

Israel's Messenger

Winter 2017

Publishing Salvation to Zion - Isaiah 52:7

A Ministry of Jewish Awareness Ministries

December 2017

Christmas & Chanukah: SHEDDING LIGHT ON DECEMBER 25TH



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POSTAL INFORMATION

POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to
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To subscribe to Israel's Messenger, please write to
 Jewish Awareness Ministries
 P.O. Box 1808, Angier, NC 27501
 Call 919-275-4477
www.JewishAwareness.org
 Subscription rate \$9.95 per year



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Contents

ARTICLES THIS ISSUE

Why December 25th?

Mark Robinsonpage 5

When Was Jesus Born?

Dan Bergman.....page 9



REGULAR FEATURES

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Mark Robinsonpage 4

MESSIANIC WITNESS TO ISRAEL

Mark Robinson page 13

SOWING THE SEED, REAPING THE HARVEST

Ken Overby..... page 14

SHADOWS OF THE TRIBULATION

Mark Robinsonpage 15



The cover of this issue is a December, 2017 calendar showing the holidays of Chanukah and Christmas. Perhaps they have more in common than normally recognized. The dates of each holiday begin on the same calendar day – the 25th. Christmas in the month of December and Chanukah in the month of Kislev in the Jewish calendar. Perhaps the same day for these holidays holds a deeper significance. This issue of *Israel's Messenger* looks at the relationship of Chanukah with Christmas and when was Jesus born.



From the Director's Desk

WINTER 2017

Shalom in the Messiah!

For me and many of our readers, this season of the year is the favorite time of the year.

Thanksgiving should be a byword for those of us redeemed by the grace of God from the wretched condition of our sin. From darkness to light, death to life, hopelessness to hope, these are not just phrases, but the reality of the life transformed by God's grace through our faith in Messiah Jesus.

Thanksgiving is also a distinctly American holiday. In a nation steeped with gospel light throughout her history, we should be thankful, if we live in this country, for the freedoms we have had from residing in the U.S. On behalf of the staff of Jewish Awareness Ministries I pray you have a blessed time of fellowship with loved ones and friends this Thanksgiving.

This season also is the time of year that the birth of the Savior is remembered. About one month after Thanksgiving, the birth of Jesus is celebrated in churches throughout this country, as well as the world. The impact on the Christian culture in this country is still seen on Dec. 25th. Public schools are closed, businesses will have the day off, government offices such as post offices won't be open, and there is the requisite bank holiday for this day. So let me also, on behalf of the personnel of Jewish Awareness Ministries wish you and your family a blessed Christmas as well.

December 25th is almost universally recognized as the day Jesus was born. Is this, in fact, the case? There are two main articles in this issue of *Israel's*

Messenger. Both of these articles analyze the questions around when was Jesus born and was it on December 25th.

I have written an article simply titled, *Why December 25th?* I don't believe Jesus was born on December 25th. If this is correct, why, then, has this date become so universally accepted as the date of his birth? Many Bible believing Christians, with a large number of Jewish believers being among them, see Christmas' roots coming from paganism. One publication attributed the adopting of December 25th to the early "church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun." The missing ingredient in this discussion is the Jewish holiday of *Chanukah*. Always celebrated close to Christmas, the background of this holiday and its practice in the first century and through the years will, I believe, shed light on why December 25th? This article should be thought provoking.

I have asked Dan Bergman to write an article on when was Jesus born? If not on December 25th, is there any biblical criteria that can shed light on the answer to this question? Reading his article will help you decide.

The *Sowing the Seed...Reaping the Harvest* column in this issue is written by Ken Overby. Just prior to Rosh Hashanah, September 21st, he visited Israelis in the malls in the Charlotte, NC area to give them gift bags with a gospel tract tied in with the Rosh Hashanah holiday. The encounter he had with one young man was simply amazing. You should definitely read the story. You, too, will be amazed.

In the last issue of *Israel's Messenger*, in the *Messianic Witness* column, I wrote on one way you can open a conversation with your Jewish friend or co-worker about Messiah Jesus. In this issue I have



given you some possible responses of your Jewish friend and how to proceed with him after you have offered him the pamphlet. Read this, re-read last issue's article, get some pamphlets from Jewish Awareness Ministries, and try it with your Jewish friend.

I have written the article for the *Shadows of the Tribulation* column in this issue as well. The need to address some of the sensationalism, although past and again proven erroneous, is important to the evangelical Christian world, especially to those who believe in the prophecies concerning Israel, the coming Tribulation period, and other end time events. How tragic that the Lord's name is continually dragged through the mud by those claiming to have insight into last day's events through "signs in the stars," Jewish holidays, and other such items. Please read this.

Our *Journey to Jerusalem* tour in 2018 is scheduled for Oct. 17 – 27. This 11-day tour will visit sites that most groups don't see, unless they have an extended itinerary. Your deposit of \$500 will hold your place for our trip to Israel next year. Don't wait to sign up.

I am convinced we are living in the end times. Jesus will come in the pre-tribulation rapture any day. When, no one knows. We do know, it will happen one day!!!

Maranatha! ☞

In Messiah,
Mark Robinson

Why December 25th?



by Rev. Mark Robinson

It has become almost universal in agreement that Jesus was born on December 25th. Children sing about this in their church Christmas plays. Secular media commentators reference this day as Jesus' birth during the Christmas season. Even the "*Jesus is the Reason for the Season*" signs suggest this time of year is special because it celebrates the birth of Jesus. Certainly, there are some who don't accept the 25th of December as the birth date of Jesus, I being one of those voices. But these voices are lost in the roar of the crowd who accept the 25th of December as His birth date. So why the almost universal acceptance of December 25th as Jesus' birth date if, in fact, it is wrong?

