



Prophetic Observer

December 2021—Vol. 28, No. 12

Keeping Time On God's Prophetic Clock

L-410

Christ Was Conceived on Christmas Day

by N. W. Hutchings

Many Christians are reticent to observe Christmas because many of the events or celebrations associated with Christmas are of a secular or paganistic origin. However, let us consider: Is there anything about December 25 that Christians can in good conscience, set aside, or observe as being associated with the coming of Jesus Christ, or God's love in sending His only Son in the form of human flesh to die for the sins of the world?



We begin in the first chapter of Luke, and we read verses 1-3: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, Even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus."

In these opening verses Luke, the beloved physician, writes to Theophilus. The meaning of *Theophilus* in the Greek is "lover of God," so it could be he is writing to anyone who loves God, or it could have been that he was writing to a particular person, we don't know. In any event, Luke says, "It seems good to me to do this," and he starts first from the virgin birth, or the birth of Jesus. Luke was a physician, so the indication here is that being a physician, he should start with the birth of Jesus Christ—the virgin birth—or the coming of the Messiah from the womb of the virgin. Certainly, his being a believer in Jesus Christ, a disciple of the Lord and a physician, it was natural for him to address this subject.

"That thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. 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" (vss. 4-5).

So the setting for Luke's beginning here concerning the birth of John the Baptist, and later Jesus Christ, was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea. It is important to note that Zacharias was of the course of Abia. In the priesthood—as we read

in 1 Chronicles 24—it was divided into 24 courses, because there were many priests. If you took all of those priests and put them in the courtyard around the temple, the courtyard probably wouldn't hold them. Each order served in the temple one week, twice a year. In other words, they were in the temple two weeks out of the entire year, and each period of service was separated by six months. Most of the priests lived in the Judean hills; some lived on the outskirts of Jerusalem; some lived down in Jericho, because Jericho was a very beautiful city. So they would go to their homes and live off of the offerings of the temple, and they would also grow their own crops, or gardens; some may have even had sheep or cattle, but we don't know. In any event, it was not a hard life, and they would go up twice a year to serve in the temple.

We read here that one of these priest's name was Zacharias, his wife's name was Elisabeth, and both of them were from the tribe or lineage of Aaron. We continue in verses 6-7: "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years."

Zacharias and his wife were not only old, they were stricken in years; they were feeble. He probably walked around with a cane; and

Elisabeth, when she would go out to hang out clothes or get something from the garden, probably had to totter around and maybe get hold of the fence or the door in order to get back into the house.

In verses 8–11 we read: “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.”

So, Zacharias’ service in the temple was to offer up incense. He would go and take some of the incense, put it on the coals in the altar of the incense, and the smoke, having a sweet savor, would rise up out of the temple and ascend up into heaven. The people on the outside in the courtyard—those observing Jews who were surrounding the temple, some perhaps there to make offerings—would see the smoke come up, and as soon as they did they would stop what they were doing and start praying, because the smoke was symbolic of the prayers ascending up to God. The whole multitude would pray as long as the smoke was coming up out of the temple.

Likewise Zacharias. He would also pray when the smoke would begin to rise up from the altar. We know from subsequent verses that Zacharias, at this particular time, was praying for a son, because he didn’t have an heir. They were both old, they were both feeble, and he wanted a son to possibly carry on the lineage or the hope of the Messiah. That was the prayer of every mother, of every father in Israel, to somehow be in the lineage to produce the Messiah. So, Zacharias was praying for a son even though he and his wife were both old, were both feeble, probably in their mid-eighties, or perhaps even older. While Zacharias was standing praying, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and we read from verses 12–14: “And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.”

Now, here was this old man, this feeble old man and priest praying, and the angel comes and tells him that God heard his prayer. We continue on in verses 15–17: “For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

What was this angel, Gabriel, telling Zacharias? He was telling him not only was he going to have a son, but his son would grow up and would go out in the spirit and power of Elijah; he would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and he would make ready a people for the Lord, or the Messiah. So what Zacharias was told was that his son was going to be Elijah (or like Elijah) and he would be a forerunner of the Messiah. This was prophesied in the

Old Testament: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6).

