

“JOY TO THE WORLD!”

Several years ago, I was summoned to court, possibly for jury duty. Before the selection process began, the judge took a few other cases. One was a young divorced woman seeking a court order against her former husband. The charge? It was not about battery, abuse, alimony or some other things that might come to mind. She did not want their son to be with him for Christmas! She explained to the judge: “My former husband will be going to his parents’ house for Christmas. They will have a Christmas tree there and my son will be given presents. I am a Jehovah’s Witness; *celebrating Christmas is against my religion!*”

Some thoughts went through my mind. If her former husband was a gang member, if his parents were undesirable people, if the boy would be exposed to drunkenness, drugs, debauchery, or immorality—the concern would be understandable. But spending Christmas with grandparents?

Whatever one’s conviction may be regarding Christmas, a certain liberty is in order. Generally speaking, any day is no better or worse than what *we* do with it. But in our view, much needless division, confusion, and hurt has been caused by religious groups that require their people to take an *anti*-Christmas position.

Most people realize that celebrating Christmas is not a biblical *commandment*. The word “Christmas” does not appear anywhere in the Bible—but *neither does the word “Bible”!*

In the Old Testament, Israelites observed certain days by God’s *commandment*. But it was by *custom* that certain other days were observed. It became “a *custom* in Israel” to set aside four days to lament the daughter of Jephthah (Jud. 11:39, 40). At the time of Esther, the Jewish *people* decided to set aside “a day of gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and for sending presents to one another.” It became an annual “*custom*” (Esth. 9:18-23).

By the time of Zechariah, the Jewish people had set aside four days each year as days of fasting (Zech. 8:19). At the time of Jesus, it was a Jewish custom to fast on two days a week (Luke 18:12). Jesus attended the winter Feast of Dedication (John 10:22, 23), even though it was not commanded in the Bible.

Who was it centuries ago that decided to set aside a day to honor the *birth* of Jesus Christ? Was it Jews who rejected Him? Was it followers of Mohammed? Was it followers of Buddha? Was it followers of Confucius? **No.** It was followers of Jesus Christ! This fact should not be quickly cast aside.

With the passing of time, however, there were decorations and folklore added to the Christmas story, additions that some find objectionable—like Santa Claus. But the original 4th century Santa Claus—Saint Nicholas of Myra—was a **believer** in Jesus! He enjoyed giving gifts to people, often secretly, and was a good and kind person. Fables about him having a sleigh, pulled by reindeer, and a gift workshop at the North Pole were added *much* later.

To suppose that **Santa** means **Satan**, because each term has the same letters—S-A-N-T-A and S-A-T-A-N—is foolish.

Any holiday celebration that involves millions of people—Christians and non-Christians—will produce some negatives. Christmas is no exception. Some have pointed out **X**’s in Christmas—things like **X**pense, **X**cess, **X**asperation, **X**haustion, **X**hibition, **X**travangance, **X**cuses, and **X**changes! And, unlike the country music song, all these **X**’s are not in Texas!

Because of negatives, some Christians sincerely believe the Lord does not want them to observe Christmas. I understand. But most Christians believe they can observe Christmas as a day to honor the Lord. I believe the guidelines of Romans 14:5-6 apply.

I will say, however, in *my* observations over the years, preaching a legalistic *anti*-Christmas message is fruitless.

A minister friend of mine who has preached in many countries, told me about a 5-night Christmas program presented at the church his son-in-law pastors in New York City. Each night the choir sang hymns of the season, there was a play about the birth of Christ, followed by a salvation message. Each night many responded to the invitation to receive Christ, resulting in over **300** following the Lord in water baptism!

Down the street, an *anti*-Christmas group may have waxed eloquent in criticizing Christmas—*criticism*, but with no *converts* to Christ! Can there be any doubt which church was fruitful?

We have all heard about the wise men who came to Jerusalem from the East. In the King James Version and many others, they are called “wise men” (cf. Dan. 2:48). Some translations use terms like Magi, stargazers, or astrologers.

It is true there were monthly prognosticators, stargazers, or astrologers who were not of God (Isa. 47:12,13, etc.). But even the book of Job refers to star patterns like the Pleiades, the Belt of Orion, and the Great Bear (Job 38:31, 32). Jesus Christ himself is called “the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16).

