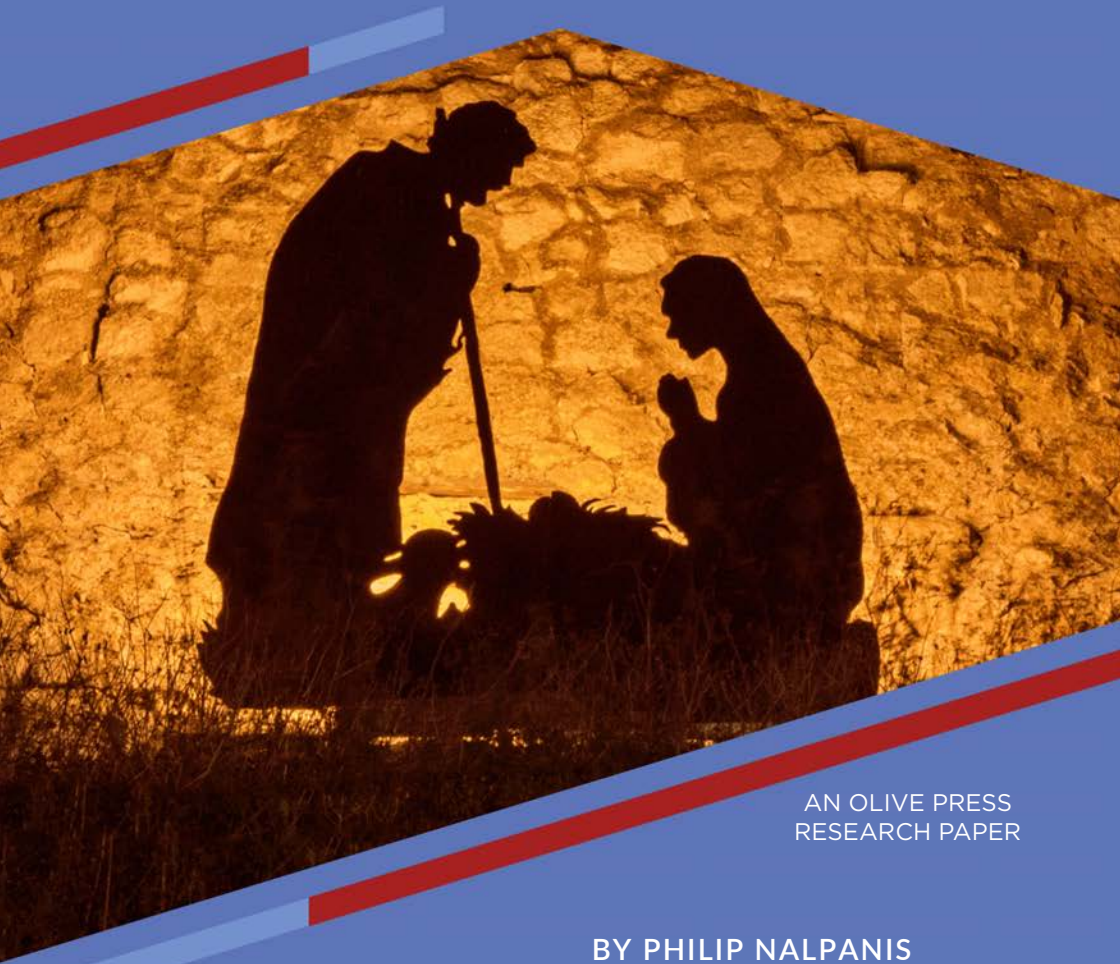


# Should we celebrate Christmas?



AN OLIVE PRESS  
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BY PHILIP NALPANIS



The Church's Ministry  
among Jewish People

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# Should We Celebrate Christmas?

BY PHILIP NALPANIS

To some, the answer is obvious: 'God commanded us to celebrate seven feasts and Christmas isn't one of them', or perhaps 'Christmas is a pagan festival'. I don't deny that Christmas, as it is observed by many, pays little or no attention to the scriptures that describe the events surrounding Yeshua's birth; instead, fuelled by an orgy of consumerism it provides an excuse to eat, drink and spend to excess. Yet for many genuine Christians (I use the term deliberately) it is an important and meaningful celebration of a historical event without which there would be no death on a cross, no lying in a grave, no resurrection, no ascension and no Pentecost. The theological term for that historical event is 'incarnation': becoming flesh, as Paul describes in Phil 2:5-7.

