

# Christ & The Calendar

To: The Neal Children  
15 December 1999

## **Preamble**

It's late evening, almost midnight. In the great room of Jackson Lodge, a single table lamp casts yellow light beside the couch closest to the fireplace while fire burns low red at the hearth. It has been a romantic evening full of rich music and quiet conversation. Mom and I have been discussing Christmas. We're looking forward to meeting with all of you this Saturday evening for a family Christmas party. Our thoughts turn to things Spiritual, and we take some time and read out loud the Proclamation to the World from the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It is direct and powerful and does not shrink for its lack of political correctness. I'm reminded of how happy I am to be a member of the church.

I've shared with Maureen some thoughts and insight gained over time about the dating of the Savior's birth and the miraculous consistency of the scriptures and the validations from external sources from diverse locations around the world. She wants me to write it for you and give it to you four days hence.

The resources are large and the related subjects broad so I shall restrain my thoughts to the narrow subject of the year and day of the Savior's birth. Time is short and interest will lag so I shall be brief yet attempt to write about things not commonly known which may shed light, and hopefully insight, on an event so well known that the entire world maintains their lives around it.

## **The Calendar**

Whether one believes in the Savior or not, virtually everyone on the planet is directly and repeatedly affected by the life that Jesus Christ lived here on earth. Aside from the shaping of nations, culture, and the spiritual testimonies of millions, Christendom is the source of our modern-day calendar and all of us are impacted by it each day. We measure all of history in relationship to Christ; his birth marks the reference point for all things prior and everything that has happened since. Society's placement of the Savior's birth is the basis for all our chronology; we measure our lives and project our futures in terms of this timetable. The calendar represents our view of time.

It is commonly believed that the earth and all we know is bound by time. We live in a three-dimensional world governed by the fourth dimension, and we understand that dimension to be time. Christ and our eternal family must stand outside of time, but I suppose this is a subject for another time. Tonight I'm to write about a puzzle that is much more tangible.

Most of the people I know, and certainly my family, are familiar with the oft-told stories about the birth of the Savior. In fact, we have a long-standing tradition of reading the Bethlehem narrative from the second chapter of Luke each Christmas Eve. It is a beautiful and poignant story that never fails to touch my heart. The whole world knows Jesus Christ lived, it is one of the best-attested facts of history, but the actual date of his birth is another matter. The true birth date of Christ, or the real date for Christmas, is not at all well understood.

It was several hundred years after the birth of Jesus that the organized Roman church attempted to calculate Christ's exact birth and reset the calendars accordingly. It is widely recognized that there were errors and political interference in the computations and the day we celebrate for Christmas is certainly more symbolic than it is accurate.

One of the reasons that scholars are relatively certain that the day we commemorate as Christmas is not accurate is that the Savior was born in the spring and not in the winter. This conclusion is supported by a number of particulars, for example in Luke 2:1-2 read:

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.”

From external sources we discover that the Roman tax and census which required that Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem was conducted in the spring in concert with Passover, and considering Mary gave birth in Bethlehem immediately upon her arrival there, the Saviors birth would logically be in the spring.

It seems that the reason we observe the birth of Jesus on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December has to do with the merging of older elements of Roman religions with Christianity. This made the new religion more palatable with the society of the times as the celebration of their primary holidays would remain the same. It was about 325 AD that the date for the birth of Jesus was set by Roman hierarchy as being that of 25 December. This then

agreed with the ancient festivals of the Winter Solstice, set on 25 December, the coming forth of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which was on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December and the Roman Legion's god Mithras celebrated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December and believed to have been born on that date as well. Observation of January 1<sup>st</sup> as the first day of the calendar year was also a part of the Roman compromise. Perhaps these quasi-religious compromises are of little consequence, particularly considering they do not deal with doctrinal issues and by building on pre-existing cultural traditions continuity was preserved and Christianity was able to prosper. I leave that conclusion to the reader.

It should be abundantly clear that the meaning of Christmas is considerably more important than the actual date. However, a more accurate date is of interest and probably more so to Latter-day Saints than anyone else. Why? Because when Joseph Smith first organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he did so in the spring, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, asserting that through revelation he was inspired to know that this was the true birthdate of the Messiah. And, because in the fourth verse on the first page of the first book in the Book of Mormon we read:

“For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, (my father, Lehi, having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed.”

