

December 16-22, 2019

# Christmas

“Good Tidings of Great Joy”

---

**Summary:** *Matthew 1: Christ is born of Mary—She conceives by the power of the Holy Ghost—Our Lord is named Jesus.*

*Matthew 2: The wise men are directed by a star to Jesus—Joseph takes the child to Egypt—Herod slays the children in Bethlehem—Jesus is taken to Nazareth to dwell.*

*Luke 1: Gabriel promises Zacharias that Elisabeth will bear a son, whom they will name John—He also tells Mary that she will be the mother of the Son of God—Mary visits Elisabeth and utters a psalm of praise—John the Baptist is born—Zacharias prophesies of John’s mission.*

*Luke 2: Heavenly messengers herald the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem—He is circumcised, and Simeon and Anna prophesy of His mission—At twelve years of age, He goes about His Father’s business.*

*1 Corinthians 15: Christ died for our sins—He rose from the dead and was seen by many—All men will be resurrected—Paul speaks of baptism for the dead—The three degrees of glory are described—Victory over death comes through Christ.*

*Colossians 1: Christ died for our sins—He rose from the dead and was seen by many—All men will be resurrected—Paul speaks of baptism for the dead—The three degrees of glory are described—Victory over death comes through Christ.*

*1 Peter 2: Converts are newborn babes in Christ—He is the chief cornerstone—Saints hold a royal priesthood and are a peculiar people—Saints are in subjection to the laws of man.*

---

## Supplemental Jewish and Holy Land Insights

### When can I celebrate Christmas?

For decades, I have lived right next to Bethlehem. I feel that

the sheep and shepherds are my neighbors. I have experienced visiting Bethlehem and the nearby hillsides more than eight-hundred times, celebrating Christmas over and over again. It may be a world record, at least for a Jew! For me, it is like stepping into a time warp. Things are so similar to the times, the culture, the land that Jesus knew.

### Where can I feel the wonder of Christ’s birth?

Today many people travel to the Holy Land to look for Jesus in traditional spots. They expect a stable behind an “hotel-inn.” They come looking for scenes they learned from Christmas cards. Their traditional perceptions come from the West. Let’s draw our attention to the East, where it really happened. First, let’s examine the traditional site. One foreign broadcast correspondent once commented about his Christmas visit in Israel. He said that Bethlehem should be

spelled, B-E-D-L-A-M. The conflict, chaos, and confusion of that Christmas Day were not what he had expected. Secondly, after the Church of Nativity, we should examine the not-so-well-known site, where sheep and shepherds still roam on the hillsides of Bethlehem.

### **What is at the Nativity Church?**

The traditionally accepted birthplace of Jesus is in a grotto located under the Church of Nativity. A grotto or cave is probable because stables were usually on the ground floor or underneath the inn rooms. Ancient inns were usually caravan stops. People were accustomed to “camping.” There were a few private rooms—not at all like today’s Holiday Inns. The traditional site for Jesus’ birthplace was established only 175 years after His birth. Three Christian churches, the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Catholic, hold separate services here and maintain a star decorating the place of birth.

### **Who owns the Church?**

Ownership is tentative, at best. The three churches rotate their rights in using the grotto. Each church’s priests, in turn, bring their own decorative accouterments, adornments, carpets, and curtains to be used during their particular mass or service. After that they must remove all of their items, relinquishing the temporary ownership during their mass to the next religious group. In the past there have been considerable conflicts over these ownership rights. In 1989 a change was made among the Armenian priests. An Australian, Father Nursis, came to direct the Armenian Bethlehem facility. A good-natured man, he went directly to the Greek Orthodox and Catholic prelates and made friends. He has reconciled centuries of conflict. For example, the fight over ownership of a wall separating their two

chapels has been resolved. Previously, regular headlines around Christmas time would read, “Annual Christmas brawl breaks out at Bethlehem church.” This seems to have been settled, mostly through the efforts of a friendly and faithful visiting priest.

### **What is Manger Square like during the Christmas season?**

During Christmas week the square is full of bleachers for various visiting choral groups. Shops and the few trees nearby are festively decorated; the mosque is not. Opposite or close to every Christian church in this Holy Land is a Moslem mosque; and Bethlehem’s Manger Square is no exception. Also, across the street are the local police station and souvenir shops. New satellite dishes stretch up from the aged housetops. The skyline picture is surely a contrast to what the village of Bethlehem must have looked like twenty centuries ago. Let’s go back to that time.

