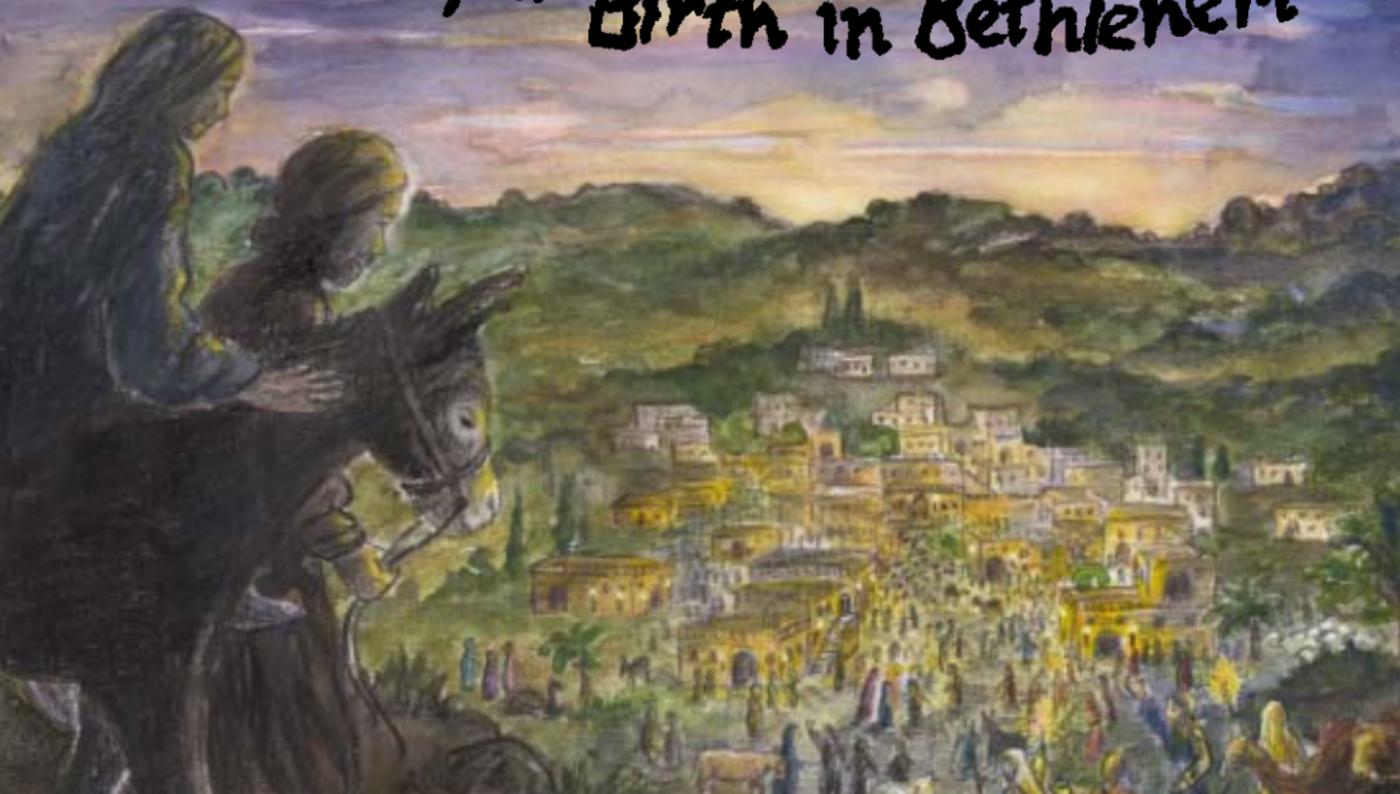
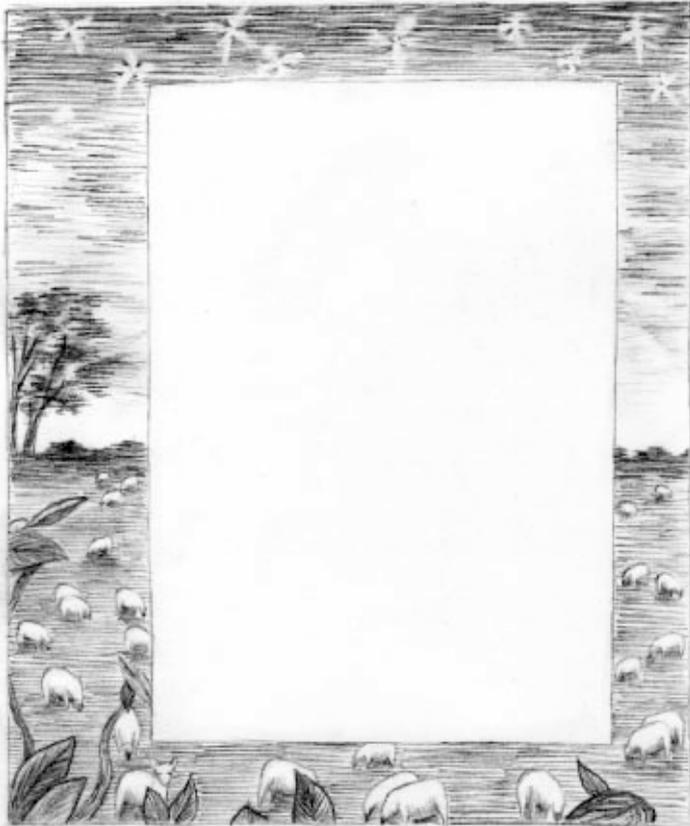


