

January 9-15, 2023

## Matthew 2; Luke 2

“WE HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM”

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### Summary:

*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 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.*

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### Supplemental Jewish and Holy Land Insights

#### What is Bethlehem like?

My Israel home is close to Bethlehem. The sheep and

shepherds are my neighbors. I have experienced visiting Bethlehem and the nearby hillsides close to a thousand times. To me, it is like stepping into a time warp. Things can be so similar to the land Jesus knew. 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 us 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 are the traditional sites.

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 would have been some private rooms around a central dining and meeting area called a *kataluma* in Greek. That could be a guest chamber or lodging place in a private home. Permitting this view, Joseph and Mary planned to stay at the home of friends or relatives, however, the small dwelling and its guest chamber were so crowded that they had to be lodged in the lower portion where the animals were quartered—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. 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 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 the friendly and faithful visiting Armenian priest. As of now, his temporary visit seems to have turned into a more compatible attitude among the churches in Bethlehem. There is a grotto under the Catholic Church that marks where "Saint" Jerome (born c. 347, in Stridon, Dalmatia and died 419/420, in Bethlehem is known for his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate. The late John A. Tvedtness, (1941-2018) told me that the Prophet and President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Harold B. Lee, (1899-1973) visiting the three churches in 1972 and sitting quietly in Jerome's grotto said, "We are close to where the Lord was born."

### **What celebrations happen at Bethlehem?**

During Christmas week in December Manger Square is full of bleachers for various visiting choral groups. Shops and the few trees nearby are festively decorated; the mosque is not. Some years decorations were not allowed by Moslem activists because their cause was to cancel celebrations and to promote animosity to the "occupation" by Jews having returned to Israel. 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 three Christmas holidays. One of my guests, a Bishop in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, shared a sweet story of a young autistic lad who was assigned to lead the singing in Priesthood meetings. The young man selected a Christmas carol every week!

I'm sure it's okay to sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, every day! 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. Television antennas that stretched up from the aged housetops are now replaced with satellite dishes. The skyline picture is surely a contrast to what the village of Bethlehem must have looked like thirty-three to twenty centuries ago. Let us go back to that time.

### **How did the Davidic line come to be in Bethlehem?**

Around Bethlehem are numerous hills still grazed by sheep and goats. In the fall, 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 about 1300 year before the birth of Jesus. They arrived at Bethlehem at the "beginning of the barley harvest." That is the spring season when at Passover the Children of Israel celebrate the Egyptian deliverance and anticipate an even greater future deliverance. 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. 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 and family. What Boaz did was culturally and doctrinally proper, and it certainly blossomed into a sweet love story. 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 1, 2, 3, 4)

### **What do Jews anticipate from the line of David?**

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) The old David proved himself politically, militarily, and spiritually. Despite 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.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as many 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) 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 who came in the meridian of times and will return in the latter-days.

### **What was the heralding of Jesus’ birth like?**

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 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. But she brought a convert daughter-in-law to Bethlehem to become the great, ever-so-great-grandmother of King David, whose royal line brings our Messiah. Our Savior came from a convert’s family!

### **When was Jesus born?**

A simple story that comes out of obscurity is the first introduction of the Davidic

descendant, the King of Kings. The Savior was born during the high-day holiday in the spring season 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. April 6, 1830 was that biblical high-day holiday. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized at the first full moon after the first day of spring. It was Passover, “. . . 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. 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. They may have been staying with relatives for Passover, 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**) Joseph and Mary, Davidic descendants were there in the *kataluma*, when Jesus’ birth happened.

### **Who knows the story?**

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. 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 and a “squeak of his voice” 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.

### **Who has a picture of Jamil?**

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.

Our Arabic speaking 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 that Jamil is waiting for his mother and that they will be reunited. 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 almost fifty-years, tourists and I have shared feelings and sung songs to these humble shepherds—songs that echo the angels' announcements 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!" Alan Macfarlane, grandson of the hymn's author, John Menzies Macfarlane, remarked, "I can see my Grandfather has not been on your tour!" The hills of Bethlehem still remind us of the angels' songs. 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.

### **Who Are, and 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 – worshipping 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**) 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, a 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 (**Hel. 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**) There's a "Made-in-Bethlehem" nativity scene in my home, with wise men, yet, I've placed them a distance off.

### **What was Jesus doing in His childhood?**

Jesus' youth was spent in Nazareth, an 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. Nowadays, 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. 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 and Hebrew)?

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 is, and when do boys have a *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* (son of the Law). Jews regularly read the Law and the Prophets publicly three times a week (Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturday). 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, singing the words in a cantillation appropriate to the text. 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." As stated above, in Aramaic or Hebrew that 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*)