CHRISTMAS IS A PAGAN HOLIDAY?

In the August, 2008 issue¹ of Christianity Today there was an article titled the same as this article, Why December 25th? They had a brief blurb under the title that read, "For the church's first three centuries, Christmas wasn't in December, or on the calendar at all." The entire article quoted extensively from church fathers and attributed the adopting of December 25th as the birth date of Jesus to the 'church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun.'"

This explanation of a pagan background has become the accepted reason for why December 25th became the date of the birth of Jesus. What is missing in the Christianity Today article, and most discussions about the origin of December 25th as the date for the birth of Jesus, is the possible Jewish cultural background to this date and future Christian practices.

The Jewish cultural background I am referring to is the holiday of Chanukah.

WHAT IS CHANUKAH?

The Greek general, Alexander the Great, captured the known world in the late part of the 4th century B.C. Alexander would unite his kingdom in the Greek culture and language, the Hellenization of the world, which would have a big impact on Israel and the Jewish people. His reign was short-lived as Alexander died at the young age of 33, and his kingdom was then divided among his four leading generals in 313 B.C. Two of the resulting dynasties were known as the Ptolemaic, headquartered in Alexandria, Egypt, and the Seleucid, headquartered in Antioch, Syria, empires. Israel was located between these rival kingdoms.

On the 25th day of the month Kislev in 168 B.C., Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes, head of the Seleucid dynasty, took over the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. He set up a statue of Zeus in the Temple and sacrificed a pig on the bronze altar to Zeus.

Many of the Jewish people of Israel had become Hellenized in their thinking and practices because of the 150 years of Greek rule. Although stunned by the actions of Antiochus they went along with his decrees believing this to be the best course of action. A small remnant of Jewish people refused to bend their wills to the dictates of this despotic ruler because of their faith in Jehovah.

Shortly after Antiochus issued his decrees and defiled the Temple, a contingent of his army came to the small town of Modin, about 18 miles to the northwest of Jerusalem. An elderly priest by the name of Mattathias and his five sons, John, Simeon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan lived in this town. The captain of the troops ordered an altar built and the citizens of Modin to offer a pig as a sacrifice to Zeus. One apostate was

very willing to make the sacrifice, but Mattathias and his sons were enraged at this unholy act and slew the apostate as well as the soldiers of Antiochus. They fled to the hills where they were joined by many Jewish believers in Jehovah and began a time of guerrilla warfare against the evil forces of Syria and their king, Antiochus Epiphanes.

Shortly after fleeing to the hills, Mattathias died. He left his forces in the hands of his son Judah Maccabeus. After months of battles Judah led his forces into Jerusalem and recaptured the city and the Temple. They cleansed the defiled Temple, rededicated it back to Jehovah, and Judah declared that an eight day holiday should be instituted memorializing the restoration of the Temple. This was done on the 25th of Kislev, 165 B.C., exactly three years after the desecration. This holiday became known as the Feast of Dedication or Chanukah.

The explanation for the length of the holiday is based on the legend that only one cruse of consecrated oil, a day's worth, was found for the lighting of the menorah. Miraculously, this one cruse of oil burned for eight days providing time to consecrate more oil. And so today Jewish people celebrate this holiday for eight days around the lighting of candles in their menorah on each night.

CHANUKAH AND CHRISTMAS

The holidays of Chanukah and Christmas have a number of common themes. There are three that I believe are pertinent to the question, Why December 25th?

The first is the holidays fall on the same day - the 25th. Chanukah begins on the 25th of the Hebrew month Kislev and Christmas is celebrated on the 25th of December.

Continued on page 6

The second common theme is that of light. For the 8 days of Chanukah candles are placed in the Chanukiah, the menorah, with one on the first day, two on the second day, until the eighth day when there are 8 lit. One of the customs of Christmas is the festive decoration of lights on houses and Christmas trees.

The third common theme is the centrality of the servant in each holiday. The chanukiah has a ninth branch that is either set apart or elevated from the other 8 candles. This ninth branch is called the *shamash* candle. *Shamash* means servant and it is with this candle the other 8 candles are lit. Christmas celebrates God's Servant, the Messiah Jesus, coming into this world. In 4 chapters of Isaiah - 42, 49, 50, 53 - the Messiah is called the servant.

JESUS AND CHANUKAH

Chanukah remembers an event that occurred in the 400 years between the end of the book of Malachi and the birth of Jesus. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all, though Antiochus and what he would do is prophesied in Daniel 8.

The only mention of Chanukah is in the gospel of John. "*And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter,*" John 10:22. Chanukah means dedication. Jesus went to the "*feast of Chanukah*" when it was being celebrated in Jerusalem.

We have no record of how Chanukah was celebrated during the days of Jesus. Just that it was celebrated. I think it is safe to presume that there were at least two components to the celebration. One would be the telling of the story of the events around this time period with the rededication of the Temple. The second part of the celebration almost certainly would have been focused on a menorah and the lighting of candles remembering the miracle of the one cruse of oil that lasted for 8 days in providing light for the Temple menorah.

Most likely, the chanukiah used

would have been eight branches. The Talmud (Shabbat 21-24) testified that (during or after the second Temple), Jews were lighting chanukiah lights. But the passage only mentions eight lights, and does not mention the "*shamash*."