# An Eventful Birth in Bethlehem

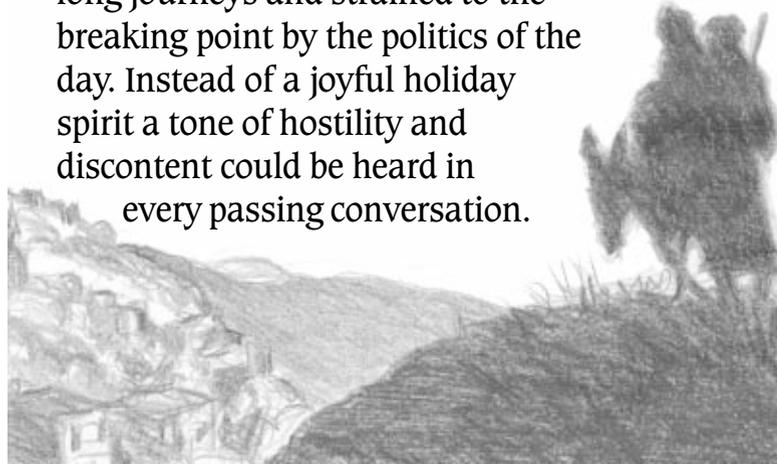


# Seasons Greetings



# NO I Room INN *in the*

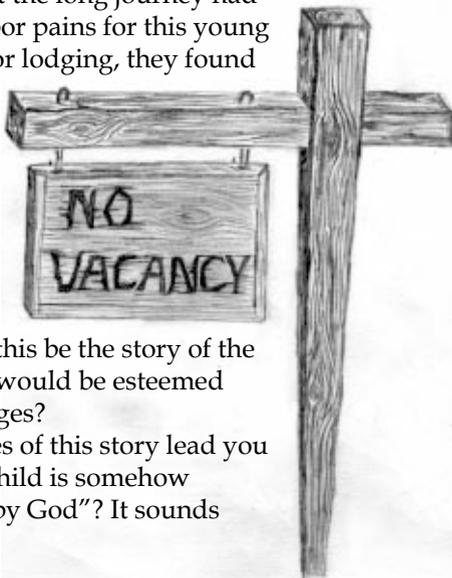
Crowds filled the streets of the small mid-eastern village. The faces in the narrow streets were those of men weary from long journeys and strained to the breaking point by the politics of the day. Instead of a joyful holiday spirit a tone of hostility and discontent could be heard in every passing conversation.



“No Vacancy” read the sign on the local inn, as the population of their tiny village had just risen far beyond their ability to house the masses called there for the census.

Into this uncertain scene came a young couple whose lives would forever alter the history of mankind, though only their look of peaceful acceptance made them stand out in the crowd. The young man helped his wife gently from the donkey upon which she had been traveling. Though “heavy with child,” the young woman appeared to be little more than a child herself. Walking together, leading their donkey through the crowded streets, it became evident that the long journey had brought on early labor pains for this young woman. Looking for lodging, they found none. Unfortunate circumstances...

