

Joe Megacz - The Birth Of Jesus

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Four days from today on December 25, Christians around the world will observe the holiday called Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Savior of mankind. In English speaking countries, the traditional greeting is Merry Christmas. Among Spanish language peoples, it's Filiz Navidad. In Polish, it's Wisowis Fjund, and in the Hawaiian language, which does not have the letters R, S or T in their Alphabet, which makes it hard to say the words Merry Christmas, the greeting is Mili kelikimaka.

But whatever the language or the words, the sentiment behind them is, or at least should be, an appreciation of the birth, life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

This morning we're going to review the scripture accounts of that birth, life and death and find in them some lessons we can gain not only for today or even for the few days surrounding the holiday, but for the entire year and year after year as we strive to live our lives after the pattern of our Lord and master, Jesus Christ, who gave his life a ransom for all.

Most of what we'll say is well familiar to you. You've probably heard it many times. But perhaps a few of the things we will share with you today might be something you haven't thought about recently and I hope edifying in review and in quiet reflection. Let's begin our scriptural reading with the account in Luke, chapter two, verses one to 20.

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 man into his own city, and Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, 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 the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

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, and this shall be a sign unto you.

Ye shall find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, and suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men, and it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us, and they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger, and when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherd. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart, and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told unto them.

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While the scriptural record of Jesus life begins with this passage describing his birth, there are verses in the Bible that go back much earlier and speak about Jesus before he was born. The babe in Bethlehem. This sometimes surprises Christians who are familiar with the account we just read, but are unaware that Jesus had a pre human existence as a spirit being in heaven with God. Let's take a look at a few of the verses that relate to Jesus pre human existence. First, John 1:1, from an accurate translation of the Greek into English called the Diagloth.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the God, and a God was the Word.

Here the apostle John tells us that Jesus was with the God Jehovah from a long time ago, called a beginning. What beginning was that? Well, it was the beginning of Jesus existence as a heavenly being called the word in John 1:1. Now God has no beginning and no end, a concept that boggles our finite minds. But Jesus had a beginning, and his beginning was the first of all beginning.

Colossians 1:15 tells us that Jesus, or more correctly the word, as John 1:1 called him at the time, was the firstborn of every creature, and the familiar scripture in John 3:16 says that Jesus was God's only begotten son. Thus Jesus was God's firstborn and lastborn son. John 1:3 goes on to tell us that all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made. So indeed Jesus had a very long pre human existence as the firstborn of God and as the executive creator of the universe, we might say, creating all things under God's direction and according to God's plan.

Jesus Himself declared that he had a pre human existence in heaven. Listen to John 6:38. For I came down from heaven not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.

Now let's review some of the scriptures that speak not of Jesus pre human existence, but rather scriptures which foretold his human birth. As we read about in Luke chapter two, the first of these prophetic scriptures is well known to us. It's found in Isaiah 9, 6, 7. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace, there shall be no end.

These names or titles prophesied to apply to Jesus are so rich with meaning, someday all mankind will indeed recognize him as the Wonderful One, the embodiment of Divine justice, love, wisdom and power. He will be the world's counselor to give assistance, guidance, direction whereby they may return to restitution, into harmony with Jehovah, and to enjoyment of all the blessings provided through the redemption. His title, the Mighty God, or Mighty Mighty One, will be recognized on earth as well as in heaven. Him that hath God sent forth to be a prince and a Savior, to grant repentance and remission of sins to Israel and to all that are afar off. The title the Everlasting Father will apply to him as the life giver of the world during the thousand years of his reign.

In all that time he will be giving life more abundant to mankind, everlasting life to all who will obey Him. Therefore his title the Everlasting Father. For the Father who will give everlasting life to all humanity, his title, the Prince of Peace, will not apply to him at the beginning of his reign, when he will be breaking in pieces as a potter's vessel, every human system out of accord with the divine will and plan. But true peace shall speedily be established, and he shall be known as the Prince of Peace, whose reign will be undisputed and unmolested of the increase of his government and peace.

There shall be no end, there will be no rebellion. His kingdom will not pass away.

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We'll talk more about Christ's Kingdom a little later.

Our second of three prophetic scriptures regarding Jesus birth is perhaps less familiar to us. It's found in Micah 5:2. But thou, Bethlehem and Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of these shall he come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from old, from everlasting, and the third and last prophecy about Jesus, even predicting his name, so I think it has special significance. Isaiah 7:14.

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. So these three scriptures taken together foretell the birthplace of Jesus, that his mother would be a virgin, what name he would be given, and his ultimate destiny according to God's plan to be the ruler over all mankind in his glorious kingdom on earth.

Now let's fast forward in time to just a short while before Jesus was born. The account is in Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18 to 23.