### **How do Ruth and Naomi lives foreshadow the birth of Jesus?**

Around Bethlehem are numerous hills still grazed by sheep and goats. In the spring, the small fields, supported by terraces, are planted with wheat or barley. It was to these hills that the widows Naomi and Ruth returned from Moab. Ruth gathered after the reapers; her good fortune was to come to the fields of Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi’s late husband, Elimelech. “And Elimelech Naomi’s husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. And they took them wives of the women of Moab; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. . . . And Mahlon and Chilion died also both of them; . . . she went forth out of the place where she was, . . . And she said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods:

return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. . . . So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess . . . and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.” (Ruth 1:3-22) The grains of wheat and barley are planted in the Fall and harvested in the spring. Spring is also the season celebrating the deliverance from bondage in Egypt, Passover.

### **How does the Savior of all, descend from a convert?**

Ruth married Boaz and had a son named Obed. Obed had a son named Jesse, who tended flocks and crops in these same hills. It is still the Middle-east custom for the husband’s family to care for the late husband’s widowed wife. What Boaz did was culturally proper, and it certainly blossomed into a sweet love story. “And Naomi had a kinsman of her husband’s, a mighty man of wealth . . . and his name was Boaz . . . And Ruth . . . gleaned in the field after the reapers: And her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech. . . . Then said Boaz unto Ruth . . . abide here fast by my maidens . . . Then she . . . said unto him, Why have I found grace in thine eyes, . . . seeing I am a stranger? And Boaz answered . . . a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.” (Ruth 2:1-12) A genetic line begins, as he marries Ruth, a foreign convert, and that set the stage for a line of kings. “So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife . . . and she bare a son. . . .And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her

bosom, and became nurse unto it. And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and they called his name Obed: He is the father of Jesse, the father of David.” (Ruth 4:13, 16-17) Jesse’s youngest son was named David. In obscurity during his childhood he was ordained the king of Israel. Yet he continued to be a shepherd; surely he was a good shepherd. Born at Bethlehem he was promised by God that his seed would bring the King of Kings, the Messiah—also to be known as the Good Shepherd. “I am the good shepherd: The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

### **How does the King of Kings descend from biblical royalty?**

Biblical David proved himself politically, militarily, and spiritually. In spite of his sinfulness later in his life, Israelis still sing about the old David, King of Israel, awaiting a new Davidic descendant. Virtually every Bar Mitzvah celebration is enhanced by singing to the Jewish lad being honored. He is treated as an expected David, one that should come in latter-days, out of obscurity, to reestablish a righteous kingdom. Christians feel that the Davidic prophecies began to be fulfilled when the Davidic kingdom was partially restored in the meridian of time with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. They do expect the rest of the fulfillment to come later. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for

ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

### **What about a Latter-day David?**

In considering the words of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea, the Jewish expectation of a latter-day David seems to include a person similar to the ancient David in addition to the Davidic Messiah, the King of Kings. He may also come out of obscurity. “But they shall serve the LORD their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them.”

(Jeremiah 30:9) “And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David a prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it.” (Ezekiel 34:24) “Afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and shall fear the LORD and his goodness in the latter days.” (Hosea 3:5) If ancient events are any kind of pattern for the future, the latter-day David may be like the ancient David. He probably will prove himself politically, militarily, and spiritually. The people may then want to proclaim him a king. However, he will not likely accept that kingship. Although honored as a prince or a noble person, he will introduce and bear witness of the King of Kings. He came in the meridian of time and will return in the latter-days. A simple story that comes out of obscurity is the introduction of the Davidic descendant, the King of Kings.

### **How do we know the Messiah was born during Passover:**

Again, it was the Passover season, spring of that year. (There was no month with the name of April when Jesus was born). According to the biblical calendar, Passover always occurs on the first full moon after the first day of spring. By the way, April 6, 1830 is the date the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized. It was also the week of the first

full moon after the first day of spring. It was Passover week that year, “. . . being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh . . .” (Doctrine & Covenants 20:1) The Deliverer was born during the season that celebrates the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and also the expectation of an even greater deliverance. The two deliverances are linked by a journey of time through two millennia.

