

CHRISTMAS FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS¹

RICHARD DAVIDSON
Andrews University

Reveling in Christmas Lights

I revel in the lights of Christmas! And I am not alone in such reveling. Our wider Christian family is entranced each year by the lavish display of lights so festively decorating our homes. If I were forced to eliminate all types of Christmas decorations but one, I could forego the tree, the tinsel and Christmas balls, the snowflakes, and many other things, but I would keep the lights! Somehow, for me, the holiday lights capture the essence of Christmas.

Objections to the Lights of Christmas

Not all Christians share this love of the lights of Christmas. In my travels for speaking engagements, I encounter well-meaning individuals who decry the fact that Christians celebrate Christmas at all. Everyone knows, as they say, that Christ was not born at this time of year. Such individuals are especially appalled by the lights, which remind them of secular commercialism, and which are ultimately rooted, as they are quick to point out, in the winter-solstice light festival of pagan Rome.

In the past, I have been satisfied to answer these skeptics of Christmas celebration with the argumentation that since society has traditionally celebrated the birth of Christ at this time of year, it is not inappropriate to take this opportunity to join in honoring the birth of Jesus, if it is done in the right spirit, with Jesus at the center of our celebrations.

In the last few years, however, I have become increasingly aware of what I consider a supplementary, and perhaps even more effective, answer to these contemporary skeptics of Christmas celebration in general and of the use of Christmas lights in particular, which provides, for me, a powerful reason to celebrate the incarnation of Christ at this time of year and a potent explanation of why Christmas lights indeed capture the heart of this celebration.

The Other Christmas Story

During the Christmas season, Christians usually focus upon the Bible stories connected with Christ's birth, as found in Matthew and Luke: the accounts of the shepherds (Luke 2) and the Wise Men (Matt 2). The "other Christmas story," which is not so often referenced at Christmas time, is found in the Gospel of John (1:1-5, 9, 14). The emphasis of John's Prologue is upon Christ's incarnation as the "true light . . . coming into the world" (v. 9, NRSV).

¹From a Christmas presentation at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University.

Two important questions to consider regarding this account are, What time of year did the incarnation of Christ take place? and What is the connection between Jesus' incarnation and light?

When Did Christ's Incarnation Occur?

We cannot know the exact date of Jesus' incarnation, and probably for good reason in order to avoid venerating a day rather than a person. However, I believe that Scripture gives us clues so that we may know at least the approximate times of year that he was conceived and born. These clues are concentrated in two chapters of the Bible, Luke 1 and 1 Chron 24, and are tied to the account of John the Baptist's conception and birth.

According to Luke 1:5, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, who was priest in the course (or division) of Abijah, was serving in the temple "when his division was on duty" (v. 8, RSV). First Chronicles 24:7-19 lists twenty-four divisions of priests. The Talmud indicates that, in the period contemporary with Jesus, each division of priests served for one week, from noon on Sabbath until noon the following Sabbath.² The only exceptions to this schedule were the annual festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, when all the priests served. The priests' cycle-of-service periods probably commenced at the beginning of the first month of the Hebrew year (which came in the spring), as did the service periods for the other officials at Jerusalem (see 1 Chron 27:1, 2). The twenty-four divisions of priests thus served biannually, starting respectively in the spring and autumn. The forty-eight weeks (or twenty-four divisions times two) plus nearly three weeks of festivals when all priests served, covered the span of the Jewish year.³

According to 1 Chron 24:10, Abijah was leader of the eighth division of priests. If the divisions began serving the first Sabbath of Nisan, the first month of the Hebrew religious calendar, two divisions would serve before Passover (Nisan 14), all priests would serve during the week of Passover, and six more divisions would serve before Pentecost. Thus the division of Abijah, of which Zechariah was a part, would have served just prior to Pentecost (Sivan 6), which usually occurred sometime during the first part of June.⁴

²Talmud, *Sukkah*, 55b; see also Josephus, *Ant.* vii, 14, 7. This weekly service, which begins on the Sabbath, is already implied in 2 Kgs 11:5 and 1 Chron 9:25.

³About every three years, an extra or intercalation month was added, during which the priests who served during the twelfth month served again in the thirteenth (Talmud, *Megillah*, 6b).