With a fine line between “astronomy” and “astrology,” we do not know exactly what the wise men believed. But they had heard of a coming Messiah who would be King of the Jews. Despite any superstitious ideas they may have had, God apparently intervened, meeting them on their own ground, as it were.

I am reminded of a couple I met some years ago in Canada. Before they knew the Lord, according to their horoscope, they needed to speak with a teacher. The only one they knew that might be considered a “teacher,” was a pastor they had only met briefly. They contacted him and asked what message he had for them.

Without putting down horoscopes (which he did not believe in, of course), he said he did indeed have a message for them. He was able then to lead them to Christ, their lives were transformed, and they became a vital part of his church congregation.

In Scripture there are numerous examples of *truth* coming forth, even when negative elements were involved:

The woman with a familiar spirit at Endor brought up “Samuel.” *However* that may be explained, the *message*—that Saul and his sons were about to die—was *true* (1 Sam. 28:19).

A girl “possessed with a spirit of divination” spread a message around Philippi that Paul and Silas were “servants of the Most High God”—a *true* statement (Acts 16:16, 17).

People who were demon possessed cried out, acknowledging that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 1:23, 24; Matt. 8:28, 29).

Jacob’s son, Joseph, whose record is seemingly flawless, practiced some kind of divination using a silver cup (Gen. 44:2, 5, 15).

Sometimes messages were conveyed in *unusual* ways, like when Balaam’s donkey was given the ability to speak. *She* “rebuked” him for his cruelty (Num. 22:28; 2 Peter 2:16).

God has a way of turning things around. In the case of the wise men, they were shown a unique star, one that ultimately caused them to find the baby Jesus. We believe *God* was involved in guiding them. As we read of their return trip: “And being warned of GOD in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way” (Matt. 2:12).

But Jehovah’s Witnesses, having a disdain for Christmas, teach the star that guided them was made by SATAN! “Who do you think made what appeared to be a star to guide the astrologers to Herod? It was not the true God, Jehovah, but his adversary, or enemy, **Satan** the Devil!” (*The Watchtower*, December 1, 2013).

A question about who made a star to guide the astrologers to Herod is redundant. The star the wise men saw in the East never guided them (or anyone else) “to *Herod*”!

Because the wise men, or astrologers (if some prefer), believed the star they saw signaled the birth of the King of the *Jews*, they concluded He would be born in *Jerusalem*. When they arrived there, they asked the *first* question recorded in the New Testament: “*Where* is He that is born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2).

When Herod heard what the wise men were saying, he consulted with the Jewish religious leaders “demanding of them *where* Christ would be born” (verse 4). Their answer, based on Micah 5:2, was that He would be born in *Bethlehem*. Herod then privately told the wise men to go to Bethlehem, search for the young child, and bring him word.

It was after this that the star **again** appeared: “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” (Matt. 2:9). When they saw the star again “they rejoiced with exceeding great joy”! (verse 10).

Some take “the star went *before* them” to mean that they *then* followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Others take these words to mean the star went *before* them, so that when they got to Bethlehem, it was *already* there, right over where the young child was. But either way, the result was the same: They found Jesus.

It was not until I visited Israel (first time was in 1978), that I realized how *close* Bethlehem is to Jerusalem (6 miles—only took a few minutes on the tour bus)!

The Bible does not tell us the age of Mary when Jesus was born, but based on norms of that time and area, it is estimated she was about 15. I think it is safe to say she is probably the **best-known mother** who ever lived. Even the Muslim *Quran* mentions her by name 34 times—*more* times than the Bible! The *Quran* even tells about the *supernatural conception* of Jesus.

In manger scenes, the wise men and the shepherds are commonly pictured together at the manger with the baby Jesus. Probably the two groups were not there at the same time, though that is not *impossible*, as we shall see.

In an attempt to remove the visit of the wise men as far away from the Christmas story as possible, a *Watchtower* (December 1, 2013) article quotes Matthew 2:11, and goes on to say: “So Jesus by then was no longer a **baby** in a manger; He was a **child** living with Joseph and Mary in a **house**.”