Two pages later in 1 Nephi 2:2 the story continues and says:

“And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.”

Through revelation Lehi, a prophet in Judah, was inspired to leave his home and escape with his family and therefore avoid the destruction that the Babylonians were soon to inflict upon his homeland. During this time the prophet Jeremiah, who was a contemporary of prophets such as Daniel, Ezekiel, Lehi, and possibly others, foretold the destruction of Judah and its capital city Jerusalem. He was bold in the calling of his people to repentance and particularly the ruling class. This caused Zedekiah, the king of Judah, who was evidently Jeremiah's own grandson, a great deal of political strife.

The Bible records Jeremiah as saying that he was not the only prophet foretelling the impending destruction of Judah and Lehi was surely one of

those who rose up and had the courage to speak out. Lehi's departure from Judah marks the beginning of the Book of Mormon, just prior to the devastation of Jerusalem. It also begins a 600-year countdown referenced many times throughout the Book of Mormon regarding the Savior's expected birth. For example 1 Nephi 10:4 says:

“Yea, even six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews – even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world.”

Nephi, the son of Lehi, makes clear that this prophecy is literal and there are several examples of his descendants taking care to keep track of the time expired since Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. This long-range tracking of events is not a phenomenon of the descendants of Nephi, the keeping of calendars was a time-honored tradition of the educated class in a host of locales surrounding Lehi and Nephi's homelands, both in the Middle East and later in Mesoamerica.

Recording the passage of time for hundreds of years requires a calendar of some kind, but the current solar calendar with which we are so familiar was a product of the Middle Ages brought about by edict from the Pope of Rome, at least a thousand years after Lehi departed Judah. So, the question might be asked, what constituted a “year” in Lehi's time and upon what kind of a calendar was the Lehi prophecy based?

Determining the calendar that Lehi's descendants may have used is an interesting study particularly because external history tends to present a time window smaller than that allowed by Lehi's prophecy. And, which if left without further consideration, might appear to strike-down this all-important prophetic record. I am familiar with three approaches to reconciling the 600-year prophecy that are all well done and interesting, if not overly intricate, and all are based on the solar calendar. However, I would like to present another view.

Calendars of significant precision, based upon identical astronomical observations and calculations are found in Bible lands and Mesoamerica, the latter the ultimate destination of Lehi & company. The true solar year was worked out in both areas to the seventh decimal point, 365.2421987 days. In both of these diverse locations the precise timing of the cycles around Venus and Mercury had also been calculated. Curiously this was not accomplished again until Kepler's work in the 17th century AD.

Even though much work has been done to demonstrate the efficiency of the solar calendar in 600 BC, I suspect there may be more to the ancient prophecy than first meets the eye.

We should be able to date the time Lehi left Jerusalem quite accurately. For example, we know from external sources that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler who made Zedekiah the puppet king over Judah, did so in 597 BCE. This date is well documented. Therefore, if the calendar Lehi used was a solar calendar similar to the one we have today then we are faced with a birthdate for Jesus somewhere between 3 AD to 4 AD. We reach this conclusion by simply adding 3 (for 3 AD) to 597 (for 597BC) and come up with 600, the amount of years called for in the Lehi prophecy. On the surface of it and assuming you accept the literal validity of Lehi's prophecy that would mean that Jesus was born at the earliest in 3 AD.

Of course there is the matter of the year zero, that mysterious lost year between BC (now BCE) and AD (now CE). You may have read or have seen a television show about the controversy surrounding when the exact year zero actually was supposed to have occurred, and this of course is all about determining the exact year of the birth of Jesus. Here the dating game gets a bit more complex as historical sources tend to validate a true birthdate for the Savior in the spring of 5 BC and not the year zero as is widely accepted. So...let's look at some known information about the time of the Savior's birth. In the second chapter of Matthew the first and second verses we read:

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea 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.”

A careful reading of the Scriptures demonstrates that the Wise Men or Magi met with Herod in Jerusalem not long after the Savior's birth. But from historical records we learn that Herod died just before Passover in the year 4 BC and therefore Jesus would have been borne before that date, probably in 5 BC. Further, at the time of Herod's death Varus, the Roman Governor of Syria was called upon to quell a riot that broke out during Passover. Varus had earlier stationed a legion outside Jerusalem to keep the peace and had struck coins bearing his name dated from 6 BC through 4 BC. By the time the traditional year zero rolled around Varus had already returned to Syria and Herod was long dead.