### **What Inn?**

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem had taken at least a week to ten days. “And it came to pass in those days, . . . that Joseph and his espoused wife went . . . unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem . . .” (Luke 2:1-4) Bethlehem was their destination because they were of the house and lineage of David. As Davidic descendants, they may have been staying with relatives for some time, for the scripture reads, “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6-7) Luke’s description in the Greek language uses the word “kataluma,” a guest chamber surrounded by individual rooms. I imagine that Joseph and Mary, realizing that there were no available individual rooms, and that the guest chamber offered no privacy, left for humble confines, probably under the kataluma, where no tongue would wag and no prying eyes would peer at the sacred occasion of the Son of God’s birth.

### **In ancient days, who Knew?**

Nearby, shepherds watched over their flocks, and angels announced good tidings. “For unto you is born this day in

the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. . . . Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:11-12) Twenty-one centuries later we feel that we may know some of those angels. Were we there? Was Naomi also happily singing? In her life she was bitter, having lost her husband and sons. However, she brought a convert daughter-in-law to Bethlehem to become the great-great-grandmother of King David, whose royal line brings our Messiah. Our Savior came from a convert’s family!

### **In modern day, who knows?**

Although most of the ten-million inhabitants of this little land of Israel do not even know anything about Him, I am grateful that I do. Some of my neighbors are shepherds, possibly descendants of ancient shepherds. My family and I have shared their happiness when their babies were born—as naturally as the baby lambs are born. We have mourned with them as their children die.

### **How can we share the Savior’s mission to shepherds, today?**

One of those children was my little Arab friend Jamil, with blonde hair and big dark-brown eyes. For years this silent child, dwarfed and barrel-chested by illness, would stand by me every week as I told and read the story of Jesus’ birth to tourists sitting with me on the hillsides with sheep and shepherds. Jamil even managed to smile a time or two. He did not understand the words, he could not hear, nor could he speak, but he soaked in the spirit and love of our simple songs and unspoken love. Week after week, month after month, year after year, he came running breathlessly out of his mother’s tent to be with us. One day there was no Jamil—and his mother did not come out of the tent. His cousin from a

nearby tent explained, “Jamil died.” The next few weeks were not the same, although other children came to watch and listen to us. Life eventually seemed to return to normal, but his mother never seemed to lose the grief of Jamil’s death.

### **What promises can we give?**

Months later she finally asked me, “Picture . . . Jamil?” I realized she missed him, so. It took several months to locate someone who had taken a picture of Jamil. We had it enlarged and framed. Then one of our tourist guests, a modern Ruth, presented the photo to the shepherd mother. Our Arab driver explained to the shepherdess that this Ruth had also lost her son just months before. Ruth offered the framed photo that contained an inscription, a promise, “Jamil is waiting for you, and wants you to be happy.” Our shepherdess, typically showing no emotion, took the picture. Then as the two women sank to the base of an olive tree, they both softly shared their tears. The shepherd mother slowly rocked back and forth, holding Jamil’s picture close to her. This began the end of her grief; I sensed that she believed the promise that we made. We made the promise because we know that another child from Bethlehem made it possible for families to be reunited. We shared the thought that in the meantime, departed ones are still near at hand. For more than forty-years, tourists and I have shared feelings and sung songs to these humble shepherds—songs that angels announced two thousand years ago. We cannot sing, “Far, far away on Judea’s plains.” The words come out as, “Near, near at hand on Judea’s hills, shepherds of old heard the joyous trills!” Today’s shepherds may not yet understand our words, but one day they will; they will understand the gift of the One born in a manger.

### **What happened to the Holy Family in the next few years?**

Jesus' first two year of mortality were likely in the same village of Bethlehem. "When Herod's edict went forth to destroy the young children, John was about six months older than Jesus, and came under this hellish edict, and Zacharias caused his mother to take him into the mountains, where he was raised on locusts and wild honey. When his father refused to disclose his hiding place, and being the officiating high priest at the Temple that year, was slain by Herod's order, between the porch and the altar, as Jesus said. John's head was taken to Herod, the son of this infant murderer, in a charger -- notwithstanding there was never a greater prophet born of a woman than him!" **(Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Section Five 1842-43 p.261)**