Now, the birth of Jesus was on this wise when as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit, and she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sin.

Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken of the Lord by the prophets, saying, behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which being interpreted is God with us, and we read that scripture earlier in Isaiah 7:14.

Now, at first reading, this last passage sounds rather odd. It says, thou shalt call his name Jesus, that it might be fulfilled. They shall call his name Immanuel. Why didn't the angel tell Joseph to call his name Immanuel, that it might be fulfilled? They shall call his name Immanuel.

Here's where the understanding of the meaning of names makes everything clear. Bible dictionaries tell us that Jesus and to do that, Bible dictionaries tell us that Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which was originally Hoshea. After the people of Israel were scattered among the nations in the diaspora following the Babylonian captivity, it assumed the form Jeshua. So Hoshea became Joshua, which became Jeshua. From whence came the Greek form Jesus.

And that name was given to our Lord to denote the object of his mission to save his people from their sins. As we read in Matthew 1:21, Joshua in Hebrew is a compound word that is composed of two yah and shua. Yah is of course an abbreviation of Yahweh, referring to God, and shua means to save or salvation. So Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua and Hoshea, and they all mean the same thing, namely God saves or God is salvation.

Now, how about the name Emmanuel? They shall call his name Immanuel. Well, we see the suffix El at the end of that name, which tells us that the word God is part of that name. El in Hebrew means mighty one and is often used to refer to God as well as other mighty ones, such as angels or even mighty humans.

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Bible dictionaries say that the first part of that name Emmanuel, means with us. So then the entire name Immanuel means God is with us, and indeed God was with us, with mankind, when he gave his only begotten son the Word to become Jesus, the Savior of the world. Thus, the Scripture in Matthew chapter one is not so confusing or contradictory when it says, thou shalt call his name Jesus to fulfill the Scripture that says they shall call his name Immanuel. They both have the same meaning and import.

Moving on to another subject related to the birth of Jesus. No discussion of that wonderful event would be complete without some mention of the wise men from the east who came a long distance bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The account is in Matthew 2:1-12. 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.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him, and when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born, and they said unto him, in Bethlehem of Judea. For thus it is written by the prophet, and again, we've read this before.

And thou Bethlehem in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah. For out of thee shall come a governor that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared, and he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, go and search diligently for the young child, and when ye have found him, bring me word again that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed.

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

If I were to ask you how many wise men there were, most of you would say three. Even though the scriptures don't tell us how many wise men there were, we deduced that there were three from the number of gifts mentioned in the Bible, figuring that each wise man brought one gift, and perhaps it was so. But who were these men? How did they know when and how and where to look for the birth of the Savior of the world? Again, the scriptures tell us very little, only that they were magi in the Greek, which we translate to wise men in the English.

Now that word magi is derived from an ancient Persian word that refers to a class of priests called Zoroastrians who studied the stars for signs of momentous events on earth and predictions about the future. They practiced astrology, which was highly esteemed as an advanced science in their day, but now is considered merely a pseudo science or even fiction. Perhaps the most favorable assumption we can make about how the magi knew when to look for the birth of a great deliverer is to remember that the young Hebrew captives, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego were high ranking government officials, first in Babylon and later in Persia. They would have been in contact with the most learned men of the world for decades. We can reasonably suppose that the Babylonian and Persian scholars who would have been familiar with Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks would have come to the conclusion about a certain time that Messiah would come after the

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wall in Jerusalem was rebuilt.

This knowledge of the time of Messiah's coming would have prompted the astrology minded Zoroastrians to look to the heavens for a sign confirming the prophecy and perhaps giving them some direction as to the location of the prophecies fulfillment.

Now as for the star they beheld which guided their journey, several possible scientific explanations have been offered by astronomers. One long time explanation suggests that it was a conjunction of three planets which close together resembled a bright shining star in the heaven. Another, more recent and very detailed explanation of what the star might have been offers a series of observations about the movement of planets and stars to explain each of the details of the account we read earlier in Matthew chapter 2. A non astronomical suggestion has it that it wasn't a literal movement of heavenly bodies at all, but rather a vision of a bright light in the heavens which God caused the Magi to see so that they would take their journey to Bethlehem. After all, this suggestion says God gave the wise men a dream after they found Jesus in which they were warned to not return to Herod. So why could not God have simply presented to their minds a vision of a star to guide them?

At any rate, whatever the star was or wasn't, the wise men took their journey to see with their own eyes the infant who had grown to become the most important person ever to be born on earth.

Getting back to the gifts the Magi brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh, we see in them a practical value and also, more importantly, a symbolic meaning. On a practical level, the three gifts, being worth a considerable sum of money, would have provided means for Mary and Joseph to travel to Egypt and then later support their family.

