

Jesus' Real Birthday 12-18-05

Open with the Lord's Prayer

It is amazing how far our Christmas traditions have strayed from that first Christmas in Bethlehem. There are no cows in a Bethlehem manger. Ornamented trees came from a German play. It was a fir tree on which apples were hung to represent the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden. Folks began using them for decorations in their homes. We often miss what God is saying by the changes that have crept in over time. When the time had fully come, God sent His Son into the world. (Galatians 4:5-6) It would even be hard today to get a sense of the day Christ was born if you journeyed to Bethlehem. Today the population is 60,000. The cave underneath the church of the Nativity certainly looks different than it did on the night of Jesus' birth. When Jesus was born, the population was only a tiny fraction of that.

Commented [notes1]: 4 But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.
Galatians 4:4-5 (NIV)

This morning, I want to share with you some of the historian Ray Vander Laan's insights into the Christmas Season from the Hebrew tradition. Israel is known as the land of milk and honey. (Exodus 3:8) That is a land of shepherds and farmers. The shepherds raise the animals that give the milk in the pastureland. The farmers raise crops that flower and provide nectar for the bees that produce the honey. Christmas brings them together.

Commented [notes2]: 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.
Exodus 3:8 (NIV)

Israel is geographically divided into three strips. The Judah mountain ridge runs from an elevation of 3200 feet, down to 1425 feet below sea level at the Dead Sea. To the east of the ridge, toward the Dead Sea is the Judean wilderness. To the west, toward the Mediterranean are the foothills, *shephalah*, farm country. Between the foothills and the Sea is the coastal plain, which was where the pagans lived. It is in the *shephalah* that Jew and Gentile met. Where do you meet the coastal plain people today? One might ask how is your *shephelah*, meaning your interaction with the world. Is it drawing you in, or are you drawing them to God? It is something to consider each day.

Bethlehem is on the border of Judah mountains and wilderness, farmers to the west and shepherds to the east. That is why you can have the farming story of Ruth and the shepherd story of David in the same village. West of the ridge all farming was done on what is referred to as a *gan* or in the plural *ganim*. Our English word is garden. In Hebrew then, the home of Adam was *Gan* Eden. To the east are the green pastures for shepherds. In between the two is a very narrow strip, 4 to 5 miles wide, on top of the ridge called "fields". The Christmas story tells us of shepherds in the fields. (Luke 2:8) Not in the *gamin* to the west or in the green pastures in the east. That tells us the story takes place in that 4 to 5 mile wide strip of fields at a certain time of year.

Commented [notes3]: 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
Luke 2:8 (NIV)

First, let me describe to you the gardens to the west. A *gan* is actually a terraced plot. On the ridge are the fields. To the east green pastures for shepherding. The topography is quite different in just a ten-mile span. Limestone layers of the *gan* are 6-8 feet thick. Ancient people as far back as 3000 BC built walls on the layers and used the dirt in between as the family farm. Farming there was for subsistence, not to make a living. These walls were there when Abraham got there. 2000 BC and earlier dated pottery has been found in those walls. When Judah took the territory, they divided these plots to the

families in their tribe. Each family had one small plot. If their terrace fell, the dirt would wash away and they would have no place to grow their wheat or olive trees. Many are still maintained and used to this day. You can watch as they place small stones in the wall to keep the forces of erosion in check. Keeping your wall means, you are concerned for your descendents. We are so focused on our own momentary needs. We rarely think of our ancestors beyond our grandparents or grandchildren. These family farm plots connect them with their distant past. Generations of their family before them preserved that plot for them. It also gives them a sense of responsibility about the future. I believe we need to see our spiritual heritage in the same light. What we are doing today is a result of past generations and affects the generations to come. Maybe if we had a greater vision for that, we would be shoring up the effects of the erosion of sin in our lives (Proverbs 13:22) to leave a greater spiritual legacy for our descendents.

You can see the Dead Sea from Bethlehem. It is just 15 miles away. Shepherds live in that area in between the two. Every flock you see has sheep and goats. The sheep are always led by their shepherd, never driven. The flock follows the shepherd's voice. In John 10 Jesus said, His sheep know His voice. (John 10:4) Whomever you follow is your shepherd, the rabbi Akiba said.