This sounds a bit odd, does it not, that this would be the story of “an eventful birth in Bethlehem.” Could this be the story of the birth of a Man who would be esteemed down through the ages? Do the circumstances of this story lead you to believe that this child is somehow especially “blessed by God”? It sounds



rather like the opposite, doesn't it? If divinity can control circumstances and providence make everything work out well for us, why does the story not go on to at least have this young couple taken in by those in the castle on the hill and given the master bedroom with many attending midwives to aid them in the birth of the child?

But, not this story.

It goes on to tell of how they meet with no hospitality in this Middle Eastern town where hospitality is supposed to be an integral part of their culture. After searching in vain for a place for his young wife to rest, the man was forced to take the only option offered to him. They would spend the night in the stable with the animals and hope the discomfort his wife was feeling would go away after a little rest. As the night sky filled with stars and the young man and woman settled in among the animals, the increase in birth pangs signaled that the “fullness of time” had come. He would be the only midwife for his young wife and the observing sheep and donkeys would be his only assistants. As it is historically recorded, the baby boy was born that starry night. The mother and child endured the delivery safely and Yoceph could find only the feed trough (manger) for a baby bed in which to lay this special newborn.



Thankfully it was a warm night, being in the fall rather than the traditional midwinter date that was later interjected into the story.\* Had the other details of this night not been so carefully recorded those surely would have also been altered in order to make this eventful birth look more “fitting” to the occasion. After all, this newborn is reported to have been the “savior of the world,” the “son of God.” So, why would He have to be born in such poverty and privation? Why did things not work out better for Him? If you look more into the story you will see that the whole life for this newborn son held hardship, and ended in a very gruesome death. Yet men celebrate this eventful birth with such delight that anyone who does not enter in is characterized as a “grinch or scrooge.” But is there a meaning in all these circumstances that we may be missing as we view the lovely and peaceful “manger scene” on the front lawn of the courthouse as we rush by on our way to do our last minute shopping? Should we look deeper into the details of this eventful birth to see if divine providence actually played a role in allowing the hardships? Could the streets of our busy lives be too busy to welcome Him were He to arrive unexpectedly? Could the uncertain times we live in cause us to close our doors? Were the world to have put out the welcome sign to these weary travelers how different the history of this planet could have been.

\*see “Messages in the Heavens” next page



Astrologers and astronomers can read the message. What do the stars say? Could there be some credibility to what the stars say? Well, depending on who is “reading” them, we all must admit it seems that clear signs could come from the heavens. How many of us glance at the horoscopes each day just in case the stars might be true? So then, what was the meaning of the bright light in the sky over Bethlehem that night so long ago? Was it really signaling an earthshaking event?

From the Biblical story, the bright light in the sky either appears for a long period of time or there were several sightings of the phenomena. The “Wise Men” who journeyed to find the “newborn king” were not merely idle stargazers. They were men trained to know the warnings seen in the heavens. They would not have made this grueling journey across the desert on a whim. They must have been deeply convicted that a monumental event was happening. The “East” in fact, was the home of the most advanced

scientific studies of the day, which still amaze modern day scholars for their accuracy considering the limited resources available to them. With this in mind, we must see that the wise men made a calculated study to determine that the bright star was a sign which must be investigated as a signal of a royal birth, both kingly and divine. Amazingly, the Biblical description of “the star of Bethlehem” has now been verified by astronomical data, pinpointing the exact time when this “heavenly sighting” could have occurred. Could this be the means for us to finally know the exact time of this eventful birth in Bethlehem and to determine its significance?



## **The Actual date of Christmas... December 25: True or False?**

At the time of the birth, Joseph and Mary had gone to Bethlehem to be taxed (Luke 2:1-5). There are no records to indicate that the middle of winter was the time of taxing. A more logical time of the year would have been in the fall, at the end of the harvest. If this was the case, it would have been the season for the Feast of Tabernacles or Ingatherings,

a festival in which all the men of Israel were required to appear in the temple in Jerusalem, bringing their families with them. This would explain why even at Bethlehem “there was no room in the inn” (Luke 2:7). According to the historian, Josephus, Jerusalem was normally a city of 120,000 residents, but during the feasts sometimes as many as 2 million Jews would gather there. Such vast crowds not only filled Jerusalem but the surrounding towns as well, including the little town of Bethlehem just five miles to the south. If the journey of Mary and Joseph was indeed to attend the feast of harvest, as well as to be taxed, this would place the birth of the savior in the fall of the year.

