

The ancient Babylonians are said to have been the first people to make New Year's resolutions, some 4,000 years ago. They were also the first to hold recorded celebrations in honor of the new year — though for them the year began not in January but in mid-March, when the crops were planted. During a massive 12-day religious festival known as Akitu, the Babylonians crowned a new king or **reaffirmed** their loyalty to the reigning king. They also made promises to the gods to pay their debts and return any objects they had borrowed. These promises could be considered the forerunners of our New Year's resolutions. If the Babylonians kept to their word, their (pagan) gods would **bestow** favor on them for the coming year. If not, they would fall out of the gods' favor — a place no one wanted to be.

A similar practice occurred in ancient Rome, after the reform-minded emperor Julius Caesar tinkered with the calendar and established January 1 as the beginning of the new year circa 46 B.C. Named for Janus, the two-faced god whose spirit inhabited doorways and arches, January had special significance for the Romans. Believing that Janus symbolically looked backward into the previous year and ahead into the future, the Romans offered sacrifices to the deity and made promises of good conduct for the coming year.

For early Christians, the first day of the new year became the traditional occasion for thinking about one's past mistakes and resolving to do and be better in the future. In 1740, the English clergyman John Wesley, founder of Methodism, created the Covenant Renewal Service, most commonly held on New Year's Eve or New Year's Day. Also known as watch night services, they included readings from Scriptures and hymn singing, and served as a spiritual alternative to the raucous celebrations normally held to celebrate the coming of the new year. Now popular within evangelical Protestant churches, especially African-American denominations and congregations, watch night services held on New Year's Eve are often spent praying and making resolutions for the coming year.

Despite the tradition's religious roots, New Year's resolutions today are a mostly **secular** practice. Instead of making promises to the gods, most people make resolutions only to themselves, and focus purely on self-improvement (which may explain why such resolutions seem so hard to follow through on). According to recent research, while as many as 45 percent of Americans say they usually make New Year's resolutions, only 8 percent are successful in achieving their goals. But

that dismal record probably won't stop people from making resolutions anytime soon — after all, we've had about 4,000 years of practice.

1. Read the selection from the article.

During a massive 12-day religious festival known as Akitu, the Babylonians crowned a new king or reaffirmed their loyalty to the reigning king. They also made promises to the gods to pay their debts and return any objects they had borrowed. These promises could be considered the forerunners of our New Year's resolutions.

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this selection?

- a) In ancient Babylon, New Year's resolutions served both a political and religious purpose.
  - b) Ancient Babylon was the first civilization to celebrate the new year as a holiday.
  - c) The reigning king of ancient Babylon was also considered a god to whom New Year's resolutions were made.
  - d) Babylonians enjoyed celebrating the new year so much that they created a 12-day festival for the holiday.
2. Which of the following claims does the author support the LEAST?
    - a) The ancient civilizations of Babylon and Rome practiced the tradition of making New Year's resolutions.
    - b) New Year's resolutions were incorporated into early Christian practices through special services.
    - c) Many Americans today have difficulty achieving the goals they set as New Year's resolutions.
    - d) New Year's resolutions across cultures and religions focus on improving oneself and one's behavior.
  3. Read the following statements.
    1. The practice of making promises for the new year might have begun some 4,000 years ago in ancient Babylon.
    2. Julius Caesar further established the practice of New Year's resolutions by setting January 1 as the start of the new year.
    3. Over time, New Year's resolutions have become more personal and less focused on religious practices.
    4. Today, it is estimated that 45 percent of Americans make New Year's resolutions every year.

Which two options accurately reflect the article's CENTRAL ideas?

- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| a) 1 and 3 | c) 2 and 3 |
| b) 1 and 4 | d) 2 and 4 |

4. Read the following two summaries of the article.

- Summary 1: In ancient Babylon, the 4,000-year-old festival of Akitu represented the start of a new year. During this fun celebration, individuals attended religious services and made resolutions for the upcoming year. Julius Caesar abolished this festival circa 46 B.C. and established January 1 as the start of the new year. As Christianity began to spread, the importance of the new year remained. Today, New Year's resolutions are a largely religious practice in America.
- Summary 2: In ancient Babylon, the equivalent of New Year's resolutions were made regarding loyalty and debts. Ancient Romans also made sacrifices and promised good conduct for the upcoming new year. Later, Christianity adapted the tradition of making promises for the new year, and to this day certain churches still hold watch night services. However, the majority of New Year's resolutions made by modern Americans involve personal goals.

Which option provides an objective, accurate summary of the article, and why?

- a) Summary 1; it analyzes which culture New Year's resolutions first originated from.
- b) Summary 1; it describes the major changes in the development of New Year's resolutions.
- c) Summary 2; it explains why New Year's resolutions were first practiced and the effect they had on society.
- d) Summary 2; it traces the chronological history and evolution of New Year's resolutions.