That name first appeared in the 16th-century summary of Jewish law, *Shulchan Aruch* (Orach Chaim, Chapter 673), applying it to the Talmudic description of an extra light sometimes kindled in the same room with the Hanukkah lamp. Shmuel Gonzales in his article Chanukah: The Ner Mitzvah and the Shamash comments "In this line the custom of Ashkenazim to light the Chanukah lights with the Shamash is documented for us here in the 16th century by the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis of Kraków, Poland). It also provides us from where the custom of placing the Shamash light right next to the Chanukah lights is derived."²

So, at least the mention of the *shamash* candle in Jewish sources is many centuries after the destruction of the Temple. This does not mean, though, that the appearance of the *shamash* candle didn't come sooner than the 16th century. In fact, there is evidence that the shamash candle did appear on the scene many centuries earlier although it was not mentioned in Jewish writings.



THE CHANUKIAH

The nine branch chanukiah is widely accepted today. Yet, there is little in Jewish writings about the history of the nine branched chanukiah. Hannah Weiss in her fascinating article "*Hanukkah Riddle: The Elusive Origins of the 'Shamash'*" writes:

"The hanukkah, or Hanukkah lamp, follows two traditional designs: a branched candelabra or a straight row. The eight lights (one for each festive night) are supplemented by a ninth light, identical but set apart from the others. Whether it burns oil, electric or candles, the hanukkah is so familiar you would never guess it has a short history. A rabbi at Yeshiva.org, when asked about an unusual hanukkah which someone had inherited, remarked, 'The first use of an eight-armed menorah for Chanuka is not known, although there are some dating back over 500 years.' The Israel Museum's

earliest hanukkiah on display is from the 14th century. But in commemorating an event from 165 BC, that's fairly recent! What did these ceremonial lamps look like before 1300 AD apparently no one knows. Even more mysterious is the shamash, the ninth light bearing an Aramaic name that means 'servant.' What is its purpose? Rabbinic sources offer contradictory answers."

Why isn't the nine branched chanukiah and its use in the Jewish world developed in more detail? The discovery of some ancient nine branch chanukiah in Israel raises more questions about the lack of Jewish historical development of the chanukiah. The first is reported on by Heritage Auctions.



"The decorative motif and general form share similarities to

the Beit Natif type, commonly dated to the Third Century CE or later. However it appears to be an early, transitional form, extending the dating to the period between the Jewish War (66-70 CE) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE). The nine spouts are thought by at least one prominent expert to mark this lamp as an early form of ritual Hanukkah lamp, or Hanukkaiah, as directed in the Talmud to celebrate the Festival of Lights in honor of the Wars of the Maccabees, in which the people of Israel secured their religious freedom.

A letter from Dr. Meir Ben Dov, archaeologist and Field Director for the Temple Mount Excavations in Jerusalem, dated 6 December 1988, states the following: 'It is my considered opinion that this is a Hanukah menorah, a lamp used for Jewish ritual use during the festival of Hanukah requiring nine lights. As a Hanukah lamp dating back to the period of the Second Jerusalem Temple it is an object of extraordinary significance.

It is undoubtedly the earliest Hanukah lamp extant. It is also possibly the oldest Jewish ceremonial object to have been discovered to date. This Hanukah Menorah is thus of the greatest importance as an object relating to Jewish history and to the development of objects used in the Jewish ritual."³

Weiss reports on two other discoveries.

"A similar archeological find escaping scholarly attention is an intriguing photo in the 1906 edition of the Jewish Encyclopedia: an undated Chanukah lamp found in Jerusalem excavations' sometime before the Encyclopedia's publication, which closely resembles the Greek-Judean hanukkiah."



candelabra, also dating back to the 1st-2nd century. This one was unearthed in the ancient Golan town of Sogana (renamed by local Arabs as el Yehudiye). The engraving is thought to be from the arch of the town synagogue. But no scholar has commented on this appearance of a hanukkiah design that Jews would not use for the next 1000 years."

"A[nother] witness is a portrayal of the other "new" design, a nine-branched

SOGANA

There is little known about the town of Sogana. Once again, Weiss helps:

"Of Sogana little is known beyond a bare description by the 1st-century Jewish historian Josephus (Wars of the Jews 4:1). The town wall was fortified by Josephus himself during the 70 AD Judean rebellion

against the Romans. Yet despite its potential to withstand attacks, Sogana unaccountably surrendered rather than fight to the death (as neighboring Gamla did). Josephus made no attempt to explain Sogana's strange decision, undoubtedly made over his objections. But as a town only a few miles northeast of the places where Yeshua spent most of His time, we might imagine a strong Nazarene presence there, which motivated them to obey the New Covenant instructions (Romans 13:1-7) to "submit to the governing authorities," namely King Agrippa who represented Rome."

With thousands of Jews coming to the Lord in the early church period, it is easy, and likely correct, to conjecture that towns in the Golan, like Sogana, could have become largely followers of Messiah Jesus.

JESUS, THE SHAMASH OF GOD

The discovery of early, 1st century, nine branch chanukiah and the lack of historical development of its origins by the Jewish community pose an interesting possibility. Was the shamash candle added by the Jewish followers of Yeshua in the first century in order to celebrate this holiday that Jesus celebrated, but, now, focusing the attention on the servant candle which gives light to the other candles.

These Jewish followers of Jesus would have understood the darkness of sin that infected all people. They would have understood that Jesus, who proclaimed Himself as the light of the world, John 8:12, was the only One who could give the light of life to people. They certainly were aware of the four servant passages in Isaiah speaking of the Messiah who would bring redemption to Jew and Gentile.

Were Jewish followers of Jesus the ones who introduced the nine branch chanukiah? The evidence indicates it is a distinct possibility.

