

Christmas Eve

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## CHRISTMAS, THE BIRTH OF A NATION

### AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

In Galatians #4 vv. 4 & 5 (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 4-5), the Apostle Paul writes, **“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”** The sovereign, all-wise God of the universe brought various pieces together at just the right time to produce the Christmas story.

The prophet Isaiah had declared 700 years earlier that the Messiah of Israel would have a Galilee connection, in what we know today as the north of Israel. (ISAIAH 9:1) In #9 v. 1 of that Old Testament book he wrote, **“...in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. (ISAIAH 9:2) The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”** Yet it was also clear that this Messiah was to be born in the little town of Bethlehem south of Jerusalem. The Old Testament prophet Micah (MICAH 5:2) said in #5 v. 2, **“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”**

So it was that the Lord chose a young, poor, engaged woman from a small village in Galilee to be the mother of Jesus Christ. To fulfill prophecy, He had to get her to Bethlehem. (NAZARETH TO BETHLEHEM) Thus enters upon the stage the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. He decides to number the citizens of his realm. The census requires that males return to the hometown of their ancestors to be counted. Mary's husband Joseph decides to bring along his pregnant wife to Bethlehem, the ancient home of the family of David. In Nazareth, it must have been difficult to convince family and friends that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit and that an angel of God had told them so. We would expect that story to be met with skepticism and disapproval. It was probably a relief for this young couple to move to a new environment.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Mary gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem. An ancient tradition says that it was in a cave where domestic animals were kept that Jesus was born. The Gospel writer tells us that angels appeared

to shepherds nearby to announce the birth of this Messiah. These shepherds raised sheep which were destined for sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem, just a few miles to the north. The angels announced that a Savior had been born for them, and they would find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger in Bethlehem. They came rushing into Bethlehem to find this special child. They found Him and declared to His parents the message that they had received from heavenly messengers. Little did any of these people realize that this special child would likewise be eventually sacrificed in Jerusalem. John the Baptist would describe Him as the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world.

This great divine drama was not without tension. The king who was allowed by the Romans to rule over the province of Judea was Herod the Great. He was an evil man. In his later years, he became increasingly paranoid and erratic. He killed a couple of his own wives and a couple of his own sons. One day, these wise men from the east showed up looking for a baby who had been born king of the Jews. Herod was taken aback by that. When he consulted with the priests, they told him that the Scriptures said that a great leader was to be born in Bethlehem. Herod did not want any competitors around to claim his throne. He sent these wise men to Bethlehem with instructions to report back to him about what they found. When they failed to return, he sent his soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all of the little boys that they could find in the vicinity.

Because of a dream that Joseph received just before this, the special family fled to Egypt and missed out on the slaughter of the innocents. After Herod died, the family returned to Judea and settled back in Nazareth. From there, Jesus would arise and conduct His public ministry and carry out the drama of the Good Friday and Easter story.

Because His own people, for the most part, refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah, Israel suffered. In 70 AD the Roman armies put down a Jewish attempt to become independent of Rome. Israel as a political entity died. One of the religious groups that suffered at the hands of the Romans was the Essenes. Before the Romans could wipe them out, some among their number hid their writings in clay jars (PROJECTOR ON--- QUMRAN CAVES) in caves in the hills in an area known as Qumran. In this dry, hidden area on the east side of the Dead Sea Qumran, these manuscripts would remain hidden for centuries. (QUMRAN MAP)

We fast forward the story 2000 years. The Christmas season is approaching in 1947. It is two years after WW II. Six million Jews have been murdered in the Holocaust. Thousands of survivors have fled to Palestine. (PALESTINE BRITISH MANDATE) Great Britain has served as the political sovereign over the Holy Land for several decades. Tensions are rising between the Arabs and the Jews who all live close to

each other. Both groups resent the British. British troops have been killed by radicals from both sides. Great Britain is ready to wash its hands of its mandate.

In the United Nations, which has recently come into existence, discussions are taking place in the General Assembly about the establishment of a Jewish state. There is no precedent in world history for a nation coming back into existence after not existing for 2000 years. This would be a special and remarkable birth. The United States took a leading role in pressuring the other members of the General Assembly to consider partitioning Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. But there was much opposition. The Arab world was entirely opposed to the idea.

