



GIFT BASKET

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GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY: BYU PROFESSOR SHARES INSIGHTS ON CHRISTMAS

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What would Christmas be without a lush, green Christmas tree with an angel or star on top, candles on wreaths, stockings over the fireplace, and a manger scene on the lawn? Well, probably a form of Christmas that stays true to the biblical narratives of the birth of Jesus. Christmas has become so ubiquitous in modern times that these customs, and many others like them, are frequently taken for granted as having always been a part of the festive holiday.

Given that the celebration of Christmas has evolved over the centuries, it is always helpful when a historian comes along to guide us through the rich traditions and customs found throughout the various reaches of Christendom. Professor Eric D. Huntsman of Brigham Young University is one such historian who has written a book aimed at giving Latter-day Saints a better understanding of the history of Christmas. His book, *Good Tidings of Great Joy: An Advent Celebration of the Savior's Birth*, not only provides a helpful look at why we celebrate Christmas the way we do today, but also a careful analysis of what the Gospel nar-

ratives do and don't actually say about the birth of Jesus.

Huntsman, who holds a PhD in Ancient History from the University of Pennsylvania, is an associate professor of ancient scripture, and is the coordinator of Ancient Near Eastern Studies at BYU. He says he wrote his book out of a genuine love for the story of the birth of Jesus. "I have always loved Christmas, the celebrations and especially the joyous story of Jesus' birth," Huntsman said. This motivated him to write a book mixing "biblical exposition, art, Holy Land pictures, and sidebars on music, history, and devotional topics" on the subject of Christmas.

Having a command of biblical Greek and Latin, Huntsman's insights into the biblical story of Christmas and the subsequent development of the holiday throughout Christian history shed further light on the traditions we practice today. For example, Huntsman writes that "not until the third century did some Christians begin to consider celebrating Christ's birth as a holiday." These Christians "became attracted to

the idea of celebrating a festival of their own that could stress the elements of their own faith." But how exactly did we end up celebrating Christmas in December? According to Huntsman, although the biblical account seems to place the birth of Jesus in the spring, Christians in the 4th century, in an attempt to convert pagans away from sun worship, decided to commemorate the birth of Jesus "on a date near the winter solstice, which in the ancient Roman calendar fell on December 25."

Furthermore, Huntsman notes that "the tradition of a Christmas tree has no biblical precedent, and it probably finds its antecedents in the evergreens—leaves, boughs, and even whole trees—that were used during the midwinter festivals of various cultures." Because evergreen trees "so powerfully symbolize the principle of eternal life" in pagan mythology, "Christmas tree symbolism was easily co-opted by Christianity, maybe as early as A.D. 720." Although these two customs—celebrating on December 25th and erecting Christmas trees—don't have any real biblical precedence, other modern Christmas traditions do. For example, the singing of Christmas hymns finds precedence in the Gospel of Luke, which depicts angels heralding the birth of Jesus by singing praises to God, while the exchanging of gifts finds precedence in the Gospel of Matthew's depiction of the Wise Men giving gifts to the infant Jesus.

Some religious groups, most noticeably Jehovah's Witnesses, do not observe Christmas for the very reason that the modern symbols and traditions of

Christmas more frequently have pagan, not biblical, roots. When asked why he thinks these non-biblical traditions have survived so well among even faithful Christians, Huntsman explained that the importance of these customs wasn't so much their origins, but rather how they function today. "I think these traditions are just fine, as long as we teach our children what the symbolism is," Huntsman said. "These traditions have continued, even among those who are not particularly religious, because they bring joy and light to what is otherwise a dark and cold time of the year."

In addition to providing an overview of the historical traditions of Christmas, Huntsman also helps to both clarify some common misunderstandings as well as offer some intriguing insights into the Bible's depiction of the birth of Jesus. For instance, the Gospel of Luke uses the Greek word *katalyma* to describe the place where Mary and Joseph dwelt in when Jesus was born. Although *katalyma* has traditionally been understood as "inn," in the conventional sense of a place where guests visit for a brief stay, Huntsman explains that the word "has a fairly broad range of meanings," including "inn," "a camp on the road," "a guest room," or "a more permanent caravansary outside the town." The popular tradition of Mary and Joseph being turned away with shouts of "No room!" because there was no vacancy in the "inn" is therefore a modern embellishment.

Of more significant theological interest is the word translated as "virgin" to describe Mary in the Gospel of Matthew, which quotes Isaiah 7:14 as evidence

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that the birth of Jesus fulfilled prophecy. The Hebrew word rendered in Greek (and subsequently English) as “virgin” is *‘almâ*, which Huntsman explains “can mean a literal virgin, [or more] commonly . . . simply a young girl.” This has significant theological ramifications for understanding the nature of the birth of Jesus, including what it means for Jesus to be the “Son of God.” Although most Christians, including Latter-day Saints, insist that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, thus highlighting the miraculous nature of Jesus’ conception and birth; examples like this show that there is some ambiguity in the original text that urges us to be cautious when we assume certain things about the meaning of the scriptural story.

But besides merely offering a scholarly look at the history of Christmas, Huntsman is also careful not to lose sight of the very personal and dynamic aspects of the cherished holiday. Although not commonly practiced by Latter-day Saints,

Huntsman nevertheless says he finds meaning in observing a form of Advent, or the preparatory, expectant festival before the actual celebration of Christmas. “We have adopted a modified form of Advent in our family,” Huntsman said. “We take time each of the four Sundays before Christmas to have a special family devotional that focuses on scriptures highlighting the Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace associated with the first coming of Christ. We have a traditional Advent wreath with a candle for each of the Sundays, and my son, who has autism, particularly loves the custom of lighting an additional candle each Sunday and singing the songs, reading the scriptures, and having family prayer as part of our family Advent services.”

Today it is hard not to turn on cable news and hear certain pundits decrying what they see is the secularization of Christmas into merely a commercial holiday. Some, especially very conservative, pundits have even gone so far as to

announce a “war on Christmas” being waged by secularists or commercialists who, in these pundits’ views, wish to downplay the religious significance of Christmas. Huntsman’s own views on the so-called “war on Christmas” are considerably more moderate, however. “The commercial aspects of Christmas can play a constructive role as long as they are kept in perspective and kept solidly secondary to Christmas’ religious aspects,” Huntsman opined. “There is nothing wrong with gift giving and bringing joy, happiness, and fun to the season, because that is what Jesus’ birth did. Certainly commercialism has gone a bit amuck, but I actually am glad that non- or less-believing people celebrate Christmas in any fashion.”

Huntsman also expressed his hope that Christmas would be a time to unite with each other despite religious differences. “I have lived in Jerusalem, where I respected and to some extent even participated in Jewish and Muslim holidays as

well as Christian ones,” Huntsman said. “We should not force others to accept or directly participate in our religious celebrations, nor should they be threatening to anyone. My Jewish friends wish me Merry Christmas and I wish them a Happy Hanukkah. And if I know someone is irreligious, I wish him or her season’s greetings or just happy holidays.”

Christmas as we know and practice it today, then, is the product of nearly 1,500 years of development and evolution. Whether you celebrate it out of devotion to Jesus or simply because of cultural heritage, Christmas, with its universalistic promise of peace on earth and good will toward men, is a holiday that not only historically united Christians with each other and their pagan neighbors, but also continues to unite people across the globe today. ●

**Photos courtesy of Eric D. Huntsman*