The fields are in that 4 to 5 mile strip in between. Little stone mounds divide the fields into family farms in the same way that the *gan* terrace walls divide the gardens. Those mounds are what the Bible refers to as the ancient landmarks. The Bible tells us not to move them. (Proverbs 22:28) You could cheat and try to move the wall. You could, in a time of need, sell your plot, but every 50th year, called the Year of Jubilee, it must be returned to the family that sold it. (Leviticus 25:10) You might not like farming, but God gave that to you to care for and your descendents after you. To sell it is like avoiding the call God has on us, that connectedness with our past and future. Some churches today have the Pastor do everything, visitation, teaching, preaching, organizing, discipleship, even janitorial and bookkeeping. In forsaking their gift from God, to the pastor, they forsake their legacy.

Thistles grow in the rock mounds that separate the fields. Known as *serim*, it looks like chicken wire with hooks all over it. The old growth is brown and the new growth is green. It burns very rapidly as the sap is volatile. Brown burns first and then the green. In one passage, God warned that judgment would come before the green could burn up. (Psalm 58:9) This is thought to be the bush the ram was caught in when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac. (Genesis 22:13)

Along the mounds are the paths. Since the fields are small and the land so valuable, it was the natural place to use as a path. It is from the path that the farmer would sow the seed. You can visualize the story of the sower. Some of the seed fell on the rock dividers, some among the thorns, some on the path, and some in good soil. (Matthew 13:8)

The rainy season begins in November. The rain softens the soil for 4 to 6 weeks. As soon as the ground is dry enough the farmer plows and plants, usually by mid December. By Late March the first ripe can barely be seen. This is the basis of the Jewish religious calendar. God's holidays are feasts related to harvests. Passover is timed just as the barley heads out. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is a time of

Commented [notes4]: 22 A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous.
Proverbs 13:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.
John 10:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 28 Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers.
Proverbs 22:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan.
Leviticus 25:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 9 Before your pots can feel [the heat of] the thorns-- whether they be green or dry--the wicked will be swept away.
Psalms 58:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.
Genesis 22:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.
Matthew 13:8 (NIV)

praying for the grain, for life out of the earth, for protection from weather and pests. The Feast of Firstfruits is the beginning of the harvest. It was a gift, by faith, of the first formation of grain believing that the rest would follow. (Leviticus 23:11)

Jesus was slain on Passover. On the Feast of Unleavened Bread He was buried. On the Feast of Firstfruits He was raised out of the ground. Sovereign God ordained it so from the beginning of time. Only once in 9 years do they come three days in a row. Passover is the fourteenth day of first Jewish month, and then Unleavened Bread on the fifteenth. Then comes Firstfruits, which is the day after the first Sabbath after Passover. (could have been a week away)

Do you think it was a coincidence that Jesus was in the grave on the day every Jewish person was praying for life out of the earth? What did Jesus teach? *"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it will bear many seeds."* (John 12:24) Jesus is the firstfruits from among the dead. (Colossians 1:18)

Then, in June, comes the next holy day, Pentecost. It is related to the wheat harvest. Now consider this. The first Passover took place in Egypt some 1300 years earlier. The lamb was slain and the blood was put on their doorposts. The next day the people were liberated from bondage and went up out of Egypt. The enemy was defeated in the Red Sea. It was 56 days from Egypt to Sinai. There, Moses went up to meet with God. The Feast of Pentecost also celebrates Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from God. Why did Moses bring the Torah during wheat harvest? Because *man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God!* (Matthew 4:4) What did Moses do when he came down? He punished the people for their idolatry and revelry. That day the number executed was 3000! (Exodus 32:28)

Now go forward 1300 years. Jesus was slain on Passover. His blood was placed on the doorposts of our heart. We were delivered from our bondage to the world. Jesus conquered the enemy single handedly. 40 days later, He ascended, like Moses going up the mountain to meet with God. Ten days later, the Spirit was poured out. How many believed on Pentecost? 3000! (Acts 2:42) *The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.* (2 Corinthians 3:6) Who but God orchestrates His story on such a grand scale! I do not know about you, but I am in awe. Jesus said, *"Lift up your eyes and look on the fields. They are already white unto harvest."* (John 4:35) The 3000 souls that came to Christ are the beginning of the wheat harvest. The harvest of people came during the wheat harvest.

