others in Europe. Standing against this, many Protestant Christians celebrate October 31 as Reformation Day in honor of reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others who spearheaded the Reformation in the 1500s.

## Other Cultures Have a “Day of the Dead”

Although many affirm that Samhain was the origin of modern-day Halloween, it is significant to note how many cultures throughout the world have celebrated a “day of the dead” (often with sacrifices), occurring at the end of summer and fall. There seem to be *too many parallels* to call these similar celebrations a coincidence.

For example, in the Americas there is the Mexican Day of the Dead (*El Día de los Muertos*) that goes back to the ancient festival of the dead celebrated by Aztecs and the more-ancient Olmec. This was likely where the Guatemalans got their Day of the Dead.

Brazilians also celebrate Finados (Day of the Dead). Bolivia has the Day of the Skulls (*Día de los Natitas*).<sup>7</sup>

In Asia, there are similar festivals. For example, the Chinese celebrated the Ghost Festival, which was a day to pay homage to dead ancestors. The Japanese celebrated something similar called *O-bon* or merely *Bon*. Even Vietnam has a variant of the Ghost Festival called *Tet*

*Trung Nguyen*. In Korea, there is *Chuseok* or *Hankawi*, in which deceased ancestors are ritualized. In Nepal, there is the cow pilgrimage called *Gia Jatra* to honor the recently deceased. In the Philippines, there is the Day of the Dead (*Araw ng mga Patay*), where tombs are cleaned and repainted. The list goes on and on (see reference 5).

The annual Jewish holiday of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) is celebrated in the fall, usually September or October.<sup>8</sup> But it is distinctly different in purpose. It is not in honor of the dead. Rather, it deals with soul searching, repentance, and is a time of great sacrifice for the sins of the people (Leviticus 23:27–28). So, there is some cross over, but God instituted this date.

Though the origin of this date, specifically for the Israelites, can be traced to Moses, the day may well have been chosen by God going back to previous events, as famous Bible chronicler Archbishop Ussher pointed out (the approximate day Adam and Eve sinned, according to Ussher's calculations, and God's subsequent covering of their nakedness with animal skins).<sup>9</sup>

## What Is the Original Source for Halloween?

It seems no coincidence that cultures all around the world in both present and ancient times have had a holiday when the dead were remembered and animals were sacrificed. We can make a pretty strong argument that this holiday goes back to a time when all the peoples lived together—and then they took this holiday to various parts of the world.

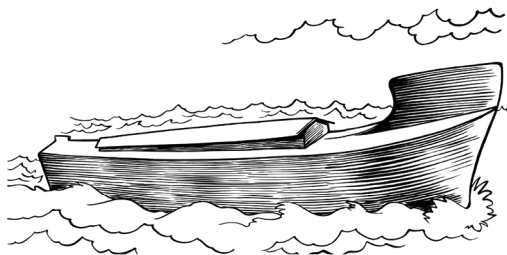


Archbishop Ussher was the 17th century historian who compiled *The Annals of the World*, a history covering every major event from Creation to AD 70.



Otherwise, it seems strange and difficult to explain how these cultures developed celebrations that are so similar. This would likely push the true origin of “Halloween” and these other “days of the dead” to the time before the dispersion at Babel (Genesis 11), over 4,200 years ago, after which different early cultures began to vary in its practice.

According to Archbishop Ussher, the timeframe between these events was about 106 years, with the Flood ending in 2348 BC and the dispersion occurring about 2242 BC. In this timeframe, Noah would have still been alive, and Noah’s sons, too. We are not given much information in Genesis about the wives of Noah or his three sons, but Noah’s son’s wives were busy having children after the Flood, producing a total of 16



grandsons for Noah. And then their children have children, and so on!

There have been several reasons suggested for so many cultures having a day of the dead. Consider these:

1. Were the days celebrated in honor of an ancestor or group of ancestors after they died? Perhaps the day was to celebrate at the time when a great patriarch or matriarch of a given family that left Babel finally died. The death of a great ancestor would happen to each culture sooner or later. But the odds of most of them dying in the late summer/fall is very low; therefore, it would be more difficult to explain the holidays all being at about that time.
2. Was it a harvest festival of grains and animals, which were prepared for winter, thereby signifying death? Then, later was this festival transformed spiritually to honor the dead? This might explain the sacrifice of animals and why the holidays occur in the fall. But it fails to address why each culture deviated toward a spiritual day of the dead.

Also, this doesn't make sense for cultures that are in the southern hemisphere, where September and October are spring, not harvest time.

3. Did Noah's wife die soon after the Flood and this day honored her? By the time Ham had fathered Canaan and sinned against Noah (which was before the dispersion at Babel), Noah's wife is not mentioned and conspicuously absent, and Japheth and Shem (Noah's sons) were left with the task of covering their



father's nakedness after he got drunk and lay uncovered in his tent (Genesis 9:20–27). One would suspect that Noah's wife should have had this responsibility, but she is nowhere mentioned. Had Noah's wife died fairly early prior to Babel, this well-known matriarch's death would have been remembered by each culture after the dispersion at Babel. But there is no mention or reference to a great woman, (rather than a multitude of ancestors), which would be expected if this were the case.<sup>10</sup>

4. Did Satan, the one who comes to kill and steal and destroy (John 10:10), move throughout all the pagan cultures after the dispersion to develop these days of the dead? Though this is possible, it seems Satan would almost have to have an omnipresence and omnipotence about him to do such a thing. And although Satan would like us to think he has these attributes of God, he doesn't.
5. Was it a day to remember those who died in the Flood and a continuation of the

sacrifices that Noah made after coming off the Ark? Because the celebrations call for the remembrance of the dead and have sacrifices, it is reminiscent of the large sacrifice that Noah and his family performed after the Flood. This would also explain why many other cultures have a variant of this regular sacrifice. When Noah and his family exited the Ark, they offered sacrifices to God (Genesis 8:18–9:1); of course, deviations in the manner of this sacrifice over the years and its meaning would have varied down through the ages. Based on the evidence, this seems to be the most likely explanation.

Other Christians in the past have recognized this connection. For example, Alfred Rehwinkel, a professor of theology at Concordia Seminary, realized that nations throughout the world had a similar day of the dead, and he directly related this to the Flood of Noah's day.<sup>11</sup> John Urquhart pointed this out as far back as 1931, soon after the holiday of Halloween gained prominence in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the many, varied accounts of celebrations of the day of the dead around the world, I would strongly suggest that its origin was a time when people groups were still gathered together or had closer ties. Is the event of Noah's sacrifice where the day of the dead really originates? It is possible.

It was a time when there was a sacrifice to cover sins and a reminder why death reigns in this sin-cursed world. It was a spiritual time, a time when people remembered that a sudden disaster, the global Flood, took virtually the entire population because of sin. Consider Noah for a moment: he even lost brothers and sisters in the Flood—the grief would have been overwhelming (Genesis 5:30). Halloween's roots could easily extend this far, but there should be no dogmatism about that being the case.

## **Why Sacrifices?**

Proper sacrifices in the Bible were associated with sin and death. This goes back to the first sacrifice in Genesis 3:21 when the first two humans (Adam and Eve) sinned against God. The perfect creation that God had made was