The birth of the Messiah on the Day of Atonement (Oct. 3 that year) in the season of the Feast of Tabernacles would have been a very significant sign for the people of the day. When the Roman Church of the 4th century decided to put the celebration of the birth of Messiah at the more convenient date of December 25 all these significant facts were lost. The Roman Catholic was enthralled in trying to separate themselves from their “Jewish” roots, preferring rather to align themselves with the more popular pagan religions of the day.

## **Shepherds in the field**

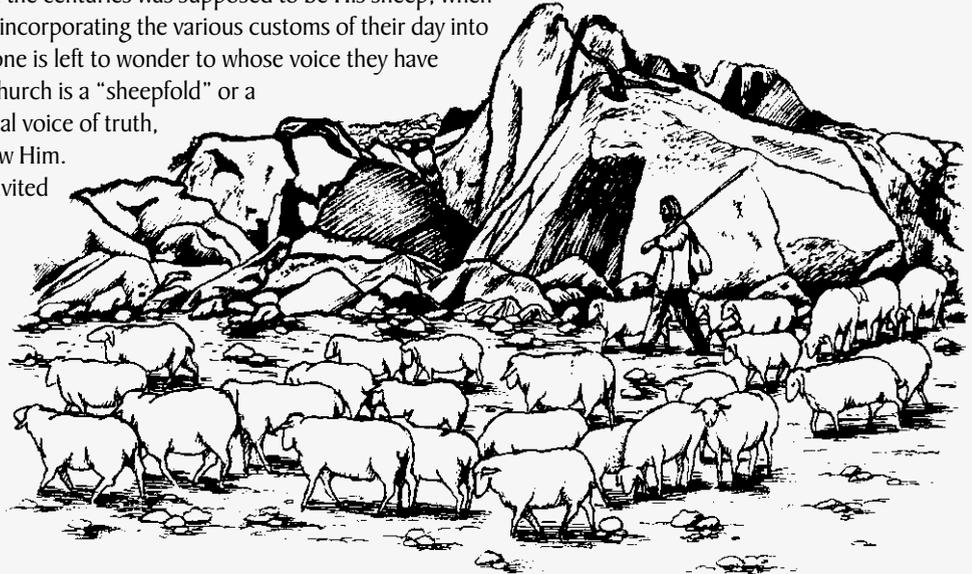
At the time of the birth, “there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8). Shepherds in Palestine did not abide in the fields during the middle of the winter. If there were still flocks outside it could not have been later than early October.

# Sheep & Shepherds

The shepherds in the field saw the star and they saw angels, and they heard the good news that a Saviour had been born... We all know the old story. But were these poor shepherds the only "dignitaries" informed of this royal birth in Bethlehem? Why shepherds? It is shepherds that most clearly reflect the heart of God in the way they care for their flocks. This is a constant analogy in the Scriptures. Like a shepherd and his sheep, so is the concern of the Creator for us, His "sheep." So, when He spoke of the purpose for which He was born to be a witness of the "truth," He also made it clear who would hear that truth. The Savior said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." Though the "church" through the centuries was supposed to be His sheep, when we see the many compromises they made incorporating the various customs of their day into the celebration of their Savior's birthday one is left to wonder to whose voice they have been listening. One has to wonder if the church is a "sheepfold" or a "zoo?" But somewhere there must be a real voice of truth, among sheep who hear His voice and follow Him.

So, it was shepherds who were the only invited guests at the first Christmas celebration; and this too should reflect a deeper and more profound message for the Christmas season. Consider a shepherd's relation to his sheep and consider the Savior's words, "I am the good shepherd...and my sheep hear my voice, I know them. And they follow Me!"