### **Where were the Wise Men on "Christmas?"**

Middle Eastern Christians have a tradition of three wise men or Magi that come from the East bearing gifts for a newborn King. Even scriptures tell us of Herod the Great receiving those visitors, seeking the child "King of The Jews." Conniving Herod told them to let him know when they found him, so he could reverence the "child-to-be-king." When they did not return, Herod ordered all the children killed in the Bethlehem who were two-years old and under, **(Matthew 2:1-16)**. Somehow, many nativity sets show the wise men at the birth even though the scriptures indicate a time frame of about two years later. Likewise, countless nativity scenes depict the wise men as two light-skinned, and one dark-skinned person. Throughout the world, these scenes have a pleasant symbolism, dark skinned and light skinned--worshiping the Messiah of all mankind. "Matthew's account of 'wise men from the east' coming to Jerusalem and Bethlehem in search of the Christ

Child is sometimes recited as a visit of three Magi. Actually, there is no historical basis for the prevailing legend that they were from the apostate Persian cult or that they were three in number. It is much more probable that they were devout men who knew of our Lord's coming advent, including the promise that a new star would arise, and that they came as prophets of any age would have done to worship their King. It is clear, that they were in tune with the Lord and were receiving revelation from him, for they were 'warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod.' **(Matt. 2:12.)**" **(Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, p.462)**

### **What three prophets knew the signs of the impending birth?**

There are three Book of Mormon prophets in this particular time frame who prophesied the Lord's imminent coming. These three also seemed to "disappear," or, "were not heard of again," an Alma, Samuel the Lamanite, and a Nephi. Alma and Nephi had light skin and Samuel the Lamanite, likely, a darker skin. **(Alma 45:18, Helaman 16:7-8, 3 Nephi 1:3, 3 Nephi 2:9)** "Our Lord's birth into mortality was accompanied by the appearance of a new star in the heavens. One of Samuel the Lamanite's Messianic prophecies foretold this heavenly sign **(Helaman 14:5)**, and the Nephites knew of the promised birth because they saw the new star that arose according to Samuel's word. **(3 Ne. 1:21)**" **(Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, p.765)**

### **What about Jesus's childhood?**

After about a year in Egypt, Jesus' youth was spent in Nazareth, a rather obscure town in the region of Galilee. "Nazareth, a city in Galilee, sacred to Christians as the home of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. According to the new Testament, Jesus' birth was announced to Mary in Nazareth.

Jesus was brought up in the town, and although he did almost all his preaching outside of Nazareth, he was known in his lifetime as "Jesus of Nazareth." Early Christians were contemptuously called "Nazarenes" by their enemies, and the Hebrew and Arabic terms for Christian are derived from the town's name."

**(Encyclopedia Judaica Jr.)** Well off the traditional crossroad is Nazareth. Today it is a busy city of Arabs and Jews. Its Arab population makes it one of the largest Arab cities in Israel. About twelve hundred feet above sea level and halfway between the Mediterranean and the waters of Galilee, this obscure town became the childhood home of Jesus. Jesus' upbringing surely included learning the tasks and crafts of his environment. "Is not this the carpenter's son?" **(Matthew 13:55)** Although western language Bibles refer to Mary's husband, Joseph, as a carpenter, the Greek Bible calls him a craftsman. The industry of Nazareth was, and still is, the regional rock quarry.

### **Who is the Rock of Salvation?**

That profession surely could have included the trade of working in stone. Interestingly, Jehovah, later known as Jesus, is called the "Rock of Salvation." "The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour; thou savest me from violence." **(2 Samuel 22:3)** Although it is popular to consider Jesus as a carpenter, He also studied the Law of Moses. In fact, He was considered a rabbi, one schooled in the law. At twelve years of age He was in the temple—with the lawyers—answering and asking questions. Was this an apprentice craftsman or an apprentice lawyer becoming a "son of the law" (*Bar Mitzvah* in Aramaic)? Nowadays, someone schooled in the law is called a lawyer. Jesus was the lawgiver, our advocate with

the Father. "For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us." **(Isaiah 33:22)**