If God commanded seven feasts starting with Passover, why should we celebrate anything prior to that? The facile (and not definitive) answer is that Yeshua is believed by some to have celebrated Hannukah, so he himself celebrated a feast that God hadn't commanded. Laying that aside, the answer to the question is another question: does the Incarnation matter? The problem with the seven-feasts argument is that, by starting at Passover, we jump to that event without considering the importance of the preceding thirty-three years of Yeshua's life and ministry here on earth. So let's consider together why the Incarnation might matter.

Many Christians (again, I use the term deliberately) believe Jesus was born to die for us, and hence jump from Christmas to Easter, relegating the intervening thirty-three years as being of secondary importance. Others focus on his teaching to love God and your neighbour, and misinterpret the massive significance of Yeshua's death, resurrection (if they believe in that) and ascension. Yet others look at his healings and other miracles, and seek to do those works today.

The key verse, lying within a passage often read at carol services, is Jn 1:14 'The Word became a human being and lived among us, and we saw his Sh'khinah, the Sh'khinah of the Father's only

Son, full of grace and truth.’ Nowhere in this famous prologue to John’s gospel, of which this is the final and climactic verse, does John refer to Yeshua’s death and resurrection; instead, John’s focus is on his life, on the purpose of his coming into the world, and indeed of what the disciples saw in him. John echoes this at the beginning of his first epistle (I Jn 1:1-2,5). But John is far from unaware of Yeshua’s full mission: perhaps the best-known verse in the whole bible is Jn 3:16 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’; again, I Jn 2:2 ‘He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins’. And note that, in v14, Yeshua ‘lived among us’: he lived out his life, morning until night, in the midst of his people, every move watched, every word listened to. He gathered round himself, as rabbis did, a group of talmidim who shared his life for three years.

So let’s ask a different question: why should we rejoice in the incarnation? I’ll examine the following three reasons in turn:

1. Yeshua’s identifying with us
2. Yeshua’s teaching and discipling
3. The fruit of Yeshua’s relationship with God

# 1. Identifying with us

Jesus was fully human – born of a woman, growing up to adulthood (Jn 1:14, I Jn 1:1, Rom 5:15,17,19).

He experienced hunger (Mt 4:2, 21:18), tiredness (Jn 4:6), thirst (Jn 4:7) and grief (Jn 11:33-35).

He displayed emotions: anger (Mt 21:12-13, 23:33, Mk 3:5, 11:14, Jn 2:14; so much for 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild!'), indignation (Mk 10:14), sadness (Mt 23:37, Lk 19:41), sorrow (Jn 11:33-35), brotherly love (Jn 11:36), compassion (Mt 20:34, Mk 1:41, ), in Gethsemane mental anguish (Mt 26:37-44, Lk 22:44) and empathy (Jn 19:25-27). See also <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/10-real-life-emotions-jesus-expressed.html>

He 'has been tempted in every way, just as we are' (Heb 4:15 NIV) / 'in every respect has been tested as we are' (Heb 4:15 NRSV): he knows what it is like to experience temptation and have to resist it (Mt 4:1-11). And 'He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness' (Heb 5:2).

Do we know anything more of how he identifies with us? Jesus began his ministry when he was about thirty (Lk 3:23). We have only one incident following his birth recorded as happening during those thirty years: when at age twelve he was taken to Jerusalem for Passover (Lk 2:41-50).

- There is a school of thought that his father Joseph died sometime after then, during his own lifetime (Mk 6:3 suggests this, besides the lack of further references and his concern from the cross that his mother be looked after – Jn 19:26-27 – why would that have been necessary if Joseph, her husband, were still alive?): if so, he experienced the loss of a parent.
- We know he had brothers and sisters (Mk 3:31, 6:3).
- We also know that, following the temple incident at twelve, Jesus was 'obedient to [his parents]' (Lk 2:51).