What feasts follow next? Rosh Hashanah, the trumpet blows to announce judgment. Then Yom Kippur, the day God decides whose name is in the book of life. Finally, Succouth, or Feast of Booths, in the fall, which coincides with the grape and olive harvest. Because the Jewish calendar is different, we cannot give specific dates, but it takes place in late September or October. Perhaps we should be watching for what is yet to take place on those days? Maybe we should be celebrating them as well, not just because they are in the Torah, but also because they are shadows of a reality that is yet to be fulfilled.

I want to share just a few additional things related to Pentecost. The Levitical Law concerning the Feast of Pentecost ordered the people not to cut the corners of the field. (Leviticus 23:22) It was to be left for the poor to glean. Generosity toward poor

Commented [notes11]: 11 And he shall wave the sheaf before the LORD, to be accepted for you: on the morrow after the sabbath the priest shall wave it. Leviticus 23:11 (KJV)

Commented [notes12]: 24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. John 12:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. Colossians 1:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Matthew 4:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: 28 The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. Exodus 32:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. Acts 2:41 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 35 Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. John 4:35 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 22 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God. Leviticus 23:22 (KJV)

was very public. A child might ask why one field had little tiny corners and another was so large. It gave the father a chance to explain about generosity. Why is this connected with instruction on Pentecost? Your thankfulness was connected with your generosity. Proof that you are truly thankful is demonstrated in your generosity. A real Pentecost would include caring for the poor. Now we see that it is no wonder Acts chapter two ends with sharing with those in need. (Acts 2:44-45) That is the first fruit of the Spirit, love, above all the other gifts. (Galatians 5:22)

Most people used the jawbone of a donkey for a scythe. It was the perfect angle, and pieces of flint were inserted into the inside edge. It was not swung. Instead, the farmer would hold the grain as he pulled the jaw across it. One of the Hebrew words for sickle is "donkey jawbone". Who used a donkey jawbone? Samson! Do you think he just stumbled across a donkey carcass, or did he pick up a sickle?

What does this all have to do with the time of Jesus' birth? When wheat harvest begins the shepherds show up. They are nervous for if a sheep or goat gets in before the harvest is finished, it will be stoned. This takes place in late June or early July. Two Sabbaths after harvest is the allotted time for the poor to glean the fields. You will notice that this is what Jesus' disciples were doing when the Pharisees rebuked them. (Luke 6:1)

After two Sabbaths passed, the sheep were allowed into the fields. Every field is covered with sheep, and they reciprocate by fertilizing the fields. The shepherds actually live in the fields during that time. They have to get out when the rainy season starts in November. If there were shepherds in the fields, Christ was born between July 1 and November 1, give or take a few weeks. So why do we celebrate on December 25th?

It began with Constantine, a Roman Emperor that converted to Christianity. His father thought of himself as the son of the god Mithra, incarnate. The birthday of Mithra was December 25th. He did not want to dishonor father, so he put Jesus' birth on the same day hoping it would replace that celebration of Mithra's birthday. It was not because anyone argued that it was the true day of Jesus' birth, but merely convenience.

Do the Scriptures give us any other clues as to the real time of the year? Indeed, they do! The temple area covers about 40 acres. The area inside the temple where the priests ministered was 90'x 30'. There were about 24,000 priests at the time of Christ. You might say they were overstaffed. From 400 BC they divided the 24 priestly families into 24 brigades. The Bible's term is 'course'. They served for two weeks each. Jewish records tell us that the course of Abijah served during the end of May or first of June. Zechariah was of the course of Abijah. (Luke 1:5) It was while he was serving that the angel spoke to him and told him that his wife would conceive. You don't think Zechariah ran home? Elizabeth must have wondered what got into him. God used their passion to be a part of His plan. "Soon after" the KJV says, he went home. (Luke 1:23) He must have run home. Since the course of Abijah finished their ministry in the first week of June, soon after would be mid June. That would put John's birth 9 months later around Passover. Who do Jews leave an empty chair for on Passover? Elijah! Perhaps Elijah did come on Passover.