⁴It is possible that Zechariah was ministering in the temple during his second and not first round of service for the year, but in the absence of any evidence indicating otherwise, I take the statement in Luke 1:8 as referring to his first round of service. Reckoning from Zechariah's first round of service, it will be argued below that Jesus was born in the autumn. Such interpretation fits with the traditional evangelical understanding of Jesus being baptized at the age of thirty (Luke 3:23) and having a three and one-half year ministry ending in the spring (Passover time): if Jesus died in the spring, three and one-half years earlier brings us to autumn, and thirty years earlier

During the time of Zechariah's service in the Temple, Gabriel told the aged priest that when he returned home his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. Because the time following Zechariah's service period was Pentecost, when all divisions of priests were to serve, he would not have returned home until after Pentecost, or approximately the latter part of June. Luke tells us that "as soon as the days of his service were completed," Zechariah returned to his own house. "[A]fter those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months" (Luke 1:23-24, NKJV). It is not known exactly how long "after those days" was, but the NLT translation "soon afterward" seems justified, given the language of "as soon as" in Luke 1:23, and it is safe to assume that the conception took place soon after Zechariah's return home. So probably sometime during the last part of June, Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist.⁵

Luke 1:26 states that in the sixth month after John the Baptist was conceived, the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and she conceived Jesus. Verse 36 confirms that this was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. This would bring us to approximately the time of Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, which begins on Chislev 25 (often corresponding with the last part of December) and continues for eight days. Thus it may be argued that Jesus was conceived during the Feast of Hanukkah. Assuming a full-term pregnancy for Mary, Jesus' birth would have occurred approximately during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, Tishri 15-22, near the end of September or early October. So it may well be that during the Feast of Tabernacles "the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us" (John 1:14, NASB, margin).⁶

Some have objected that Jesus could not have been born during the Feast of Tabernacles because the record states that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem,

likewise brings us to autumn of the year. For support of the three and one-half year ministry of Jesus, see, e.g., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1980), 5:190-248.

⁵If John the Baptist was conceived at the end of June (late in the Jewish month of Sivan), he would have been born sometime at the beginning of Nisan, around the time of Passover. This is intriguing, given the ancient Jewish expectation that Elijah would come at Passover time, symbolized by the extra cup of wine placed on the table at the Passover meal in hopes that Elijah would come and drink it. John, the one who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17; cf. Matt 11:14; 17:12), was, indeed, probably born at Passover time.

⁶The announcement of the angel at the time of Jesus' birth may point to a connection with the Feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacles (Hebrew *Sukkot*) was considered the "Festival of Joy" par excellence (see God's special command for the people to rejoice during this festival in Lev 23:40), and it was also considered the "Festival of the Nations" since in the OT it is the only feast in which all the nations of the earth are encouraged to participate (Zech 14:16-19). In light of these designations for the Feast of Tabernacles, the angel's announcement to the shepherds takes on new significance: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will be for all the people" (NASB). The angel is announcing the birth of Christ in the language of a Feast of Tabernacles greeting.

not to Jerusalem, where they should have been going for a festival. But, according to the Talmud, Bethlehem, which was only about five miles south of Jerusalem, was considered one of the towns in the “festival area” of Jerusalem.⁷ That is, Bethlehem was one of the towns that people stayed in as they came to the annual Feasts. According to Josephus, more than two million Jews thronged Jerusalem for Passover in Jesus’ day,⁸ and if that is correct, we can assume that about that many also came to the two other annual feasts. Since Jerusalem had less than 120,000 inhabitants at that time,⁹ it seems likely that accommodations in Bethlehem were utilized by the pilgrims coming to the Feasts.¹⁰

Another objection concerns the timing of Roman calls for taxation, which some have stated would not have come at a festival time. However, at this time Judea was a protectorate of Rome and thus not under its direct taxation. Rather, Rome received tribute from Herod, who gathered these taxes as he saw fit. Herod, following the customary laws of the Jews, conducted this taxation, or enrollment, according to the Jewish manner. According to Jewish custom, taxation came at the end of the agricultural year in Palestine, i.e., in the early autumn just before the Feast of Tabernacles. It was customary to pay the taxes on agricultural products at the end of the civil year, or at the end of the harvest (see Deut 14:14). Thus, in Jesus’ day, the logical time for people to enroll and pay taxes was when they attended the annual Feast of Tabernacles at the end of the harvest season and the civil year.¹¹ Thus a fall date for Jesus’ birth at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles fits with the Jewish customs and the situation at Jesus’ time.