So he experienced all that childhood, youth and adulthood threw at him: the challenges of obedience to parents and of younger siblings, and of the process of maturing.

So far as we know, he lived for those thirty years in Nazareth, his parents' home village. It had perhaps around 200-400 inhabitants ([www.jesus-story.net/nazareth\\_about.htm](http://www.jesus-story.net/nazareth_about.htm)) or perhaps as few as 120-150 ([www1.cbn.com/BibleArcheology/archive/2010/12/19/five-things-you-didnt-know-about-nazareth](http://www1.cbn.com/BibleArcheology/archive/2010/12/19/five-things-you-didnt-know-about-nazareth)). It would have been a typical farming village of the time where everyone knew everyone else. In such a community Jesus would have experienced all of life: weddings, babies born, illness, deaths, hard labour eking out an existence; and all human nature.

What else? In Mk 6:3 he is described as a 'carpenter' (although in the parallel passage in Mt 13:55 he is described as the 'carpenter's son'); the Greek τεκτον can perhaps better be translated 'craftsman' (our word 'architect' is derived from this), so perhaps we would say 'jobbing builder'. Hence Jesus knew the world of work (possibly for himself and certainly for his father), with its challenges: not only its physical demands but also dealing with clients and payments.

Jesus knew what it was to be misunderstood, even thought mad: in Mk 3:21 we read that 'his family [Gk. οι παρ αυτου οι par autou = those belonging to him] ... went to take charge of him, for they [people - NRSV] said [Gk. Ελεγον elegon = they were saying], 'He is out of his mind.'" (NIV).

He knew what it was to be rejected: I Pet 2:4. Indeed, he prophesied that he would be rejected (Mk 8:31); the gospel accounts of his trial and crucifixion bear this out but the plotting to destroy him had started much earlier in his ministry (Mk 3:6). He knew what it was to be falsely accused – to have lies told about him – as happened at his trial (Mt 26:59-61).



He knew, too, what it was to be betrayed through one of his friends turning against him; another friend denied even knowing him. Where were his closest friends at his hour of greatest need? And on the cross, that great cry “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46): the feeling of being abandoned even by God, even by his own father.

What about joy, delight, and laughter? Jesus was a guest at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1-11) – weddings are always joyful occasions. Lk 10:21 records how Jesus ‘full of joy’ (NIV)/‘rejoiced’ (NRSV) prays to his Father. We also read (Mt 11:19) that Jesus said “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber ...’” – from that it sounds as though Jesus had a reputation for enjoying a good meal! Indeed, several stories and parables in the gospels revolve around meals, from the wedding at Cana to the Last Supper, and breakfast on the beach after the resurrection. In Jewish culture, meals are not simply occasions for the consumption of food and drink but times where families, friends and neighbours can enjoy one another’s company and offer hospitality; more than that, where God too was present. That is the culture in which Jesus lived: it was a culture of joy in, and thankfulness for, God’s blessings.

So Jesus has experienced all of human existence: its joys and its sadnesses, its successes and its trials. What we experience, he has experienced; the journey we walk, he has walked. He knows, he understands what it’s like for us.

## 2. Teaching the crowds and discipling his disciples

We're familiar with much of Jesus' teaching: the Sermon on the Mount, the parables; indeed, 'With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables' (Mk 4:33-34). Many people love (what they think they understand of) his teaching, even try to live by it: they probably know he said, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:39) and in some cases believe that they are loving God by loving their neighbour. Indeed we have much to learn from Jesus' teaching, although we need to understand the context and milieu in which he taught: not reading it through our Greek-influenced, 21st-century lens but as Jewish people of the time would have understood it.

We can also learn from the way Jesus talked to the individuals he encountered: often with far more compassion than the crowds or disciples showed, for example towards Zacchaeus, Bartimaeus and the woman who anointed his feet with pure nard (grace in action). But he was also uncompromising: towards the rich young ruler (who 'went away sad'), towards some who came to him saying they wanted to follow him (Mt 8:18-22), even towards his mother and brothers; besides, on several occasions, towards the Pharisees and Sadducees (hard truths).