*John 10.14-16, 27-29*



(cont. from page 9)

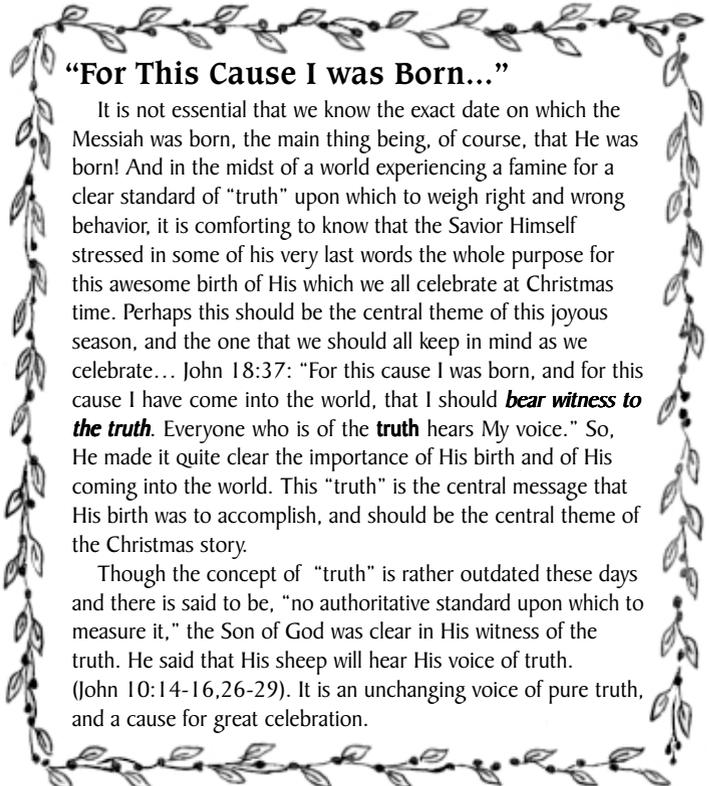
Meteorologists have made exact recordings of the temperature at this spot in the southern part of the highlands of Judah. According to all existing information the climate of Palestine has not changed appreciably in the last 2,000 years, so modern accurate meteorological observations are correct. At "Christmas time" Bethlehem would have been in the grip of frost. The Talmud even states that "flocks were put out to grass in March and brought in again before the beginning of November." Thus, we can see that our modern day Christmas celebration is not held at the proper time. So, if this is such an important occasion celebrated by millions of people, why is it not held at the correct time? Is this just an innocent mistake or has some tampering occurred with the authentic facts, and why?

## **Tampering**

It is recorded that the early believers commemorated the death of the Messiah, but not his birth. There is an accurate recorded date for his death at Passover in the Spring. But no date is recorded for his birth. The Catholic Encyclopedia says, "Christmas was not celebrated among the earliest festivals of the church. Ancient church historians, Ireneaus and Tertulian, omit it from their lists of feasts." Later, when churches in various places did begin celebrating the birthday of Messiah, there was much difference in opinion of the correct date. It was not until the later part of the fourth century before the Roman church began observing it on December 25. Yet, by the fifth century, the same church was already ordering that this birth date be forever observed on this date.

By this time the Roman church had become the "national religion" and wanted to bring order in the Roman Empire by joining the pagan "winter festival," called the Nativity of the "Sun," which celebrated the birth of the "son-god" with the Christian observance of the birth of the Messiah. Some pagans even began to say that the Savior must be Sol, the sun god. This "winter festival" was very popular in ancient times, with many cultures celebrating the "winter solstice" with widely varying festivities. So it only made sense to the powerful church to incorporate many of the customs of the pagan celebrations with what they called the "Christmas season," thus making it a religion that would be more widely received by the masses.

The giving of presents and the general feeling of geniality is also an inherited practice from the Roman winter festival of the Saturnalia. They tried to merge this custom with that of the bringing of gifts by the wise men. Yet those gifts were purely for the baby, born as King, a symbolic gesture signifying that this baby would not only be an ordinary earthly king but divine and with a special mission from God. The gifts were not intended to be given to each other. The Christmas tree is another such borrowed custom dating back to the idea of "sacred trees," something incorporated into the Christmas celebration from ancient rituals of mysticism. This mixing of the customs of the ancient Roman Empire into this new religion they called Christianity made it easier to bring unity in the now shaky Roman society of the fourth century. Thus, we are handed down a set of traditions that we do not really understand, and wonder what the "truth" is in all these things.