Continued on page 8

DECEMBER 25TH

There are those who believe Jesus was born on December 25th. Alfred Edersheim, a Jewish believer and scholar of the 19th century, is one who believed this. "The date of the feast of Dedication (Chanukkah) - the 25th of Kislev seems to have been adopted by the ancient church as that of the birth of our blessed Lord - Christmas - the dedication of the true temple which was the body of Jesus."⁴ Although this theory is intriguing, there is better evidence for Jesus being born in the fall.⁵

I think there is a better explanation of "Why December 25th?" The early church's, 2nd century and following, animosity toward the Jewish people and their culture and customs is well established. The adoption of an anti-Jewish understanding became the norm in the first couple of centuries after the Jewish apostles and the first century church (a good part being Jewish believers) passed into history. The early church fathers followed the Julian calendar, introduced by Julius Caesar in 45 B.C.E.

The animus against things "Jewish" can be seen in this quote from an Orthodox Church website and an article titled, "*The Patristic Church Calendar: An Indissoluble Element of Universal Church Tradition.*"

"Only the system of the Great Indiction and the traditional Orthodox Paschalion conform to the requirements of the Seventh Apostolic Canon and the dicta set forth by the First Ecumenical Synod, which are confirmed in the First Canon of the Council of Antioch. These rules *explicitly forbid the celebration of the Christian Pascha on the same day as the Jewish Passover.*" (Italics in the original).⁶

The article argues for the Julian Calendar as the church calendar. Why, though, the 25th of December?

JEWISH BELIEVERS AND DECEMBER 25TH

From the above information, we can piece together a possible explanation for the celebration of December 25th as the date for the birth of Jesus.


1. The 9 branch chanukiah was clearly used following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., regardless of the Jewish communities lack of acknowledging this fact.
2. It is logical to believe that the Jewish believers in Jesus introduced the *shamash* candle and the 9 branch chanukiah in order to remember their Messiah after the destruction of the Temple.
3. If the *shamash* candle was a picture of Jesus bringing light to Jew and Gentile, it is understandable why the larger Jewish community would not want to be associated with the 9 branch chanukiah and the *shamash* candle.
4. With the Jewish people scattered in the diaspora after 70 A.D., and the use of the Julian calendar in the Gentile world, it is very possible that the Jewish believers in Jesus, prohibited by the anti-Jewish church and culture to remember events on their Jewish dates, used the parallel day of 25 used in the Gentile world. This calendar day being in the month of December. Thus, the 25th day of December was chosen to remember the *Shamash* of God, Jesus, coming into the world to bring light to the world as the Jewish followers of Jesus tied in the events of Chanukah with Jesus as the *Shamash* of God on December 25th instead of Kislev 25.
5. If December 25th was in fact introduced by Jewish believers to remember the events of Chanukah and Jesus as the *Shamash*, it is understandable why the 3rd and 4th century church fathers,

wanting to wipe every vestige of Jewishness from the church, came up with the explanation that December 25th was the "church's identification of God's son with the celestial sun." This explanation was possibly offered in order to separate the Jewish believer's celebration of Chanukah and Jesus as the *Shamash* on this day from the celebration of Jesus' birth on this day throughout the (largely) Gentile church world.

The church fathers rejected the Jewish calendar followed by Jesus, the Jewish apostles, and the first century church, comprised of primarily Jewish believers. Their rejection of the Jewish calendar and the adoption of the Julian calendar, wedded with their animosity toward all things "Jewish," possibly resulted in the acceptance of December 25th as the birth date of Jesus as early as the late 3rd century.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Certainly one can't be dogmatic on "Why December 25th?" and the relation of that date to Chanukah and Christmas. What we can be dogmatic about is that Jesus was born into this world! He came into this world as God's Servant! As His Servant He died for your sins so you can have the forgiveness of sin, a personal relationship with God, and a home awaiting you in heaven!

Merry Christmas, as He was born into this world to die for us! Happy Chanukah because He is the Light of the World! 

End Note

1. This article can be read at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/why-December-25.html>
2. Access the entire article at <https://hardcoremesorah.wordpress.com/2011/12/23/chanukah-the-ner-mitzvahandthe-shamash/>
3. <https://historical.ha.com/itm/judaica/judaea-secondtemple-roman-era-circa-70-200-ce-ceramic-nine-spoutedhanukkah-lamp/a/6170-52078.s?ic4=GalleryView-Thumbnail-071515>
4. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as they were at the time of Jesus Christ*, p 334.
5. See Dan Bergman's article in this issue of Israel's Messenger, "When was Jesus born?"
6. http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/photii_cal.aspx

When was Jesus Born?

by Rev. Dan Bergman



There is much in our Christmas culture that makes us find it difficult to imagine any setting for the nativity other than a cold winter's night. Take the example from the Christmas carol "In the Bleak Midwinter" which I'll admit, I really do like! This song (which I've sung in many-a Christmas cantata) is based on a poem by the English poet Christina Rossetti. Here are some of the words:

*In the bleak mid-winter
Frosty wind made moan;
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak mid-winter
Long ago.
Our God, heaven cannot hold Him
Nor earth sustain,
Heaven and earth shall flee away
When He comes to reign:
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable-place sufficed
The Lord God Almighty —
Jesus Christ.*

Do you have a picture in your mind of this scene? Beautiful as it may be, it is most assuredly an inaccurate one. Was Jesus born in the *bleak mid-winter*? Even though we may be fond of this notion, if we really want to get to the truth, and deduce when the Messiah actually entered this fallen world through physical birth, we must leave all preconceived notions behind. I invite you to join me in this investigation. We may have our ideas and beliefs challenged, but take heart, we can get to the bottom of this mystery! Are you ready?