To make this distinction between “baby” and “child” can only reflect very inferior research. The terms are used *interchangeably*:

“...the **baby** wrapped in swaddling cloths.”

“...the **baby** lying in a manger.”

“...concerning this **child**.”

“...the circumcising of the **child**.”

“...the **child** Jesus was brought to Jerusalem.”

“...this **child** is destined...” (see Luke 2:12-27).

Even *before* He was born, Mary was “with **child**” (Matt. 1:18).

Every baby is a child, but not every child is a baby—like every Ford is a car, but not every car is a Ford.

Next, it is argued that the wise men came to a “HOUSE”—*not* the manger (Matt. 2:11). But can anyone prove the manger (a trough used to feed animals) was not located at a *house*? In more primitive times, a place for animals was often in close proximity to the house, *even a part of it*.

In the scholarly *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, an article on *bayit* (the Hebrew word translated “house”) mentions various parts of primitive houses and adds: “There was also a room for domestic animals.”

The house of the woman with a familiar spirit at Endor serves as an example: “The woman had a fatted calf *in the house*” which she slaughtered to feed Saul and those with him (1 Sam. 28:24).

Harper's Bible Dictionary (article “House”) mentions houses of Palestine having “a lower level, where the animals ate from stone mangers and rested on straw.” Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* confirms this. According to *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, “in many houses the cattle are in a lower part of the same dwelling,” and cites Genesis 24:32 and Luke 2:7.



Let’s suppose people came to look at a car I had for sale. One person might describe the car as being in the garage. Another might say he saw the car at my house. Whether they saw the car in my garage or parked in front of the house, either way they would have come to my *house*.

So, the house to which the wise men came, *could* have been the location of the manger.

In the attempt to remove the visit of the wise men as far away from the time of Jesus’ birth as possible, some say Jesus may have been as much as **two years old** when the wise men came to Bethlehem. That is impossible. *Jesus was not in Bethlehem two years after his birth!*

We don't know how many days Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus stayed in Bethlehem, but they were only there *temporarily*. We do know they were at the Temple in Jerusalem for Jesus' dedication 40 days after his birth (Lev. 12:2-8). *Nothing is said about them returning to Bethlehem*. Instead, "when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to their own city **Nazareth**"—not Bethlehem! (Luke 2:39).

This *unmistakably* places the **Bethlehem** visit of the wise men—if not at the actual birth of Jesus—sometime between that and when Joseph and Mary left to take Him to Jerusalem for His dedication. After that they were not in Bethlehem.

After the dedication they returned to Nazareth. But they did not go *directly* there, for as Matthew explains, they fled into Egypt (Joseph being warned in a dream that Herod would attempt to kill Jesus). They remained there for a period of time, and after that went (back) to Nazareth (Matt. 2:19-23).

It has been over a hundred years ago that my mother's family moved from Missouri to California. This is the *short* story. The longer account would explain they actually moved from Missouri to Colorado for a couple years (where my mother was born), and then on to Riverside, California—in 1919. Luke provides the *short* story. Matthew gives a longer, more detailed account, which includes the time in Egypt.

We are not told how long the wise men stayed in Bethlehem before heading back to the "East." But they were "warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod"—in Jerusalem—so they returned home "another way" (Matt. 2:12).

They had this warning, but apparently nothing was revealed about Herod's murderous rampage that would later follow. Had they known about this—and if they conveyed it to Joseph—it is doubtful he would have risked taking the baby Jesus to Jerusalem.

But the wise men, having departed Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to Jerusalem where He was dedicated. It was then, "having performed all things according to the law of the Lord" (Luke 2:39), that Joseph was warned about Herod:

"The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt...for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him." They remained in Egypt "until the death of Herod" (Matt. 2:13,14).

The title "Herod" means **hero**, but he was certainly not that in the true and good sense of the word. Just the opposite! When he realized the wise men were not coming back to him, he set out on his murderous rampage.

So, what about the claim that Jesus may have been as old as **two years** when the wise men came to Bethlehem?

This is based on Herod's order to have male children slaughtered "from two years old and under, according to the *time* when he had diligently enquired of the wise men" (Matt. 2:16). Going back to verse 7, Herod "enquired of them diligently *what time the star appeared*." And this refers back to when the wise men saw the star in the East.