In March of 5 BC Chinese records describe a new long lasting and brilliant “broom star” that appeared in the heavens moving from east to west. Probably a brilliant comet with a sweeping tail, this “star” is the most likely candidate for the star of the Magi and the date fits perfectly with what we’ve learned about the death of Herod. But if Herod died prior to Passover in 4 BC and the broom star is the sign of the Messiah’s birth in the spring of 5 BC then we only have 592 years between the departure of Lehi from Judah in 597 BC and the birth of the Savior. (597 less 5 equals 592.)

The Book of Mormon records that signs in the heavens marked the birth of the Savior after exactly 600 years had expired. This is problematic if we use a standard solar calendar. However, just because the solar year had been worked out does not mean that societies were converted to its use. So, what kind of calendar was in use at that time? Well, the answer is not quite that simple as there were quite a number of different calendars in use during the Egyptian-Babylonian-Medes-Assyrian time frame. However, the best known and most widely used calendar of the ancient world is the 12-month lunar calendar.

Before nighttime light pollution, television, and before books and reading were widespread, observation of the night sky was the pastime of almost everyone. Even today most people know how to track the phases of the moon. The moon appears as a thin crescent and then expands to a full moon then contracts into another crescent after which it disappears for about four nights at the time of the new moon. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all still measure lunar time. Easter, for example, is determined each year as the first Sunday after the first full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox.

In the Jewish calendar Passover is a lunar festival in the spring. The Muslim calendar still cycles forward on a twelve-moon year without concern as to seasons. In virtually all ancient societies the phases of the moon were the basis for the month, even though more sophisticated calculations were required to determine the best time for planting. The religious calendar in use in Judah, Egypt, and Mesoamerica at the time, were all based on a lunar year even though the solar calendar was well known by the scholars of the day.

Most societies actually tend to use multiple calendars, for example in our home we are exposed to multiple fiscal years, calendar years, and school years to mark and track important events. The calendar-sensitive Mayans used a number of different calendars based on different astronomical

observations including lunar, solar, Venus, and others. Egyptian calendars included lunar, solar, Venus and the signature star of the Egyptians, the dogstar Sirius. Special calendars were prepared and observed for each.

When Lehi and his band of travelers left Judah for the Arabian Peninsula, and eventually an ocean-going trip to Mesoamerica, the most obvious and likely calendar would have been a lunar one. A lunar calendar requires nothing more than simple observation and the counting of how many lunar phases or months have transpired. If you loose track of day counts, the moon will be there every night to remind you of the passage of time, 12 full moons – one lunar year. The Book of Mormon records an interesting tidbit in Omni 1:21 which may reflect on the Nephities continued use of the lunar calendar:

“And they gave an account of one Coriantumr, and the slain of his people. And Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla; and he dwelt with them for the space of nine moons.”

The Nephities apparently were tracking time by lunar observation some 400 years after Lehi departed Jerusalem considering the approximate time of the event recorded above is around 200 BC. Of course, the Nephites surely had other types of calendars to track other kinds of events.

All things considered, it seems rather safe for us to use the standard twelve-month lunar calendar for calculating the birth of the Savior as prophesied by Lehi. The lunar calendar is slightly less than today’s solar counterpart. That’s because a lunar month is an average of 29 days. That slight difference in the days of a year multiplied by 600 amounts to quite a sum. So if we assume that Jesus was born in the spring of 5 BC and we calculate in reverse for 600 lunar years (7,200 moons), it gives us a date for Lehi’s departure of somewhere between the spring of 588 BC and 587 BC, which is the exact time frame set by external history for the destruction of Jerusalem. Now let’s look at some other interesting timing evidence. In 1 Nephi 7:14 we see Nephi speaking of his father Lehi’s escape:

“For behold, the Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them; for behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison. And they have sought to take away the life of my father, insomuch that they have driven him out of the land.”

And again addressing this same subject, 2 Nephi 25:10 reads:

“Wherefore, it hath been told them concerning the destruction which should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and according to my prophecy they have been destroyed, save it be those which are carried away captive into Babylon.”