Chaim Weizmann was the Jewish representative to the UN. At the conclusion of his speech pleading for the establishment of the Jewish state, he quoted from the eleventh chapter of the prophet Isaiah. (ISAIAH 11:11-12): **“The Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnants of His people. And He shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.”**

(PALESTINE DIVIDED) The proposed arrangement had the country divided up into Jewish and Arab areas with Jerusalem administered by the UN. Most observers recognized that the proposal was unworkable. The Arab world threatened war against the Jews if the proposal was adopted. The Jewish infant state was threatened by a much larger and more powerful opponent.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Meanwhile, there is another part of this drama which involves shepherds watching their flocks. Earlier in 1947, a Bedouin shepherd was looking for a lost goat on the east side of the Dead Sea. The young man was known as Muhammed the Wolf. Climbing up in the hills, he noticed a cave. This teenager, in his youthful curiosity, tossed a rock into the cave and heard the sound of something breaking.

He returned with his cousin to explore the cave. They found several jars, which looked like this. (PROJECTOR ON--- DEAD SEA SCROLL JAR) Inside the jars, wrapped in cloths--- wrapped in cloths and lying in a cave, were these ancient manuscripts. They didn't quite know what to do with these things. Somewhat later their fellow shepherds encouraged them to go into Bethlehem, the commercial center of the Bedouins from the Judean desert, and see if they could get some money for their find. There they found an antiquities dealer, who was willing to buy the seven scrolls, which would become part of a collection known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The next character who walks onto the stage of this drama is a wise man from the east. (ELIEZER SUKENIK) He is Eliezer Sukenik, a Polish Jew, born in Russia. He fled to Palestine in 1912. He was a very bright guy who got an education in Berlin and in the US. After the war, he set about to establish an archaeology department at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

An Arab antiquities dealer in East Jerusalem was a friend of the antiquities dealer in Bethlehem who acquired three of these ancient scrolls. He also had met Eliezer Sukenik. On Sunday, Nov. 23, he sent word to Professor Sukenik that a friend had just acquired an ancient set of scrolls. Tensions between the Jews and the Arabs had been rising, and there were barbed wire barricades in some places in Jerusalem that had been placed by the British to separate the two groups. On that Sunday, Professor Sukenik met the East Jerusalem dealer at one of the barricades. Through the barbed wire, Sukenik was shown a scrap of the scroll with writing that he quickly recognized as being an ancient form of Hebrew. He was intrigued.

On Thursday, Sukenik managed to get a pass from the British to go to his friend's antiquities shop. There in East Jerusalem he saw an additional piece of the manuscript. The dealer convinced Sukenik that he needed to go to Bethlehem to see this precious treasure wrapped in cloths and meet the Arab dealer who had these manuscripts.

Sukenik wanted to go the next day, Friday, but the UN vote to establish the divided country was scheduled for that day. Bethlehem was in the territory that was going to be given to the Arab Palestinians. If the partition vote did succeed, everyone knew that the Arabs would start fighting the Jews. For a Jew to be in Bethlehem on the day of the partitioning would be a dangerous thing. Sukenik consulted his son, who was Yigal Yadin. Yigal Yadin was a general in the new Israeli army. But he was also a budding archaeologist, like his father. Yadin told his father that as a military man, he could not recommend that he go. As an archaeologist, he found the opportunity as difficult to ignore.

When the UN vote was postponed until Saturday afternoon in New York, Sukenik decided that he had to go to Bethlehem. So on Saturday morning, November 29, he crossed over into East Jerusalem and got onto a crowded public bus heading for Bethlehem. He was the only Jew on the bus. Tension was in the air, but he made it to Bethlehem. He found the shop of the Arab antiquities dealer, which was just off of Manger Square, near the Church of the Nativity. There were many Christian Arabs in Bethlehem in these days, and Christmas preparations were underway.

It was difficult for Professor Sukenik to contain himself, but cultural etiquette required that he engage in pleasantries with the antiquities dealer. So they talked for a half hour about family and weather and the political situation. Finally, the dealer brought out two jars in which two of the bundles had been found. He also produced the leather scrolls which were wrapped in cloths. Sukenik quickly recognized that the texts were written in ancient Hebrew.