Commented [notes20]: 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.
45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.
Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
Galatians 5:22 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 1 And it came to pass on the second sabbath after the first, that he went through the corn fields; and his disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands.
Luke 6:1 (KJV)

Commented [notes23]: 5 In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.
Luke 1:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 23 And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.
Luke 1:23 (KJV)

When the angel came to Mary, Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant. (Luke 1:36) That would mean Mary conceived in the later part of December, around Hanukah, the Feast of Lights. Wouldn't it be amazing if Jesus, the light of the world, were conceived on the Feast of Lights? She went at once, the Bible says, to see Elizabeth. Mary was already pregnant 3 or 4 days (the traveling time between their homes) when she went to Elizabeth's house. We can be sure the baby was already in her womb for John leaped in the womb of Elizabeth at the sound of the voice of the mother of his Lord. (Luke 1:41) That would put Jesus' birth around September or October. That is the harvest of Succoth or Feast of Booths. *Cukkah* is the Hebrew word for a temporary shelter. The Israelites were to remember their wanderings in the wilderness and the tents they lived in during those times. Any kind of temporary structure for protection from the elements was a *cukkah*. The Indian jewelry stands along the road on the reservations are *cukkah*. As they celebrated the journey to the Promised Land, the One who came to bring them to the Promised Land camped among them, just as He did in the big tent in the wilderness, the Tabernacle. We cannot be sure, but considering the pattern and the clues, I would not be surprised at all at the Godincident.

Commented [notes25]: 36 And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. Luke 1:36 (KJV)

Commented [notes26]: 41 And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: Luke 1:41 (KJV)

The Young's Literal Translation of John 1:14 says that the Word became flesh and tabernacles among us. Why did John use that language? Maybe because John knew that Jesus was born on the Feast of Succoth. During that feast, the Levites sang a particular chorus. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people of good will. Why did the angels sing **that** to the shepherds? (Luke 2:13-14) And guess what the word for stable is in Hebrew? *Cukkah* !

Commented [notes27]: 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. Luke 2:13-14 (KJV)

So do we forget about December 25th? It is a great opportunity to share and practice the generosity of Pentecost and to speak the name of Jesus. Sovereign God has the world celebrating Jesus' birth at that time. Let us use the opportunity to share the life changing good news that Jesus came out of love to rescue us! Amen?

Every year, the hardhearted innkeeper gets a bad rap. "No room in the inn!" The word in Luke 2 is only used two other times in Scripture. It is in [Luke 22:11](#). The Master asks, "Where is the guest room?" No hotels existed in little towns that size. In Luke, the Good Samaritan takes the wounded man to a hotel, a very different word. There was no innkeeper! The word translated "inn" is a storage room built over the living quarters for wheat, olive oil, etc. It is an upper room. It is where people would provide sleeping quarters for a guest. Even today, there is the same home arrangement in rural parts of Israel. The inn (upper room) was full because they already did their Christmas shopping. (joke)

Commented [notes28]: 11 and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' Luke 22:11 (NIV)

Mary and Joseph took shelter in a *cukkah*. The sheep are usually outside, but lambs or sick sheep and goats are inside out of the weather. A pen in the back kept the shepherds things away from hungry goats. Sorry, no oxen in spite of the song lyrics. There is thick soot on the ceiling, built up from before Joshua came. The floor is deep in manure, and there are pigeon droppings on the walls. There is no golden straw. You take the sheep to the hay not the hay to the sheep. There was no wooden box for feed, but there would be a stone water trough where the Living Water was laid. You can be sure there were plenty of cobwebs, stench, and not a lot of room. But hey, it keeps you out of the weather.

He left heaven to come to that! That tells us how much He loves us. We need to sense the descent from heaven to the most humble conditions on earth, and consider a 12 to 14 year old woman giving birth there. (Ephesians 4:9) How many of you women had a painless drug free first delivery? The picture is not as pretty as we often imagine it. Why? God painted a picture. We have tampered with it and lost the point. What was God doing? Why such conditions? It is because God wanted to say I love you! (John 3:16) He came from the highest heights, to go to the lowest depths to help us understand He loves us that much. And what should that do in us? If it does not break your heart, you have a hard one. It ought to birth a love for Him that makes you want to give your heart as a manger, a place for Him to be born again and hopefully even grow up in you. That is why I preach, that Christ be formed in you. If we will see how much He loves us, surely we will not be able to hold back from loving Him in return.

Commented [notes29]: 9 (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions ? Ephesians 4:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes30]: 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NIV)