Depending on what is meant by the "East"—possibly Persia or Babylon—the wise men's journey would have taken several months. For comparison: when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, it took **four months**, which was considered very good travel time (Ezra 7:9). If the star initially appeared to them right when Jesus was born—which Herod may have assumed—by the time they made their slow and treacherous

journey, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would have already left Bethlehem! So, we can rule this out.

As is often the case with a sign or prophecy, the appearance of the star could have been given in advance, without indicating an *exact* time. Numbers 24:17, a Messianic passage, provides an example: "I see Him, but not *now*: I behold Him, but not *near*, a Star shall come out of Jacob..."

It is interesting to note that Herod seemingly believed the Scriptures were true—even believing that this baby born in Bethlehem, "King of the Jews," posed a threat to his rulership!

He learned from the wise men when the star appeared in the East, but how he calculated the two years is not explained. In his wild fanaticism, he might have figured a *larger* timeframe, just to be sure his objective was accomplished. We know he did this with the *extent* of his slaughter, putting to death male children, not only those born in Bethlehem, but "*in all its districts*" (Matt. 2:16).

Herod's order to kill children two years old and under may have referred to children who had entered their second year, not necessarily that they were a *full* two years old. Notice the wording of a couple verses for comparison about how a year was figured:

"When that year was ended, they came to him the *second* year..." (Gen. 47:18). The year after the first was called the second year, even though the first year had just ended. Or, "And it came to pass in the first month in the *second* year, on the first day of the month..." (Exod. 40:17). In this verse, the very beginning that followed year one was called the second year.

If that same principle applied in the case before us, a child who had completed one year of life, was then in his *second* year and, consequently, was considered **two**, even though not a *full* two years old. No need to labor a technical point; nothing essential hinges on it. But this would narrow the time period in question.

Herod's killing spree has been called "The Slaughter of the Innocents." *How many* babies were killed? A note in the NIV Bible regarding Matthew 2:16 says:

"The number has often been exaggerated as being in the *thousands*. In so small a village as Bethlehem, however (even with the surrounding area included), the number was probably not large."

If we were to figure the population of Bethlehem (and the surrounding area) as high as 2,000 people—figuring ages from those just born up to age 80—that would be 50 children two years old and under. Since only males were involved, this would cut the number in *half*. It is possible that some escaped, as Jesus did, when Joseph and Mary fled with Him into Egypt. *The Pulpit Commentary* estimates the number of children killed was not over **20**.

After all these years, even though the *basic* Christmas story is well known, there are details like this that have been misunderstood or may need clarification.

When we read that Caesar Augustus decreed that all the "**world**" would be taxed (Luke 2:1 KJV), it did not involve the entire **planet**. The Greek word, here translated "world," often has a more *limited* meaning, like the "world" of the Roman Empire. Some scholars say the word (as used here) could even be limited to the Jewish "world." No one believes it involved the American Indians, Aboriginal people in Australia, or Eskimos in Alaska!

Caesar Augustus, founder of the Roman Empire, reigned from 27 BC until his death in AD 14. Little did he realize that a political decree he made, would play a part in Jesus being born in Bethlehem, fulfilling a *very major* Bible prophecy! (Micah 5:2).

According to Luke 2:1-5, the “reason” Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem was to be taxed (Luke 2:1-5 KJV). The Bible does not say they went to Bethlehem *so that Jesus would be born there*. The implication is that even **they** probably did not *fully* understand how Bethlehem would fit into God’s plan, until later.

The Greek word translated “**taxed**” in the King James Version (Luke 2:1, 3, 5), actually means “**registered**,” as most other translations say. In the *one* other place it is used, believers’ names are “**registered** in heaven” (Heb.12:23). This has *nothing* to do with income tax! While in time the paying of taxes might have been based on census information, that is not the primary meaning.

It is commonly assumed that Joseph and Mary were unable to get a room because they arrived in Bethlehem *at the last minute*. But the Bible says, “so it was, that *while they were there*, the days were completed for her to be delivered” (Luke 2:6, 7). This *could* imply they were there for several days, *during which* the days were completed for her delivery—not a *last-minute* arrival.