The date of December 25, which contemporary Western Christians designate as the time to celebrate Christ’s incarnation, is, therefore, not off the mark, but often coincides with the time of the Feast of Dedication that begins on Chislev 25. Since Jesus’ conception, as well as his birth, are part of his incarnation, we do well to remember Christ’s incarnation at Christmas time—although instead of (or along with) saying “Merry Christmas!” (and thinking primarily of his birth) we might consider greeting one another with something like “Happy Conception Day!” (and thus sharpen our understanding of the incarnation to include his conception that probably took place at this time of year). If the above reconstruction is correct, Jesus’ incarnation began with his conception at Hanukkah/Christmas time and climaxed with his birth at about the time of the

⁷Talmud, *Shekalim*, vii. 4.

⁸Josephus, *J.W.*, vi.9.3.

⁹Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 78, 83.

¹⁰The word “inn,” used for where Mary and Joseph were to stay in Bethlehem, is the Greek word *kataluma*. The same word is used elsewhere in the NT for a “guest room,” where people could go to keep the annual festivals (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11). Of course, during the Feast of Tabernacles, there would also be occasion to stay in *sukkot* (“tabernacles”), but no doubt these booths, as today in Israel, would have normally been attached to permanent dwellings. Many pilgrims apparently also reserved rooms in order to keep out of the elements at least part of the day—something that would have been especially true for pregnant women!

¹¹*Encyclopedia Biblica*, cols. 3,994-3,996.

Feast of Tabernacles in September/October. But this leads to the second main question, What is the connection between Jesus' incarnation and light?

What Is the Light Connection?

Long before it became a Roman pagan festival in celebration of the winter solstice in the first century A.D., the beginning of winter already had a well-established Hebrew holiday, the Feast of Lights, otherwise known as "Hanukkah" or "Dedication." In 167 B.C., on the twenty-fifth day of the Jewish month Chislev, the darkest day of the calendar year, the Seleucid King Antiochus Epiphanes, "The Illustrious," or, as he was also known, Epimanes, "The Madman," conquered Jerusalem, desecrated the Temple, stopped the regular ceremonies, offered swine's flesh on the altar of burnt offering, and sprinkled swine's blood in the Most Holy Place. Exactly three years later, on the twenty-fifth of Chislev in 164 B.C., Judas Maccabees, "The Hammer," having won a stunning victory over the much larger Seleucid army, came to Jerusalem and reconsecrated the Temple, restoring the services of the holy place (cf. 1 Macc 4).

In that year, 164 B.C., on the darkest day of the year (Chislev 25), at the darkest time of Jewish history, the miracle of the light came. According to Jewish tradition, only one bottle of the consecrated lamp oil was found to light the Temple menorah. The oil from this bottle, which normally lasted only a single day, continued to burn for eight days until more oil could be manufactured and consecrated. Hence, the Feast of Hanukkah also became known as the Feast of Lights.

Some 160 years later, at the darkest time of human history—possibly during the Feast of Lights—Jesus, the Light of the world, was incarnated. In the prophetic words of Ps 40:6-8 (cf. Heb 10:5-9), the preexistent Christ, the King of the universe, called out from his heavenly abode: "Lo, I come!" The next instant, he who had created countless galaxies and nebulae, became flesh, a single cell in Mary's womb, the Light of the world! John 1:9, 14 captures this light connection by indicating that the one coming into the world, the one becoming flesh, was the Light of the world.

It appears to be no accident that John connects the theme of Jesus' incarnation (becoming "one flesh") with light, if indeed he is aware that historically Jesus was conceived during the Feast of Lights. Further confirmation that John consciously connects Jesus' incarnation with the Feast of Lights is found in John 10, where the apostle carefully records that at the time of Hanukkah (Feast of Dedication, v. 22) Jesus himself alludes to his incarnation (v. 32, "coming into the world") and thus announces himself in his incarnation as the fulfillment of the Hanukkah typology.

How does this all relate to us? As Christians celebrate with family and friends around a lighted Christmas tree, string the lights outside, or enjoy the light displays at neighbors' homes and municipal centers, remember "the other Christmas story" and celebrate Christ's incarnation as the true Light!