The above two verses identify a specific time frame as to when Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, ie: Jeremiah was cast into prison, and the destruction of Jerusalem after Lehi departed. When Lehi and his family first departed Judah, they traveled south into the Arabian Peninsula after which Lehi twice sent his sons back to Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the city. From external sources we know that in the fall of 589 BC the Babylonian army invaded Judah, destroying the fortifications of the surrounding cities of Jerusalem. The Babylonian’s offensive was in retaliation for Zedekiah’s political alliance with Egypt. The attack on Jerusalem proper began in January of 588 BC whereupon the Jews called on Egypt for support.

Egypt sent an army in response to Zedekiah’s ambassadors and their call for help and the Babylonians left off on the siege of Jerusalem for some five months to fight their new foe. This allowed Jerusalem to open their gates and re-supply. It was at this time that the prophet Jeremiah endeavored to leave the city was arrested and charged with desertion. There was much intrigue and some fascinating stories about Jeremiah’s situation, but the bottom line is that he was kept in prison until the Babylonians conquered the city. They then freed the prophet.

Lehi’s sons (as recorded in the Book of Mormon) learned of the imprisonment of Jeremiah during their second trip up from Arabia to ask Ishmael and his family to join them in their exodus. External records place this event between 587 BC and 588 BC. The actual destruction of Jerusalem was June 587 BC. This is exactly the same period we get by counting in reverse Lehi’s 600-year prophecy using the 12-month lunar calendar where we fix the birth of the Savior in 5 BC.

Lehi’s family left Judah prior to the siege of Jerusalem. Sometime later the Babylonians attacked, and Lehi’s sons appear to have returned to the area about the time that the Egyptians had engaged the battle some distance away but before they had been defeated. (Had the Egyptians already been defeated this would have been such a significant event I believe it would have been mentioned in the text.) External records give us great insight to the political turmoil of the times, which may explain why the family of Ishmael was so willing to leave all of their lands and possessions

and travel with Lehi's sons into the desert of Arabia to join Lehi's exodus band.

Lehi along with his large family and that of Ishmael's and Zoram, the former servant of Laban, were led by the Spirit of God and eventually made their way down the Frankincense Trail along the Red Sea to approximately the modern day Jeddah, harbor site for inland Mecca. From this point they turned east by southeast to eventually come to the seashore at the sole of the geographical boot we call Arabia, probably in the country known as Oman. Eventually they constructed an ocean-going vessel and sailed to the area now known as Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica is a modern term that refers to both time and place. The geography encompasses Central Mexico south to Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, the time is pre-European.

Three more brief insights:

1 Every major indigenous group of Mesoamerican's believed in a first man and woman, the flood, and that their ancestors came from across the ocean led by a prophet. Further, that the Son of God had been born of a virgin, came to earth, died, was resurrected, taught baptism, and was with them in the pre-existence at a council in heaven.

2 The ancient Mixtec Codex Nuttall of Oaxaca, Mexico, was translated by Jill Furst and includes this comment regarding Quetzalcoatl, the fair god: "In the fixed religious calendar of 260 days, the date Four Earthquake would be the 6<sup>th</sup> of April. The date Seven Flower would be three days later, or the 9<sup>th</sup> of April.... Birth and rebirth are also symbolic of Seven Flower. What is shown in the pages of this codex is that on April 6<sup>th</sup> a deity shown first as dead and descending into the underworld leaves the underworld and comes back to life or is resurrected or reborn, three days later."

3 The Magi, or Wise Men from the biblical record, were almost assuredly from the geographical area of ancient Babylon and the empire of the Medes and Persians. An important religion during the time of the captivity of Judah just after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC was Zoroastrianism. The Jews were taken into captivity in the very area that formed the cradle for this ancient religion. (Modern day Iran and Iraq.) The high priests of this religious order were anciently called Magi, which is the root of our word for magician. These highly skilled and educated men were responsible for development of the zodiac and were the true forerunners of modern-day astronomy. A tenet of their faith was the belief in a prophesied Savior, that he would be born of a virgin and that a new

star would herald his coming. The Magi were stargazers, keepers of calendars, and educated well above the standards of the day. Two books of the Old Testament were written during the period of the Jewish captivity in Babylon, both books are known by the Prophets who wrote them, Daniel and Ezekiel. The elders of Zoroastrianism during this period would certainly have known the Jews and of their common belief with them of a coming Messiah. It seems reasonable that it was they who were those patiently watching the heavens for the sign of the prophesied Savior and that three of them were those who traveled to meet the Christ child.