Eleazar Sukenik asked permission to take them back to Jerusalem to study them. He promised to provide payment if the manuscripts were found to be genuine. The dealer was willing to trust him. Sukenik wrapped up his new acquisitions and headed off to the bus stop. He made it safely back to Jerusalem. Professor Sukenik himself describes what happened: **“While I was examining these precious documents in my study, the late news on the radio announced that the United Nations would be voting on the resolution that night. My youngest son... was in the next room, twiddling radio knobs in an effort to get New York... From time to time, he would give me a brief commentary on what had been said, It was past midnight when the voting was announced. [It was still the 29th in New York. Jerusalem is six time zones to the east.] And I was engrossed in a particularly absorbing passage in one of the scrolls when my son rushed in with the shout that the vote on the Jewish State had been carried. This great event in Jewish history was thus combined in my home in Jerusalem with another event, no less historic, the one political, and the other cultural. News of the United Nation’s decision spread like wildfire through the city. Soon the streets were thronged with cars from which cheering youngsters were shouting the announcement to any who might have missed it on the radio. I could not remain indoors. I went out to share the joy with Jewish Jerusalem. ...I felt myself bursting with my own news. I had to tell someone about the great discovery. I searched for friends, and was delighted to spot two nearby among the crowd... My news bubbled forth.”** (Yigael Yadin, *The Message of the Scrolls*, 1957, *BAR*, May/June 2007) Good news about a significant birth. Good news about a great discovery.

One of the scrolls that Professor Sukenik pored over that night has become known as the Warfare Scroll. A second scroll has become known as the Thanksgiving Scroll. Both of those reflected the beliefs of the first century Essene community, some of whom probably lived at Qumran. But that third scroll--- that third scroll was Bible. It was a complete copy of the prophet Isaiah. (ISAIAH SCROLL) It has become known to us as the Great Isaiah Scroll. Eventually at Qumran ancient copies of every book of the Old Testament, except Esther, would be found.

The background for this part of the drama goes like this: In synagogues around the world today, the Hebrew Bible that is brought out for Scripture readings is handwritten scrolls. They usually come from Israel where scribes today still work at copying the Bible by hand onto scrolls. As you might imagine, these are very expensive. When they become worn out, they are buried. This is an ancient tradition, which has left us with the situation that there have been no old Hebrew copies of the Old Testament.

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible came from the tenth century.

What Professor Sukenik had in his hands on that day in 1947 is generally believed to be a copy of Isaiah that goes back before the first century BC, a thousand years earlier than the previously known copy of Isaiah in Hebrew. Scholars generally recognize that this ancient copy and the accepted text today are virtually identical--- only minor, insignificant differences. Such was the added significance of that discovery to Professor Sukenik.

His son, Yigal Yadin, later wrote, **“I cannot avoid the feeling that there is something symbolic in the discovery of the scrolls and their acquisition at the moment of the creation of the state of Israel. It is as if these manuscripts had been waiting in caves for two thousand years, ever since the destruction of Israel’s independence, until the people of Israel had returned to their home and regained their freedom. This symbolism is heightened by the fact that the first three scrolls were bought by my father for Israel on 29th November, 1947, the very day on which the United Nations voted for the re-creation of the Jewish state in Israel after two thousand years.”** (*Jewish Press*, Op-Ed, June 9, 2004) Do you see the providential hand of God in this?

It is the Old Testament Book of Isaiah that speaks more about the regathering of Israel than probably any other book in the Old Testament. I mentioned earlier Chaim Weizmann’s citation of Isaiah #11. (ISAIAH 43:5) Here is another example from Isaiah 43: **“Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. (ISAIAH 43:6) I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth...”**

It is also Isaiah which says more about Israel’s future Messiah and our Savior than any other book in the Old Testament, with the possible exception of the Psalms. It says this about the birth of the Messiah in #7 (ISAIAH 7:14): **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”** In #9, this was prophesied (ISAIAH 9:6): **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (ISAIAH 9:7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore, The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”**

Isaiah also spoke of His death and its purpose. (ISAIAH 53:5) In #53 v. 5 he wrote, **“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”** Isaiah even spoke of the place of the burial of the Messiah (ISAIAH 53:9): **“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”** It was this death that would provide payment for the penalty of the sins of the world. When we trust in this Jesus and His sacrifice for us, this forgiveness becomes ours, and we receive the gift of eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It was the providential hand of God which brought all of the elements of that first Christmas together in the fullness of time. It was the providential hand of God which brought all of the elements together for the rebirth of the nation of Israel in the fullness of time. It was the providential hand of God that brought the discovery of the ancient copy of Isaiah at the same time as the rebirthing of the nation. Perhaps it is the providential hand of God which has brought you here this evening. Perhaps you needed to hear this evidence about the sovereign working of the God of the Bible. We cannot experience and appreciate the full meaning of the birth of Jesus until, and unless, we embrace Him as our Savior.