

December 18-24, 2023

Christmas

“GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY”

Summary: *Christmas, to the Latter-day Saint, is both reminiscent and prophetic—a reminder of two great and solemn events, which will yet be regarded universally as the mightiest and most wonderful happenings in the history of the human race. These events were predestined to take place upon this planet before it was created. One of these was the coming of the Savior in the meridian of time, to die for the sins of the world; and the other is the prospective event of the risen and glorified Redeemer, to reign upon the earth as King of kings.”* *Millennial Star*, 70:1 (January 2, 1908)

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.

Supplemental Jewish and Holy Land Insights

How is Christmas in Israel?

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! About 10-million people live in Israel, 8-million Jews and about 2-million Arabs. Close to 10% of the Arabs are Christian, who celebrate one of up to three Christmas holidays. Many tourists travel to Israel to experience this important Christian event. Surprise! They find it quite “un-Christmassy.” However, there are still some shops in small Christian communities like Nazareth and Cana in the Galilee, and in Jerusalem’s

Old City Christian Quarter with delightful Christmas gifts and decorations.

What is Christmas in Bethlehem, Israel like?

Just a few miles away from Jerusalem, in Bethlehem, the oldest, still-existing church in history (150 AD), the Church of Nativity has special celebrations, decorated with flags and tinsel every Christmas season. Three religions claim ownership, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Catholic. Below that building is believed to be the site of the birth of Jesus. Precipitous steps lead down to a cramped grotto where hanging lamps, gold laced curtains and a silver star embedded on the marble floor mark the traditional birthplace. The three churches have strict meeting times for their Mass and worship procedures. They keep each other on a strict, to-the-minute timing, so that ownership is not extended beyond age-old agreements. Thronging

crowds gather and wait to “see.” 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 other cave-like grottos are there?

Just a few yards away, is another below-ground-level room, underneath the Catholic Church. It is simple and calm. The tradition states this is where Jerome (347-420 AD) translated the Old Testament Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament Greek scriptures into the “common language,” the Vulgate or early Latin language. In September 1972, my friend, the John Tvedtnes (1941-2018), was there with President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Harold B. Lee (1899-1973). The small group quietly pondered the first Christmas event. After some time, Lee, softly interrupted the silence and said, “We are close to where the Savior was born.” He was able to look past the many tinsel trappings of religious worship and feel the precious original nativity scene.

What causes the different Christmas dates by different religions?

Roman Catholics and Protestants celebrate on December 25, of the “Gregorian” Calendar (it only started in 1582 AD), however, using the “Julian” calendar (started in 46 BC), the Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Coptic Christians celebrate on January 6 or 7. Calendar differences have some Christians celebrating even later. So, in fact, Christians in Israel and surrounding

countries have several Christmas holidays.

Where does 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 and 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,” it was the beginning of Passover week (a seven-day celebration)! The very day Jews begin celebrating being delivered from Egypt, (a High-Day, an extra Sabbath) is when the deliverance from Christian apostasy began.

May I sing “Happy Birthday” to my Savior?

Years ago, another guide in Israel begged me to replace her as a guide for a German speaking Christian group, as she was ill and unable to speak. I was available and hurried to the Jordanian border to meet the Pastor and his flock. Surprised at her “replacement,” he asked my name and where I was from. “Daniel, born in Haifa, son of German parents who survived the Holocaust” were the words that fell from my lips. He was visibly upset and said, “I want a Christian guide.” I replied, I’m a believer, I hope you won’t be disappointed!” The tour went well, until we arrived at the Hills of Bethlehem. We read the nativity account, accompanied by sheep and shepherds. I suggested we sing Christmas songs, even though it was summertime. He objected; I sang to the touring guests. Repeating that account to one of my Latter-day Saint groups, a Bishop, 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 guess it's okay to sing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, every day, anytime.

Who are, and where were the 'wise men?'

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 who were 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 area who were two-years old and under. "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judæa: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard

the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way. **(Matthew 2:1-16)**

How could the "Wisemen" be at Christmas Nativity Scene?

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)**

What likelihood were the three Book of Mormon Prophets, the “wisemen?”

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 **(Hela. 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. I’ve placed the “holy visitors” on the other side of the room, a distance off!

How many times have I venerated Christmas?

Celebrating Christmas annually is expected. As an Israeli tour guide for close to 50-years, I’ve been to the hills of Bethlehem close to a thousand times. Add to that, repeatedly listening to carols and thanking God the Father for sending His begotten Son, I’ve celebrated Christmas many thousands of times. At least, for a Jew, that may be a record!