EXHIBIT A: THE CENSUS FROM ROME

This passage from Luke immediately gives us some historical perimeters as to when the birth of the Messiah occurred:

"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.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Beth-lehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 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 2:1-7

When were Roman censuses normally conducted, especially one that required much travel on the part of many subjects of the empire? In his article in *Holy-Days and Holidays*, Cunningham Geikie states that this census "could hardly have been at that season [winter], however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population's traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years. Snow is not at all uncommon at Jerusalem in the winter months, and I have known it so deep that people lost their way outside the gates."¹

EXHIBIT B: THE SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELDS

There has been much study given to the possible climactic conditions of a winter nativity, which if viewed with an unbiased eye, can quickly give us some aid in narrowing down the timing of Jesus' birth. Listen to Luke's report of the angelic announcement to the shepherds:

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:9-11

It has been deduced by Israeli meteorologists after years of study that the climate and weather patterns in Israel have come to the conclusion that "broadly speaking, weather phenomena and climatic conditions as pictured in the Bible correspond with conditions as observed today."²

In 2016, the coldest average low of the year in Bethlehem was at the end of December and the beginning of January. The average low was 39° Fahrenheit.³ As one commentary put it, "These humble pastoral folk are out in the field at night with their flock—a feature of the story which would argue against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted it."⁴

If the Israeli meteorologists' projections of first century climate is accurate, we definitely would not find the shepherds abiding in the

Continued on page 10

fields watching their flocks by night in Bethlehem's winter. *Holman's Harmony of the Gospels* informs us that this seems "to indicate a birth between March and November, since the sheep were usually kept in folds rather than in open fields during the winter months, making our December date of the observance suspect."⁵

EXHIBIT C: THE SCHEDULE OF THE PRIESTS

Darrell Pursiful states well our intention in this subject: "In theory, if one could pinpoint the day on which Zechariah and Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist, one could extrapolate an approximate date of Jesus' birth. Elizabeth was "in her sixth month" of pregnancy when the angel Gabriel came to Mary. Therefore, approximately fifteen months after Elizabeth conceived, Jesus was born."⁶

Scripture that we find in the *Tenach* (Old Testament) in conjunction with rabbinical tradition, sheds some light on an interesting aspect of the timing of the Messiah's birth. These have to do with the "courses" of the priestly divisions, as scheduled based upon the divisions and families from 1 Chronicles and the Mishna *Taanit* (Rabbinical writing: "Fasting"). Let's take a look into Luke chapter 1, and examine a little closer than perhaps we have in the past, the background of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist:

"There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth... And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense." Luke 1:5,8-11

Focus in on the phrases "course of Abia" and "order of his course." Zechariah was of the course (or family) of Abijah. According to 2 Chronicles 23:8, these courses rotated from Sabbath to Sabbath. This rotation would repeat twice a year. It is inferred by Luke that Elizabeth would conceive John shortly after Zechariah's return from Jerusalem. Shmuel Safrai, in his work *A Priest of the Division of Abijah*, details for us the timing of service for Zechariah's priestly course:

During the Second Temple period, the twenty-four priestly divisions served in the temple at Jerusalem in a rotation system. A list of priestly divisions can be found in 1 Chronicles 24:7-18... The priests themselves lived not only in Jerusalem but also in other settlements in the land of Israel. When it was "time for the division to go up [to Jerusalem]" (Mishnah, Ta'anit 4:2), the priests left their homes, went up to Jerusalem for a week, and afterwards returned to their homes in Judea or Galilee... Abijah was the eighth priestly division."⁷

Once we examine the timing of these rotations, we can get a little bit closer to nailing down a more concrete time frame. Zechariah's course was the eighth.⁸ The courses started with the first month in the Hebrew calendar *Nisan*⁹ (March or April of our calendar). His shift would actually be on the tenth week of this rotation.

Why the tenth week? Because all divisions served during primary feast weeks of the Jewish year. So all of the divisions of the priesthood would serve during Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread (the third week of the year). Likewise, all of the divisions of the priesthood would serve during the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost (the ninth week). Thus, the eighth course of the priesthood would end up serving on the tenth week of the year.

Now we must make an assumption here. Remember we said that

Zechariah's division served at the temple twice a year. The Bible does not specify which of the two shifts of service it was. Regardless, nine months after one of the two dates John the Baptist was born. This would place his birth in March or September.

We will assume that Luke is recording Zechariah's first shift of service for the year. We will find that assumption tends to prove true as we discover the dates of John the Baptist's and Jesus' birth. Therefore, the date of Zechariah's service (in Luke 1) would be the Jewish date of Sivan 12-18 (mid-June).¹⁰

Due to time of travel for Zechariah, at least one additional week should be counted before we can assume John was conceived. If the above timing is correct, John the Baptist would be born almost exactly at the beginning of Passover! What is even more amazing, is that the announcement to Mary of her conception of the Messiah comes in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy according to Luke - *The Festival of Light* - Chanukah! This fits very well with the words of John:

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."¹¹

EXHIBIT D: THE CELEBRATION OF THE HEBREWS

The Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), is an amazing Jewish festival which lasts eight days. It is also known by the Hebrew name *Sukkot* (*soo-KOTE*) meaning "Booths."

"Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the



YOUR VERDICT?

Have you come to a verdict? With the evidence thoroughly weighed, it is difficult to look back to any view that is based solely on tradition. As we have seen here, if we aren't afraid to do some digging, we can arrive at a conclusion in this matter that is scripturally based. Realizing that the Messiah probably wasn't born in "*the Bleak Midwinter*" doesn't however necessitate changing the day that we celebrate His birth, as it was chosen for a reason (see previous article). What we do need to take away from this investigation is a greater faith in the Word of God, a greater understanding that our God makes no mistakes, and a greater joy knowing that we can trust Him in every area of our lives!