Upon reading “there was no room for them in the **inn**” (Luke 2:7), some suppose this inn was similar to what we call a hotel. But the word that is here translated “inn” is elsewhere translated “guest room,” which was usually within someone’s “house” (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). The word translated “inn”—where the good Samaritan took the man who was brutally beaten on the Jericho Road—is a *different* Greek word (Luke 10:34).

An angel told the shepherds that a “Savior who is Christ the Lord” had just been born *in Bethlehem* and that they would find Him “wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (Luke 2:11,12). The shepherds then said, “Let us now *go to Bethlehem* (verse 15). The implication is that they were not in Bethlehem, as such—though probably not too far away.

We may not have thought of it; but because there are tongues (languages) “of men and of **angels**” (1 Cor. 13:1), in order for the angels to be understood by the shepherds, they had to shift from their *heavenly* language to an *earthly* language. Translated from whatever language that was, we read: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!” (Luke 2:8-14).

For many centuries, most Christians have celebrated the birth of Jesus on December 25th. But, admittedly, the Bible does not provide an exact date. Some believe it was in the Fall season—at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles—that He was born and “dwelt [tabernacled] among us” (John 1:14). But if so, this would place his *conception* around December 25!

Charles T. Russell, founder of the organization now known as Jehovah’s Witnesses, believed Christ was born in the Fall of the year—“about” October 1—but pointed out: “Nine months back of that date would bring us to about Christmas time...as the date at which our Lord laid aside the glory which He had with the Father...changing to human nature. It seems probable that *this* was the origin of the celebration of December 25th as **Christmas Day**” (*The Time is at Hand*, p. 61). Russell did not hold the *anti-Christmas* teaching that later developed among Jehovah’s Witnesses.

One argument used against December 25th as Jesus’ birth date, is that travel would be difficult because of *cold* weather that time of year. *However*, going from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary most likely took the route through the Jordan River Valley which was a lower and, consequently, *warmer* way to go.

Leaving Nazareth with an elevation of 1,138 feet **above** sea level, in a comparatively short distance they would have been **below** sea level. By the time they got to Jericho—the *lowest* city on earth—they would have been **905** feet *below* sea level! The

remaining miles to Bethlehem were uphill (cf. Luke 10:30). But much of their trip would have been in a warmer climate.

Others object to the December 25th date because there were “shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8). The argument is that in winter, sheep would have been brought from the fields into a more protected shelter. *However*, if the shepherds were very poor—possibly without houses—it would have been necessary for them to remain living in the fields, even in cold weather. Their being very **poor** would provide a striking *contrast* to the wise men who were very **rich**!

Apparently Joseph and Mary were poor. We know this, because when the baby Jesus was dedicated at the Temple, they were allowed to offer doves *or* pigeons (Luke 2:24). The Mosaic law allowed this for those “not able” to afford a lamb (Lev. 12:8).

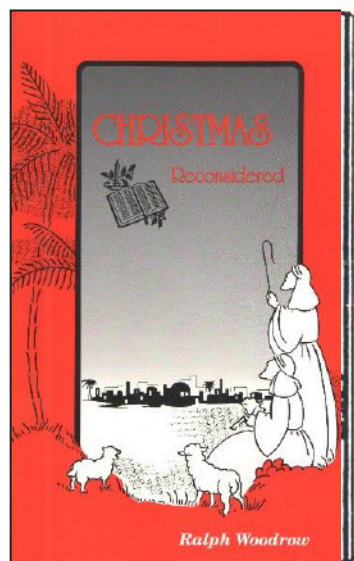
Every detail about the birth and life of Jesus is not spelled out in Scripture. As John expressed it: “I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that could be written” (John 21:25). But whether we understand all the details or not, He *was* born, and died, and rose again from the dead, and is alive forevermore! (Rev. 1:18). Because **He** lives, **we** can live also—*forever*!

Finally; in this article I have covered a variety of points. It is not my intent to put down any who may have a different understanding—including Jehovah’s Witnesses. These various points are for the reader’s consideration, intended as “thoughts”—not as dogmatic or divisive conclusions. “**Glory to God...peace on earth...good will toward men!**”

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