## “For This Cause I was Born...”

It is not essential that we know the exact date on which the Messiah was born, the main thing being, of course, that He was born! And in the midst of a world experiencing a famine for a clear standard of “truth” upon which to weigh right and wrong behavior, it is comforting to know that the Savior Himself stressed in some of his very last words the whole purpose for this awesome birth of His which we all celebrate at Christmas time. Perhaps this should be the central theme of this joyous season, and the one that we should all keep in mind as we celebrate... John 18:37: “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should **bear witness to the truth**. Everyone who is of the **truth** hears My voice.” So, He made it quite clear the importance of His birth and of His coming into the world. This “truth” is the central message that His birth was to accomplish, and should be the central theme of the Christmas story.

Though the concept of “truth” is rather outdated these days and there is said to be, “no authoritative standard upon which to measure it,” the Son of God was clear in His witness of the truth. He said that His sheep will hear His voice of truth. (John 10:14-16,26-29). It is an unchanging voice of pure truth, and a cause for great celebration.

## A Star is Born

What was that beautiful star that shown so brightly that night? If we think of a sudden bright light in the sky, we can only reckon with two types, apart from shooting stars,

either a comet or an exploding star, technically known as a “nova.” Conjectures about the star have been common since the very early times. Origen, one of the first Christian Fathers in 200 AD wrote: *“I am of the opinion that the star which appeared to the Wise Men in the east was a new star which had nothing in common with those stars which appear either in the firmament or in the lower levels of the atmosphere. Presumably it belonged to the category of these heavenly fires which appear from time to time and have been given names by the Greeks depending on their shape, either comets, or fiery beams, or starry hosts, or starry tails, or some such names...”* But with our modern technology we have come a long way from the days of Origen. We can now look back on history and can date exact astrological events down to the day. So, if this really were an outstanding appearance of celestial light, we should be able to figure out when it happened. The modern day astronomer can turn back the cosmic clock at will in our present day planetariums. He can arrange the starry sky exactly as it was thousands of years ago for any given year, any month, any day. According to this, and referring to ancient writings of astrologer/astronomers in ancient Babylon and Egypt, this “Christmas Star” could be narrowed down to only a very few possibilities. The most likely one is the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn within the constellation of Pisces in BC 7&6. This is how it would have appeared to the “wise men of the east” who were reported to have spotted this “star,” recognizing it as a sign of major importance, signaling a

birth both royal and divine in the distant land of Israel. On May 29th in the year 7 BC they observed the first encounter of the two planets from their roof of the School of Astrology in Sippar, Mesopotamia. The two planets may still have been barely visible but their nearness to one another would have made them almost look like one star, and taken to be an awesome signal. Because of the location of the conjunction in the heavens they understood that this was a warning sign of an awesome event was to occur in Israel. At that time of year the heat was already unbearable in that area, and a journey across the long desert that separated Mesopotamia from Israel would be very difficult. Should a second conjunction happen in the same area of the sky it would signal that they must go immediately. Then, on approximately the third of October, these same planets again came together announcing the birth of this newborn king. The fact that October 3 was the

Jewish Day of Atonement, within the season of the Feast of Tabernacles, may have been a strong admonition to them, and at that point they must have started out on their long journey. Travel on the caravan



routes even on camels, the swiftest means of transport in those days, took a long time. The trip would have taken about six weeks, having the wise men arrive in Jerusalem towards the end of November. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the wise men began their search for this newborn King. They inquired of everyone: "Where is he that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen His star in the east, and have come to worship Him." (Matt.2:2&3)

### Conflict with the powers-that-be

When the present Roman-appointed king of Israel, Herod, heard the subject of their search from these respectable strangers, he jealously plotted to find this newborn king and kill Him. After much inquiry it was discovered that the only area predicted in Scripture that could possibly be the birthplace of a King was Bethlehem. The wise men made preparations and headed out in the camel train toward the small village, which was only four miles away.

Nearly two months had now passed since the second sighting of this signal star. Imagine the joy and delight as the camel train headed south toward Bethlehem on December 4, and the brilliant star was once again sighted on the horizon. It was the third conjunction of the planets! At this third conjunction the planets Jupiter and Saturn appeared to have dissolved into one great brilliant star. In the twilight of the evening they were visible in a southerly direction, so that on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem they had the bright star in front of their eyes all the time.