### **What might have been Jesus' Bar Mitzvah?**

When a Jewish lad turns twelve years of age, he has the opportunity to study a section of the Law and the Prophets, a section he will recite at his Bar Mitzvah. Jews regularly read the Law and the Prophets publicly three times a week (Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturday-Sabbaths). All congregations read the same section on each of those days. Therefore, the boy must choose which day he will read—and then be trained in that particular section throughout his twelfth year. A lawyer (rabbi) has been sufficiently trained to read the appropriate sections at any given time. Jesus apparently had that training. "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read." **(Luke 4:16)**

### **What was the text for that Sabbath day's reading?**

His reading fulfilled a definite messianic prophecy, and Jesus concluded by testifying that He was the realization of Isaiah's prediction. "And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue

were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” (Luke 4:17-21)

### **How did this the congregation feel that His reading was blasphemy?**

The congregation apparently heard the words but became enraged that he would point himself out as the “Anointed One” (*Messiah* in Hebrew). To them, that kind of blasphemy warranted death. “And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong.” (Luke 4:28-29)

### **What is the biblical punishment for blasphemy?**

Close to forty different churches mark traditional sites of Jesus’ youth. However, the only scripturally supported site is an old Nazareth quarry. This is probably the place where angered Nazarenes would have stoned Jesus for blasphemy. This is known today as the Mount of Jumping or the Mount of Precipitation. Rabbinic interpretations of the ancient Jewish law of stoning indicate that it was required that the victim be thrown over a cliff (the execution). The accuser was responsible to make sure the criminal was dead. If not, the accuser had to take the first stone and crush the victim’s heart. The accuser always had to cast the first stone and then all others threw stones to cover the body (the burial—without a memorial). Jesus was brought to the edge of the hill, “But he passing through the midst of them went his way.” (Luke 4:30)

### **How did Jesus become qualified to read as a “son of the law,” “Bar Mitzvah?”**

An added thought about Jesus’ youth includes his experience at the Temple. It

is suggested that Jesus was there at the age of twelve to become a “Son of the Law.” That expression in Aramaic is “Bar Mitzvah,” which usually happens at the end of the twelfth year, usually at his thirteenth birthday. In some Jewish circles, a boy may become a Bar Mitzvah one year earlier if he has no father. Jesus had no earthly father. Gently, He reminded His parents, “And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49)

### **What preceded the Savior’s birth?**

We learn much about the time immediately prior to the birth of Jesus from Luke, who was not even there or at least was not of the first generation of disciples/apostles of Jesus. He gives us a key about trusting the witnesses of Apostles and Prophets. “It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, . . .” (Luke 1:3) The Apostle Luke was Paul’s scribe and wrote two books of the New Testament, Luke and Acts. “Luke, the beloved physician and missionary associate of Paul, first wrote his Gospel, telling of our Lord’s mortal ministry, and second this book of Acts, which summarizes portions of the ministries of Peter and Paul. Both accounts are addressed to Theophilus, a prominent personage of the period, who, since Luke’s writings are addressed to Gentile or Roman readers, may have been a distinguished citizen of Rome.” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, Vol.2, p.21)

### **How did Luke give his witness following Jesus’ death?**

“And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elisabeth. And it



came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: . . . Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and her cousins heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John . . . And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marveled all."

**(Luke 1:39-63)**

#### **Where did John really come from, "Utah?"**

Ein Kerem in the fertile watershed hills just outside Jerusalem is the traditional birthplace of John. However, another small Arab town named Yatta, just outside the hills of Hebron may be a more likely location for their residence. It is farther from Jerusalem and seems a more likely

place to hide than Ein Kerem. That town's name, Yatta, may be a derivation of the word Judah. It also has an archaeological ruin of an ancient "Levite" synagogue. It is tempting to give archaeology, plus a written account of "City of Juda," a little more credence than just tradition. With a linguistic twist we could say that John came from Utah! Utah means "tops of the mountains" and Judah is in the tops of the mountains of Israel. John from Judah preceded the era of the Savior's first coming. Prophets from Utah are preceding the era of the Savior's second coming.

#### **How did the Savior "turn" us to the Father?**

Luke emphasized the word "turn" **(Luke 1:16-17)**. In Hebrew the word "turn" is the same word as repent, hence "men turn to God" and sometimes the term is used that "God repents." Actually, it is His turning to man as man turns to Him, giving a great symbolism to "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers." This is part of the preparation to return us to our Father in Heaven. **(Colossians 1:12-14)**