With all of this in mind, the most important truth about the birth of the Messiah is the fact that it happened. It occurred just as the prophets foretold! He was born to die one day on a Roman cross, to pay the penalty for your sin and mine. Three days later He rose from the grave! Have you trusted Him as your Savior? If not, won't you do so today? 🕊

End Note

1. Cunningham Geikie, "Christmas at Bethlehem," Edward Deems, editor, *Holy-Days and Holidays*, 1968, p. 405.
2. R.B.Y. Scott, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Vol. 3*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 625.
3. <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-min-max-Temperature-fahrenheit,bethlehem-ps,Palestinian-Territory>
4. *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1971, note on Luke 2:4-7.
5. John B. Pollhill, "The Time of Jesus' Birth," in *Holman Christian Standard Bible: Harmony of the Gospels* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), 290.
6. <https://pursiful.com/2006/12/18/when-was-jesus-born-zachariahs-priestly-service/>
7. Shmuel Safrai, A Priest of the Division of Abijah, *Jerusalem Perspective Vol. 2, No. 5*, February 1989
8. 1 Chronicles 24:10
9. 1 Chronicles 27:2
10. <http://www.angelfire.com/la/jlush/jesusborn.html>
11. John 1:4-9
12. John 1:14
13. E.W. Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*, Kregel Publications, 1995 Appendix 179

fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the Lord seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. And Moses declared unto the children of Israel the feasts of the Lord."
Leviticus 23:39-40, 42-44

A *Sukkah* (booth or tabernacle) is made even today by each family (or synagogue) at this time of year to commemorate this feast. If we follow our deductions from the probable timing of the Roman census, the shepherds abiding in Bethlehem's fields at night, and the date of Zachariah's priestly service (which gives us a fairly accurate timing for John's conception), we really can ascertain a fairly accurate date for the Messiah's birth! If as previously mentioned, Jesus was conceived on Chanukah, a normal gestation period would place His birth on the 15th of Tishri, September 29th according to our calendar, which is... the Feast of Tabernacles!

It is amazing to study the connections between the Messiah's birth and this feast! Just as the children of Israel dwelt in booths as they wandered the wilderness, they are to do so once a year – in commemoration of the provision and presence of God! It is to be one of the most joyful times of the year in the life of an Israelite. It is therefore, not surprising to see the wording that John uses when he describes the incarnation of the Messiah, "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.*"¹²

The Greek word translated here as "dwelt" is σκηνώω (ske-NO) which literally means "to tabernacle." *The Companion Bible* expounds on this thought:

The word tabernacled here receives beautiful significance from the knowledge that "the Lord of Glory" was "found in fashion as a man," and thus tabernacling in human flesh. And in turn it shows in equally beautiful significance that our Lord was born on the first day of the great Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, viz. the 15th of Tisri, corresponding to September 29 (modern reckoning). The Circumcision of our Lord took place therefore on the eighth day, the last day of the Feast, the "Great Day of the Feast" of John 7:37.¹³

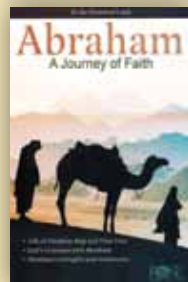
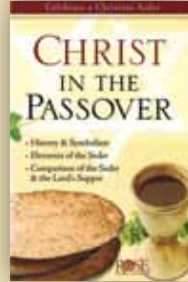
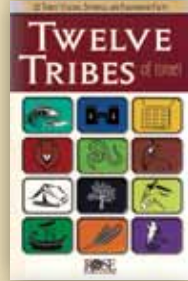
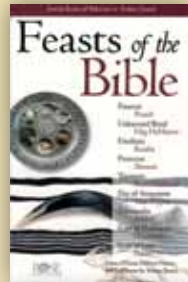
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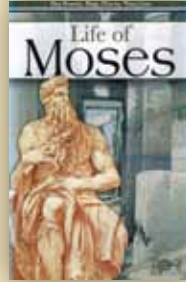
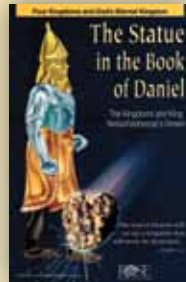
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Messianic Witness to Israel

by Rev. Mark Robinson



So now you have done it. You took the advice of the last *Israel's Messenger* issue's "Messianic Witness to Israel" article, obtained a good short booklet for your Jewish friend, asked him if he would read the booklet, and then let you know his opinion of the contents. And, lo and behold, he agreed!

Oy vey (woe is me!)!, you now may be thinking, what do I do now?

The first thing you should do is PRAY! Pray that God will convict your friend of his need for Messiah Jesus, John 16:8.

The next step doesn't matter on what your friend does next. When you gave him the booklet, you had asked him to read it and tell you his opinion of the contents. He agreed to let you know. Give your friend about a week to get back to you. The length of the booklet is minimal. It can be read in less than 10 minutes. Hopefully, your friend comes to you in the next week to let you know his thoughts. But if he doesn't, you should approach him after a week or so, and ask him, "What did you think of the booklet you took to read?"

It is at this point, depending on your friend's response, that you will have to be flexible in how you proceed. Here are some possible scenarios, certainly not all, with suggestions on proceeding with your friend.

YOUR FRIEND: "It was interesting, but I am not really interested in this type of thing."

YOUR ANSWER: "I understand your not being interested. I am very interested, though, in your OPINION on the content. Could we have a cup of coffee or lunch sometime and you could tell me your thoughts on the content of the booklet?"

If your friend persists in saying he is not interested, there is nothing more you can do but graciously accept his answer. You could leave him with something like, "I appreciate your reading the booklet. If you are interested in letting me know your opinion of the contents in the future, it would be my blessing to visit with you about it."

YOUR FRIEND: "I found the booklet interesting. But, are you trying to convert me?"