On a symbolic level, gold is a material associated with kingship. Crowns are made of this precious metal. Jesus was marked on the cross as the King of the Jews, but now he is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Frankincense is a vegetable gum or resin, and when burned it gives off a pleasant aroma. The burning of incense on the golden altar in the holy of the tabernacle pictures the sweet aroma of priestly sacrifices in the sight of God. Myrrh is an oil or gum made from the resin of a particular tree in the balsam family, and myrrh has multiple uses in biblical time. In Exodus 30:23 it is described as the largest ingredient of the holy anointing oil poured upon Aaron, their sons and their successors when they were inaugurated into the priesthood of the nation of Israel.

Myrrh was also used as an embalming agent or ointment, and it was put on the body of Jesus when he was taken down from the cross as recorded in John 19:39, and so these three gifts of literal monetary significance to Mary and Jesus, we see in them also a symbolic representation of the inestimable value of the gift of God's Son. To live a life of sacrifice, die as mankind's Redeemer and live again as the King and priest to restore all who desire to harmony with God the Kingdom.

Today, the exchanging of gifts is one of the core aspects of modern Christian tradition, making the Christmas season one of the most profitable time of year for retailers and businesses throughout the Christian world. Indeed, the day after Thanksgiving, which has long been the start of the Christmas shopping season, a little different these days, is called Black Friday because, according to one explanation, on that day, the day after Thanksgiving, for the first time in the year, a retailer's ledger sheets change from red ink showing losses to black ink showing profits. Many retailers report that around 40% of their entire year's profits are gained in the last six weeks, the year

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Looking back to the time when Jesus was born before there were shopping malls, Gift giving was common in the Roman celebration of Saturnalia, an ancient festival which took place over several days in late December to honor Saturn, the God of agriculture. A later Roman festival, Sal invictus, latin for the unconquered sun, celebrated the return of increasing sunlight as the days lengthened following the winter solstice, and it was observed on December 25. Some of these heathen traditions were carried over into the early Christian church until Christmas.

Gift giving was banned by the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages due to its suspected pagan origins, but it was later rationalized by the Church on the basis that gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were given to the infant Jesus by biblical magi, so perhaps this tradition could be reinstated. So centuries later, this decision by the Catholic Church to reverse its previous ban on gift giving and approved the giving of gifts at Christmas time brought great joy to modern wise men such as Roland Macy, Marshall Field, Richard Sears, and Alva Roebuck, and for you youngsters in the audience, I'll throw in Jeff Bezos.

So while gift giving at Christmas is not a scriptural concept enjoined on the followers of Christ, I appreciate Pastor Russell's comment and what he said about this tradition in the December 15, 1903 issue of Zion's Watchtower.

Although we cannot agree that this is the proper day for celebrating the birth of our dear Redeemer, but must insist that it was about October 1st. Nevertheless, since he did not intimate his desire that we should celebrate his birthday, it is quite immaterial upon what day that event of so great importance to all is celebrated. Upon this day so generally celebrated, we may properly enough join with all those whose hearts are in an attitude of love and appreciation toward God and toward the Savior, the habit of giving little remembrances one to another at this time of year seems to us specially appropriate. God is the great giver of every good and perfect gift. He is continually giving, and we are continually receiving from Him.

But amongst all his gifts, the one of greatest importance to us is the gift of His Son to be our Redeemer. While therefore thanking the Lord for this great gift and for the great plan which centered in it, it is appropriate that we cultivate in our hearts the spirit of liberality generosity, and that we allow this Spirit to exercise itself to some extent according to our conditions and circumstances toward those with whom we have contact, especially to the members of our own household. We recommend that every little gift on this occasion should so far as possible represent or be accompanied by some little remembrancer of the great gift, something to draw the mind of the recipient to the fact that the great gift of God in Christ is and should be in the minds of all who give or who receive the trifling exchanges of the season End of quote from the December 15, 1903 Watchtower at the beginning of that quote it said that the true date of Jesus birth is not December 25, but rather about October 1. So here is a brief, very brief explanation of how we come to that conclusion. The Bible record is clear that Jesus died at the time of the Passover, which is always in the spring of the year, and that he was resurrected on the third day after his crucifixion, on the first day of the week or Sunday, now the holiday we call Easter.

Thus Jesus was crucified on a Friday in a year when the Passover began at sundown that day. Now Bible historians using the Jewish calendar dating back to the time of Christ, and certain astronomical observations and data have fairly firmly established that Jesus must have been crucified on Friday, April 3rd, in the year AD 33. Now we know that Jesus was 33 and a half years old when he was crucified, so therefore he must have been born in the fall, a half year earlier than the spring season when he died. The basis for our understanding that Jesus was 33 and a half years old comes from the prophecy of Daniel 9:24:27, which foretells of 70 symbolic weeks in

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which a day represents a year. In that prophecy of Daniel 9, Messiah comes at the start of the 70th week and is cut off in the midst of that same week.