Elijah was caught up in a fiery chariot. Malachi was told that Elijah would come back, and that he would appear to Israel; he would be in Israel before “the great and dreadful day of the LORD” came, that is, the Great Tribulation; the time of Jacob’s trouble; the coming of the Messiah to take the government of the world on His own shoulders. Elijah would come back first. So, what Zacharias is told here is that he’s going to have a son, and this son is going to fulfill that prophecy. We continue on, and in verses 18–25 we find that Zacharias had been praying for a son, and when Gabriel told him, “All right, God will answer your prayers; you will have a son,” like so many of us he began to doubt. He was an old man, he was stricken in years, he was feeble, and now he was going home after his course in the temple was through and have a son. We can understand his unbelief.

The history of the course of Abia, from ancient records, is found in many sources: the Greek Septuagint, the *Companion Bible*, the *Greek-English Lexicon*, *Light From the Ancient East*, the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, and many others. As has been brought out, the priesthood served in the temple each course, one week, twice a year. The course of Abia, from these ancient records, indicates that their two times during the year occurred December 12–18 (that was the first course) and the second course began on June 13 and ended on June 19. According to these records, Zacharias would have been serving in the second course. In other words, his course, when the angel appeared to him, began on June 13—that would have been on the first day of the week, our Sunday—and it would have ended on Friday evening just before the Sabbath on June 19. So as his course ended on Friday evening Zacharias received this message from Gabriel.

We continue and read from verse 19–25: “And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house. And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.”

The course, or the ministration of the course of Abia in 5 B.C. was completed on June 19, a Friday. Remember that the service of Zacharias in the temple would have ended on Friday evening

around 6 o'clock, or sundown. The next day would have been the Sabbath, June 20. He could not travel on that day because it was the Sabbath. No Jew could travel more than a Sabbath day's journey, which we now know would have been a little over a half mile. So Zacharias would have had to lay over in Jerusalem on the June 20, and departed for home on June 21.

Probably five miles a day for such an old man would have been about all he could travel under the circumstances. In other words, he would probably have to walk a mile, and then rest. The Word indicates that Zacharias and Elisabeth lived in the Judean hills. That would have been anywhere from eight to twenty miles south of the temple area in those hills. In any event, we are assuming that it would have taken two or three days for this old man to walk from the temple to his home, so he would have arrived home on June 23 or 24. From that we can conclude that John the Baptist would have been conceived of Zacharias in Elisabeth's womb on June 23 or 24.

We continue on to read from Luke 1:26-27: "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary."

Luke brings out in these verses that in the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, which would have been around December 23 or 24, the angel Gabriel appeared to a virgin in the city of Nazareth. This virgin was espoused to a man who was of the house of David. Their marriage had probably been arranged soon after both were born. They were both royalty, therefore it would be natural that both of these would have been espoused, or their marriage arranged, soon after their birth. She was a virgin as Isaiah had prophesied. "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

Mary, a young virgin who lived in Nazareth at the time, was told by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear a son. We see here as we get into the biblical account, as supported by ancient records, that the conception of Jesus would have occurred on the night of December 23 or 24, quite possibly December 24. So, He was not born on Christmas Day, but His conception would have probably occurred on the night of December 24, according to our calendar Christmas Eve after 6 p.m., or December 25 as it would be according to the Jewish calendar.

Christians can have reason to associate the birth of Jesus with Christmas. Life begins at conception, and not at birth as some of the pro-choice people of our day contend. We can, I believe, in conscience, observe December 25 as the time that this life, the life of the Messiah, the Incarnation began in the womb of the virgin Mary.

We understand that Christmas was, in ancient Roman times, a pagan holiday. It would be difficult to name any day during the year that would not, at some time, have been a pagan holiday. Nevertheless, today the majority still observe Christmas in a secular, pagan manner. However, Christmas is a time of family fellowship, which is certainly important today, and it is a time that Christians can still present Jesus Christ to the world as the Saviour of the world,

the Author of all time and eternity. Time is measured before His birth, before Christ, and time after His birth is measured after Christ. Regardless of whether the world admits it or not, anytime anyone writes a check and dates it, they acknowledge the birth of Jesus Christ.

We read from Mary's announcements of her conception in Luke 1:46-48: "And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

Although Mary was from the lineage of King David, she is described as a humble handmaiden. We read the description of a handmaiden from the dictionary: "A woman or girl servant or attendant." In other words, it was, "Mary, hand me this," or "Mary, hand me that." But Luke also brings out that although Mary was a young handmaiden, she was very mature in faith and womanhood. She would have been a Jewess, and we read that God had blessed her above all the women who ever lived, or who ever would live. Mary was mature enough to understand her role in the eternal plan and purpose of God.