YOUR ANSWER: "I am not trying to 'convert' you to anything. We are born either Jewish or Gentile. No matter what one believes, their heritage doesn't change. Biblically, 'conversion' is a turning of one's heart back to the God of Israel."

Jewish people have a misunderstanding about "convert." They believe to believe in Jesus one gives up his Jewishness and becomes a Gentile (Christian). Gentile and Christian are synonymous to most Jewish people. As you have opportunity to develop this thought, emphasize the "Jewishness" of what you believe. It comes from the Jewish Bible, from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and whether you believe Jesus is the Jewish Messiah or not, believing in the Messiah is very Jewish. After your explanation, ask him something like, "I really value, and am curious about, your thoughts on the content of the booklet. Can we get together sometime to discuss this?" If he answers in the affirmative set up a time to meet; don't wait to set up a time.

YOUR FRIEND: "I found some of the contents intriguing. I would like to get together to discuss some of the content."

YOUR ANSWER: "Great! Let's set up a time to get together."

If the response is an interest in discussing the contents of the booklet, set up a time to discuss it immediately. Don't wait for a later time. When you get together ask him his opinion on the contents. Ask him to narrow down his thoughts to one subject. For example, if you use J.A.M.'s booklet "*Identifying the Messiah*," and the subject of Messiah being born in Bethlehem is raised, spend your initial time on this verse and topic. After reading the verse together out of the booklet, ask him to tell you what it means in his own words. Go phrase by phrase if possible. After he has made any comments, help him in the understanding of the verse (or

passage). Remember, most Jewish people are illiterate when it comes to Bible knowledge and won't understand things that are basic to you. For example:

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah..."

YOUR EXPLANATION: Judah is an area in ancient Israel. Something like a county or region in our modern world. Bethlehem, thus, is a small city in the area of Judah.

"Yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel..."

YOUR EXPLANATION: Out of Bethlehem will come forth the ruler. In Biblical times the ruler was king. So, the king of Israel would come out of Bethlehem and be God's king, "*unto me [God]*." So here, we have this verse telling us that the Messianic king would be born in Bethlehem. The Messiah would occupy the office of King in Israel.

"...whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

YOUR EXPLANATION: This king born in Bethlehem, whose past activities ("*whose goings forth*"), we are told, is "*from of old, from everlasting*." Who is the only One from everlasting? From eternity past? Only God is from eternity past. What this verse is telling us is "the Messianic king will be born in Israel and He is God because He is from eternity past."

Now, this will probably open up an entire new line of discussion. That is ok. Your friend might also say he can't believe that Jesus is God. Or, he might say how can man become God. The short answer is that man CAN'T become God. The Bible clearly teaches this. But, the Bible clearly teaches that God BECAME man, to live a perfect life and die for our sins, providing the perfect sacrifice.

You have opened a door of conversation with your Jewish friend. Lord willing, in the days ahead, the conversation will continue. 🕊



Sowing the Seed...

Reaping the Harvest

Rev. Ken Overby

For a couple years I have developed an outreach to young Israelis fresh out of the IDF - Israeli Defense Forces.

They are here as temporary workers generally selling Israeli products in kiosks in the shopping malls throughout the U.S. On the Jewish holidays I, along with volunteers, prepare gift bags for these young men and women, with traditional treats, and included is a specific tract for that holy day. For Rosh Hashanah, the traditional treat is an apple slice dipped in honey, representing good health for a sweet year. The greeting is "*Shanah tova um'tukah*" - Have a good and sweet year.

As I approached one tall young man named Ari, I was totally caught by surprise with the discussion that would ensue. He looked in the bag, gave me high five and exclaimed, "You are like the one bringing us the "Moshiach" - Messiah in the last days!"

I was amazed at his comment. "Ari," I said, "you are the first Israeli to say that to me. Please explain what you mean when you say, 'you are like the one bringing us the Moshiach.'" He replied, "In the last days when the countries are trying to destroy Israel at 'Gog/Magog,' the gentiles will pray for God to send Messiah to save Israel."

I said, "Gentiles?"

He said "yes the Christians."

I had never heard this before. Gentiles would be the messenger of the Messiah to Jewish people in the days of the Gog/Magog battle? Can there be a greater challenge for Gentiles to share Messiah Jesus with Jewish people? I realize most Jewish people have no inkling of what Ari told me. I also know that Ari, as well as Jewish people, are not aware of the command of Romans 11:11, "*I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.*" I am also aware that most Gentile believers in Messiah, Bible believing Christians, either are unaware of Romans 11:11, or just ignore it. My salvation is through the Jewish Messiah, planned by the God of Israel. It is brought to fruition through the people of Israel, Jewish people, who God then allowed to reject their Messiah that I, a Gentile, could be saved. It is my responsibility to share my Savior, Israel's Messiah, with Jewish people in gratitude. And here, Ari, was telling me


that he anticipated people like me coming and sharing Messiah with him and Jewish people. WOW!

I asked Ari if he knew this from the Bible or from the Rabbis? He said many Rabbis in Israel say that. Again, amazed, I asked which group of Rabbis? He said, "Chabadi." This phrase describes the Lubavitch sect of the Ultra-Orthodox. They are the iconic ones most often associated with the Western Wall in their black suits and hats and prayer shawls. I told him that they must know the prophecy of Jeremiah who prophesied that "watchmen" from Mt. Ephraim would cry out, "*let us go up to Zion unto the Lord our God,*" 31:6. This Hebrew word translated "watchmen," is different from another word frequently translated "watchmen." Here, it is pronounced "notzrim."

"Ari," I asked, do you know the Hebrew word for an Israeli who believes in Jesus?"

"Notzrim," he said. I pointed out that six hundred years before anyone heard of Jesus or Christians, Jeremiah predicted that "Notzrim" would tell Israelis about the Messiah's soon coming to Jerusalem.