Thus Jesus came as Messiah at age 30, the age of adulthood in biblical times, and he was cut off or crucified in the midst of the seven day week three and A half symbolic days or three and a half literal years later. It's a little complicated, and I really did make it too brief. But the conclusion is clear and convincing.

Now I'd like to spend a few moments talking not just about the birth of Jesus, but about the life of Jesus. We recognize Jesus as a most wonderful teacher, both by his words and by the example of his life. He spoke of many things during his ministry of three and a half years. But if I were to ask you what was the most common subject of Jesus preaching, what would you say?

The kingdom. The kingdom. Matthew 4:17 describes the start of his public teaching. This Matthew 4:17. From that time, the beginning of his ministry, Jesus began to preach and to say, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, what were the first two elements of what we call the model prayer recorded in Matthew chapter 6, verses 9 and 10? First, our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. First and foremost, a recognition of the heavenly Father and the fullness of the holiness in him and his name, and what comes next in the model prayer? What was the second thing?

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom. The kingdom. What can we learn about the kingdom, this most common topic of Jesus's preaching? Well, first of all, we see that Jesus spoke of the kingdom on earth, as we just read in the model prayer.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, and Jesus also spoke of the kingdom of heaven, as we read in Matthew 4:17. So which is it? A kingdom on earth or a kingdom in heaven? The answer, of course, is both, and this is an important aspect of the kingdom that escapes the notice of many sincere Christians.

God's kingdom, which is Christ's kingdom, has two phases or divisions, a heavenly phase and an earthly phase. The heavenly phase is under development right now, whereas the earthly phase is for a time yet future. The heavenly phase will consist of those sincere and faithful Christians who sacrifice their hopes, aims and ambitions for earthly gain to instead follow in the footsteps of Jesus to become his true disciple. The way is narrow, and the number who follow it is small, a little flawed. The work of the true disciples is to pattern their lives and conduct and characters after the perfect example of our Lord, the most important element of that character being a selfish love for all, even our enemies.

The work of the true disciples is also to know and preach the truth of the Gospel, to live a life of examples of righteousness, and to invite those who have a hearing ear to likewise present themselves as living sacrifices to God. The full number of this little flock, also called the Church of Christ the elect, who will be resurrected as spirit beings in heaven, is not yet complete. But when it is, then the kingdom on earth, the kingdom will be fully established, and what a blessing that kingdom on earth will be when the remainder of mankind, the rest of all who have ever lived, come forth from the grave after they are resurrected, mankind will be taught God's laws by the members of the heavenly phase of the kingdom and by their earthly representative. The earth will be restored to the perfection that was in the Garden of Eden.

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Instead of a narrow way of sacrifice in this present evil world, there will be a highway of holiness requiring only obedience to God's perfect standards of love and righteousness.

The choice mankind will have is the same that Adam had in the Garden of Eden. Obey and live, disobey and die. But whereas Adam had no experience with the effects of sin and evil, mankind in the kingdom will know well the consequences of disobedience to God and make the better choice.

Then people will look back on their experience with sin before their death and resurrection and realize how wise and loving God was to permit evil to rule over us for a time. Just as wise earthly parents sometimes have to exercise tough love and let their children learn wisdom from the consequences of their own mistake. But in the end, listen to how the Scriptures describe the kingdom of God, which again was the most common theme of our Lord's preaching. Isaiah 35:5 10. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap, as in heart, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert, and the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water in the habitation of dragons. Where each lay shall be grass with reeds and rushes, and an highway shall be there and away, and it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for those the wayfaring men, though fools shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon it shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their head they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away, and also Our beloved.

Revelation 21:4 and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying. Neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away.

This is the kingdom for which Jesus taught us to pray. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

I'd like to close by reading a composition that has been read at this season for many years. Its title is One Solitary Life. Its author is unknown. One Solitary Life.

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in a small town, worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30, and then for three years was an itinerant teacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home.

He never had a family. He never went to college. He never traveled, except in his infancy, more than 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While he was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemy. He went through a mockery of a trial.

He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth. His seamless robe. When he was dead, he was taken down from the cross and laid in a borrowed grave through the generosity of a friend. 20 centuries later.

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20 centuries have come and gone, and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of all human progress. I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever were built, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth powerfully as this one solitary life.

May God bless you and all of us with a deeper appreciation of the birth, life and death of Jesus, not only today, but throughout all of our years as we strive to pattern our own lives after the example he set forth. Amen.