As it is written, "The bright star went before them."

Though many celebrate Christmas on December 25, beginning the world's calendar with the year 1AD from that date, astronomers and historians, secular and ecclesiastical, are unanimous that this was not the authentic date of the birth of the Savior of the world. Even the historically recorded date of the death of Herod, the one who had called for the murder of all babies in Bethlehem in his jealous rage to make sure this new king would die, is clearly recorded in 4 BC. Thus making the date 7 BC for the first "Christmas" even more certain. For it is written that Mary and Joseph had to flee to Egypt for a time shortly after the birth of their Son to protect the baby from the danger of this evil King's plot. They stayed in hiding there until warned in a dream to come back to their land because the evil King Herod had died. This time frame coincides perfectly with the historically recorded data we have now. These facts now fill the gap in the story where there was once no records, making the more accurate date of the birth of Messiah in the fall of 7 BC.

## Profound Truth

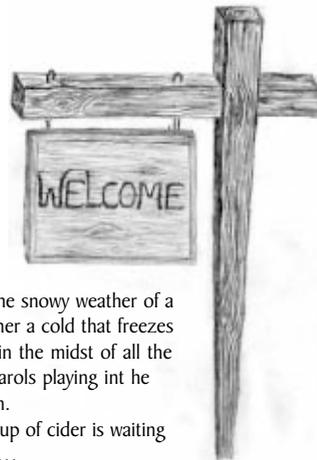
But regardless of which date or which custom we may use, the deep significance of this story is something that none of us should miss. The quaint nativity scene means much more than just a sentimental journey. The profound **truth** of the event is what touches the souls of all of us and brings us to understand the real joy of this season!



Inspired by the spirit of this story, you will always find a welcome sign at the homes listed below. The No Vacancy sign has long ago been buried away in the attic.

Though some may stretch their benevolence to do a few good deeds this time of year, reality is that a large percentage of men and women find themselves "out in the cold" in this joyous holiday season. It is not so much the snowy weather of a "white Christmas" that chills them but rather a cold that freezes their souls, leaving them depressed even in the midst of all the festivities. Somehow all those Christmas carols playing in the shopping malls do not seem to warm them.

But a crackling fire glows, and a warm cup of cider is waiting behind this welcome sign. Please drop by...

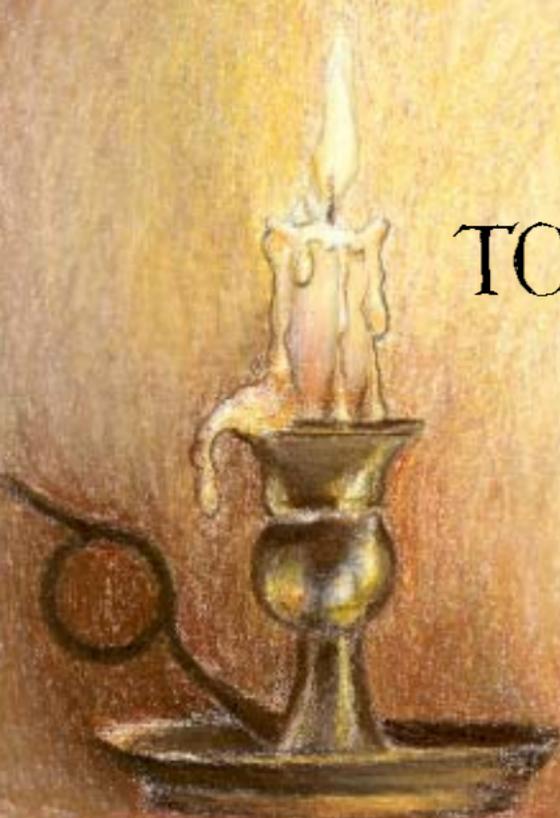


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- Community in Rutland**, 115 Lincoln Avenue, Rutland, VT 05701 ☎ (802) 773-0160
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- Community in Boston**, 92 Melville Ave, Dorchester, MA 02124 ☎ (617) 282-9876
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- Community in Cocksackie**, 7 Ely Street, Cocksackie, NY 12051 ☎ (518) 731-7711
- Community in Oak Hill**, Rt. 81, Box 81A, Oak Hill, Ny 12460 ☎ (518) 239-8148
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