I took his hand and asked, "Then, I am notzrim?" He affirmed my statement that I, as a Gentile follower of Messiah, is one of the notzrim. I asked him to read the paper in his gift bag as he enjoyed the apples and honey. "It is about Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement." I told him that I looked forward to talking about how we can know our name is in the book of life on the "*Yom HaDin*" - Day of Judgment.

What an amazing divine appointment! Ari had been prepared by the teaching of ultra-orthodox Rabbis, that it would be Gentiles that would bring the message of Messiah to the Jewish people in the time of the Gog/Magog battle spoken of in Ezekiel 38-39. With the Russian bear raising its claws around the world and especially the Middle East, Ari was prepared for someone like me, a Gentile believer in Messiah Jesus to tell him about Messiah. What a challenge to all of us Gentiles who have found grace and mercy in Israel's Messiah Jesus! 



Shadows of the Tribulation

Rev. Mark Robinson

Perhaps you were one of those who bought into the recent prophecy teaching of people like David Meade, Scott Clarke of ERF Ministries, Kade Hawkins of Prophecy News Watch, and geologist Phil Moser. All of them touted “the Great Sign of Revelation 12” which was (supposedly) the unique event occurring on Sept. 23, 2017 that would usher in the seven-year Tribulation period.

On his website, David Meade made this comment: “The actual event of the beginning of the Tribulation occurs on October 15.”¹

We are now some two months from Sept. 23rd, the pre-tribulation rapture hasn’t happened, and, despite Meade’s prediction of the Tribulation starting on Oct. 15th, it is certain the seven-year Tribulation period is still in the future. So much for the “Great Sign of Revelation 12”² and so-called numerologists like David Meade.

Or, maybe you were one of those who embraced the blood moon teaching of men like Mark Biltz, John Hagee, Jonathan Cahn and others. The blood moon teaching was refuted at the time by many writers³ and after the blood moons had passed, nothing catastrophic happened and nothing out of the ordinary, of biblical event proportions, occurred.

Jonathan Cahn has been a prolific writer seeing specific prophetic events in places that have escaped others. His books *The Harbinger*⁴ and *The Mystery of the Shemitta*⁵ have sensationalized scripture and Jewish culture to say what they don’t say. Many Christians have uncritically accepted Cahn’s teachings. Cahn has promoted his books in some unlikely places. He has been a fairly regular guest on the Glen Beck radio show. Beck is a committed Mormon who ridicules and shames any who speak of Mormonism as a false religion. And make no mistake, from a biblical perspective, Mormonism is not biblical or Christian. So why is someone like Cahn, a professing evangelical Christian, appearing on a show hosted by a Mormon and speaking of “biblical” issues? 2nd Corinthians 6:14 is clear that we are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. The end doesn’t justify the means. Is Cahn right to disobey the clear teaching of the word of God in order to publicize his book(s)? And, to top it off the sensationalist promises found in *The Harbinger* and *The Mystery of the Shemitta* have been absent in subsequent world events.

Through outright deceit, scripture twisting, or, perhaps in some cases, well meaning, but biblically ignorant understanding, there are many false teachings in our Christian world.

We are warned in 2 Timothy 4:3-4:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

The context of this passage goes back to the beginning of 2 Timothy 3. We are told that, “in the last days” (vs. 1), professing Christians (vs. 5) will be “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,” (vs. 7). Resistance to the truth will be done in the same way Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, (vs. 8). That is, through the use of counterfeit miracles. The remedy to not being swayed by false teaching is having a thorough knowledge of Scripture, (vss. 14-17).

Here is the core problem in why the sensationalism in prophecy is readily received. Why someone like Jonathan Cahn can write books that have error after error, and yet sell so many copies. Christians don’t know the word of God. The church is overwhelmingly comprised of Biblical illiterates.

When we started this column in the Fall, 2011 issue of *Israel’s Messenger*, the premise was that there are *Shadows of the Tribulation* (the seven-year period that is still future, but likely not too distant in the future). Events are occurring now that are “setting the stage,” but not the fulfillment, of the events prophesied to happen in the Tribulation period. The rebirth of Israel in 1948 is the foundational end-time prophecy, Ezekiel 37:1-11, Isaiah 11:10-12, starting the last day’s prophetic clock, alerting us to the understanding that “great events cast their shadow before them.” The Tribulation period and second coming is certainly one of the greatest, if not the greatest, event the world will ever see. The *shadows* of this event are all around us.

If the Lord tarries, we can be sure of one thing. Additional claims of prophetic insight about the rapture and the Tribulation period will be forthcoming. For the sake of the gospel, the glory of our Savior, and fidelity to the word of God, please reject the sensationalistic claims that are sure to come as the Lord tarries. The Bible has much to say about end time prophecy. There is no need to embrace sensationalistic, unbiblical speculations. ☩

End Note

1. <http://writers-web-services.com/>
2. On September 8th I did a Bible study on “The Great Sign of Revelation 12” showing the biblical errors. The video can be viewed on J.A.M. website: <http://www.jewishawareness.org/archived-video-page/>
3. Mark Hitchcock in *Blood Moons Rising*, Tyndale House, 2014, shows that the premise of the blood moons teaching is wrong in its use of history, astrology, and scripture.
4. David James thoroughly refutes the premise and claims of *The Harbinger* in his book, *The Harbinger: Fact or Fiction?* The Berean Call, 2012.
5. David James has an excellent critique on his website: THE MYSTERY OF THE SHEMITAH: Is it real? <http://www.biblicalintegrity.org/2014/09/19/mystery-of-the-shemitah/> and has also written, *Biblical Guide to the Shemirah and the Blood Moons*

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