

December 21–27, 2020

Christmas

“HE SHALL COME INTO THE WORLD TO REDEEM HIS PEOPLE”

The Christmas season is a time to reflect on and express gratitude for the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. As you read and ponder about His birth and life, consider how your study of the Book of Mormon has strengthened your testimony that He is the Savior of the world.

Supplemental Jewish and Holy Land Insights

What season was the birth of the Savior?

The great redemption festival for the Jews is Passover. At the Seder

meal, parsley and lettuce or other green vegetables are dipped into salted water. The greens are associated with the hope of spring. Passover is in the spring as a memory of the past redemption and the hope of a future greater deliverance that comes from heaven. Latter-day Saints believe that the fulfillment of hope, the heaven-sent Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, was born in the spring – at Passover. His death, resurrection and subsequent atonement were also at Passover, the great feast of deliverance.

Where do people seek Him?

Today many people travel to the Holy Land to look for Jesus in traditional spots. They expect a stable behind an 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. After that we can examine the not-so-well-known site, where sheep and shepherds still roam on the hillsides of Bethlehem.

What about 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 around 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. As of now, his temporary visit seems to be turning into a permanent stay in the Holy Land.

What goes on in Israel during the Christmas weeks?

Most people in Israel, do not celebrate Christmas. The Jewish population is busy at about the same time of year celebrating Hanukkah, instead. Both are festivals-of-lights, with gift giving. One day of gifts at Christmas,

and eight days of gifts at Hanukkah. My five Jewish-Latter-day Saint children wanted to celebrate both! Expensive! Of the almost 10-million people living in Israel, close to 8-million are Jews and about 2-million are Arabs. Around 10% of the Arabs are Christian, who celebrate one of several Christmas holidays. Many tourists traveling to Israel to experience this important Christian event are surprised! They find it quite “*un-Christmassy*”. However, there are still some shops in small Christian communities and in Jerusalem’s Old City Christian Quarter with delightful Christmas gifts and decorations. The Church of Nativity, has special celebrations, decorated with flags and tinsel every Christmas season precipitous stairs lead down to a cramped grotto where hanging lamps, gold laced curtains and a silver star on the floor, mark the traditional birthplace. Nearby, is another below-ground-level room, underneath the Catholic Church, simple and calm, where Jerome (347-420 AD) translated the scriptures into Latin. In September 1972, my late friend, John Tvedtnes, was there with President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Harold B. Lee, as a few quietly pondered the Christmas event. After some time, Lee, softly interrupted the silence and said, “We are close to where the Savior was born.” Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrate on December 25, of the “Gregorian” Calendar (started in 1582 AD), however, using the “*Julian*” calendar (started in 46 BC), the Greek Orthodox Christians celebrate on January 6. Armenian Christians celebrate on January 18. So, in fact, Israel has several Christmas holidays.

What is the real date?

Where do members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints come up with April 6 as the birth of Jesus? The official restoration of the Church was on 6 April 1830, “. . . Being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior in flesh . . .” (**Doctrine & Covenants 20:1**) That April 6th, was the date in the solar-based, 16th century, Gregorian calendar (that didn’t exist in Jesus’ time). However, in the lunar-based, Biblical, Jewish calendar, still in use, that day was the “first full moon after the first day of

spring,” Passover! The very day Jews celebrate being delivered from Egypt turns out to be the day the Deliverer was born! Another Christmas day? One of my touring guests told me that in his Ward, each Priesthood meeting began with a hymn led by an Aaronic Priesthood lad who was on the Autism scale. He chose a Christmas carol for very meeting. Maybe, it is appropriate to sing “Happy Birthday” to Jesus, every day!

How can I “zoom-back?”

During Christmas weeks 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 television antennas 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. 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**) In Israel, the

biblical farmers planted in the Fall and the first harvest was in the Spring!

How did the Savior 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-Eastern 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)** A shepherd became a king and a king became a shepherd!

How do Jews still anticipate a Latter-day David?

The old David proved himself politically, militarily, and spiritually. Despite his later-life sinfulness, 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 and Messianic Jews 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)**

How can the past teach us about the future?

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.

How can today's shepherds teach us?

Although most of the six 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. One of those children was my little Arab friend Jamil, with blonde hair and big 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 out of his mother's tent to be with us. One day there was no Jamil—and his mother would 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. 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.

How will you share the promise?

Our Arab driver explained to the shepherdess that Ruth had also lost her son just months before. Ruth offered the framed photo that contained an inscription, a promise, in her own language; "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, both softly wept. The shepherd mother slowly rocked back and forth, holding Jamil close to her. This began the end of her grief; I sensed that she believed the promise that was 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. However, 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.