Many false beliefs encompassing the doctrine of Maryology have evolved over the centuries. They have come by the traditions and will of men rather than being revealed in the Word of God, and certainly they are false. Nowhere in the Scripture is it even inferred that Mary was born without a sin nature she had a human father like everyone else. After Jesus was born she bore other children, and she died and went to be with Jesus in Heaven. The reason I say this is that she confessed her Son Jesus as her Lord and Saviour. She declared in Luke 1:47, "... my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." We must not allow the false doctrines of Maryology to blind us to Mary's importance to the plan and purpose of God in bringing forth the Saviour.

We read that Mary stayed with Elisabeth for three months until John the Baptist was born, which would have been around March 25 according to our calendar, or at the time of the Passover. Then Mary returned to Nazareth where she lived with her husband Joseph. At that time Nazareth was but a small village adjacent to Cana on top of the mountain to the west of the Sea of Galilee. It was probably a poor village, because when it was announced that Jesus came from Nazareth, the response was, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" The population was probably not over four or five hundred. The Catholic Church has built a huge structure, or cathedral, on the west side of Nazareth on the location where they say that tradition indicates Mary and Joseph lived. However, I do not believe that this is the place where they lived because the only well in Nazareth is on the east side of the city. (A very small church has been constructed on that site.) Why would Joseph locate a mile and a half away from water? It wouldn't have made any sense.

In any event, six months after Mary returned to Nazareth it came time for her son to be born. We read of this account in Luke 2:1-7: "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 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 a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Although John the Baptist was not Elijah, he legally fulfilled the prophecies that the forerunner of the Messiah must perform. Likewise, all of the religious and political conditions that are to be present in the world when Jesus Christ comes back to take the government of the world upon Himself and destroy all of the power and armies of Antichrist, should have also been present at His first coming. They were to conform to the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the coming of the Messiah to bring in the kingdom, and Jesus preached everywhere, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. So, all the signs that are to be present when He comes again should have legally been present when He came the first time.

Caesar Augustus reigned over Rome longer than any Roman emperor, and Rome had included all the known world within the empire at that time. So one man, Caesar Augustus, who was hailed as a god by most of the world, ruled the world, and he sent out a decree that all the world should be taxed. In other words, no one would work, buy, or sell except they be accountable to Augustus and the Roman Empire. We read in Revelation 13 that likewise the Antichrist who will control all the world in the revived Roman Empire will also command that everyone who works, buys, or sells be accountable to him and take his mark and number. The average reign of a Roman emperor was only five years, and few died of old age. There was almost continual warfare and strife between Caesar and the Senate. No Caesar, by law, could be declared to be a god until after he died, but Augustus was the exception. He reigned for forty-five years and was accepted as being divine.

The fullness of time had come. Micah the prophet had foretold: “But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel ...” (Micah 5:2).

So Joseph took Mary, who was already nine months pregnant, with him to Bethlehem. There was no exception, even for those with child. There was no excuse for anyone not complying with the orders of the great, divine Emperor Augustus. And so we read in Luke 2:8–14: “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 the 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.”

Now, what day did this occur? Was it summer? Was it in the spring? Was it in the winter? Or was it in the fall? If the calendar records are correct, and the historical date for the decree of Caesar Augustus is correct, then it was in the early fall, not in the winter—not in December. The time for Jesus to be born was perfect. Humanly speaking He had the perfect mother; he had the perfect birthplace; and the date was perfect: the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles—September 29, 4 B.C. We read in Zechariah 14:16: “And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles.”

The King of Israel, the descendant of David, the great Lord and everlasting Saviour, was to be worshipped by Gentiles at the Feast of Tabernacles. So according to the prophetic Word, Jesus, the King of Israel, was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the only feast day directly associated with Gentile worship and salvation. He came unto His own the first time, but as many as received Him gave Him power to become the sons of God, and at His birth Gentiles came from the east, probably wise men from the court of the king of Persia, to worship Him. The fact that Jesus was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles also fulfilled John 1:14: “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.”

So at the Christmas season, as we do every day of the year, we lift up Jesus Christ, of the lineage of David, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, Son of God, everlasting with the Father, crucified for the sins of the world, who arose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God until all things in Heaven and on earth are put under His authority and power. Do you know Him as your Lord and Saviour? As you observe Christmas this season, do you really understand the reason for Christmas? It is to lift up Jesus Christ, risen from the grave for our justification, coming back to claim us unto Himself in eternal joy and everlasting glory. We invite you to confess your lost condition as one who is unable to save yourself, and place your faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins.

—Reprinted from the December 1995 *Prophetic Observer*

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