

New Year's resolutions began many years ago as promises to the gods

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Image 1. A statue of Julius Caesar in Rome, Italy. Under Caesar, the Ancient Romans established January 1 as the beginning of the new year in 46 B.C. Photo by: iStock/Getty Images

They say the ancient Babylonians were the first people to make New Year's resolutions. The ancient civilization began the practice some 4,000 years ago. They were also the first known people to hold celebrations in honor of the new year. For them, however, the year began not in January but in mid-March. It was before we had our Julian calendar most people use today.

To mark the new year, the Babylonians held a 12-day festival known as Akitu. During this festival, Babylonians made promises to the gods to pay their debts and return anything they had borrowed. These promises could be considered the ancestor of our New Year's resolutions. Babylonians believed if they kept to their word, their gods would reward them during the coming year with blessings. If they didn't, the gods would punish them.

Ancient Rome also had a similar practice. It began more than 2,000 years ago, around 46 B.C., when Emperor Julius Caesar made January 1 the beginning of the new year. The month of January was named after the two-faced god Janus. He was believed to have the power to look backward

into the previous year and ahead into the future. For this reason, January was a special time for the Romans. On January 1, they offered sacrifices to Janus and promised to behave well during the coming year.

Very Few People Keep Their Resolutions

New Year's Day was important for early Christians as well. It was the traditional time for people to think about their past mistakes and about how they could do better in the future.



In 1740, the English clergyman John Wesley created Covenant Renewal Services. These gatherings were most commonly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Also known as watch night services, they included readings from the Bible and singing hymns. In the U.S., watch night services are now popular in many churches. They are held on New Year's Eve. Participants pray and make resolutions for the coming year.

Today, New Year's resolutions are mostly secular. Instead of making promises to the gods, most people make resolutions only to themselves. Their resolutions tend to focus purely on self-improvement. For example, many people resolve to exercise more or to lose weight.

Unfortunately, most of us do not find such promises easy to keep. Around 45 percent of Americans usually make New Year's resolutions. However, only 8 percent manage to meet their goals. Still, that poor record probably won't stop people from making resolutions anytime soon. After all, we've been making them for around 4,000 years.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Very Few People Keep Their Resolutions."

Select the paragraph from the section that shows New Year's resolutions are still popular.

- (A) New Year's Day was important for early Christians as well. It was the traditional time for people to think about their past mistakes and about how they could do better in the future.
- (B) In 1740, the English clergyman John Wesley created Covenant Renewal Services. These gatherings were most commonly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Also known as watch night services, they included readings from the Bible and singing hymns. In the U.S., watch night services are now popular in many churches. They are held on New Year's Eve. Participants pray and make resolutions for the coming year.
- (C) Today, New Year's resolutions are mostly secular. Instead of making promises to the gods, most people make resolutions only to themselves. Their resolutions tend to focus purely on self-improvement. For example, many people resolve to exercise more or to lose weight.
- (D) Unfortunately, most of us do not find such promises easy to keep. Around 45 percent of Americans usually make New Year's resolutions. However, only 8 percent manage to meet their goals. Still, that poor record probably won't stop people from making resolutions anytime soon. After all, we've been making them for around 4,000 years.

2 Read the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

Ancient Rome also had a similar practice. It began more than 2,000 years ago, around 46 B.C., when Emperor Julius Caesar made January 1 the beginning of the new year. The month of January was named after the two-faced god Janus. He was believed to have the power to look backward into the previous year and ahead into the future. For this reason, January was a special time for the Romans. On January 1, they offered sacrifices to Janus and promised to behave well during the coming year.

Which of the following is an accurate explanation of what this paragraph means?

- (A) Julius Caesar was the first ruler to require that his people make New Year's resolutions.
- (B) The date that Julius Caesar selected for the new year to begin on had a special meaning.
- (C) Janus, the two-faced god, was the most important god in Roman culture 2,000 years ago.
- (D) The month of January was already important to the Romans because Julius Caesar was born then.

3 Which two choices are MAIN ideas of the article?

1. *The tradition of making New Year's resolutions began in ancient cultures.*
2. *The type of New Year's resolutions that people make has changed over time.*
3. *In ancient Babylon, New Year's Day was celebrated in mid-March.*
4. *In ancient Rome, New Year's Day was celebrated on January 1.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

Select the answer choice that summarizes the article.

- (A) In the past, New Year's resolutions were very personal and were intended to help people meet their goals. Today, many cultures include New Year's resolutions in their religious holidays.
- (B) In the past, New Year's resolutions were an ancient Roman tradition that was later adapted by Christians. Today, New Year's Day remains an important religious holiday in England and the U.S.
- (C) In the past, New Year's resolutions were made to the gods and the holiday was closely tied to religion. Today, many people make New Year's resolutions for themselves.
- (D) In the past, New Year's resolutions were made during the religious festival of Akitu. Today, less than half of Americans make New Year's resolutions, and even fewer manage to keep them.