However, his relationship with his disciples was very different. It is no accident that his disciples call him 'Rabbi': the itinerant Rabbi with his disciples, teaching and working miracles, was by no means unknown at that time. And, at the end of his time on earth, he commands his disciples to 'go and make disciples' not converts, not believers but disciples (Mt 28:19).

So what does it mean to be a disciple? We must first understand that a Rabbi wasn't simply a teacher: he was someone who lived, not just taught, Torah (the Jewish 'law', although 'guidance' or 'instruction' are better translations). His disciples weren't just to

take in teaching in their heads but to model their lives on their Rabbi's.

Jesus invested three years in his disciples. They didn't just come to him for teaching sessions; they lived with him, saw how he treated people, saw his relationship with his Father at first hand. More than that, Jesus tested their faith and learning. In Mt 10:7-8 he sends out his disciples with these instructions: 'As you go, proclaim the good news: "The kingdom of heaven has come near." 8'Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.' He isn't asking them to do anything they haven't already seen him do: he has preached "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Mt 4:17), healed the sick (Mt 4:23-24, 8:5-16, 9:1-7,20-22,27-29 ), raised the dead (9:23-25), cleansed a leper (Mt 8:2-3), and cast out demons (Mt 4:23-24, 8:28-34, 9:32-33). So in effect he is saying to the disciples "You've seen me doing these things, now it's your turn". At the feeding of the 5,000 (Mt 14:15-21), the disciples have no previous experience, yet Jesus gives them the opportunity to exercise faith: 'You give them something to eat' (Mt 14:16) – a test they flunk. He gives them a second chance, at the feeding of the 4,000 (Mt15:29-38) – they flunk that one too. But in neither case does Jesus rebuke them for their lack of faith; instead, he shows them how it should be done; in contrast, when he calmed the storm (Mt 8:23-27), he said to the disciples 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' (Mt 8:26a); this was before he had sent them out (Mt 10). These were lessons in discipleship: it wasn't just about the disciples hearing Jesus' teaching and preaching nor seeing him healing, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and casting out demons; it was about them learning by doing all these things for themselves, by their faith in God and the authority Jesus gave them (Mt 10:1) in his name; learning too from failure, as at the feeding of the 5,000 and 4,000 and also when they were unable to heal a demonized boy (Mt 17:14-21).

Before returning to his father, Jesus commanded his disciples to 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19) – not converts, not



believers, but disciples. This isn't a single step, a turning to Christ, but an ongoing process of learning to live the life that Rabbi Jesus exemplified and lived (I'll expand on this in the next section).

Note that Jesus warns his disciples "You are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers [NRSV 'students'; but Greek is αδελφοι]." (Mt 23:8). Even those who had walked with Jesus were to point to Jesus as their Rabbi, not to themselves; the more so for us. Yet Paul said 'Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ' (I Cor 11:1 NKJV) / 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (I Cor 11:1 NIV) and 'Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and see in me' (Phil 4:9); the writer to the Hebrews wrote 'Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith' (Heb 13:7). So there is a place for learning from the example – the way of life, not just the teaching – of other Christians, provided we 'fix our eyes on Jesus' (Heb 12:2) and do not allow others to take his place.

*How are you being disciplined?*



### 3. Fruit of relationship with God

In the previous section I described discipleship as ‘an ongoing process of learning to live the life that Rabbi Jesus exemplified and lived’. As we’ve seen, that life wasn’t only one of acquiring a set of beliefs or even of hearing teaching and seeking to follow it so as to live a more moral life; it was also one of healing, cleansing lepers, raising the dead and casting out demons. In the Great Commission (Mt 28:19-20), the command is to “make disciples ... teaching them everything I have commanded you.” Not some things; everything. So surely that includes his commands to heal the sick and so on; and it is for his disciples today, not just those to whom Jesus gave that commission.

It wasn’t the case that Jesus could do these things because he was God. Rather, he did them as a human, at the heart of whose life was his relationship with his father. He showed what was possible for a human – for every one of us – through our relationship with God our father. Of ourselves, we have neither the power nor the authority to do what Jesus did. It’s in relationship with God, filled with the Holy Spirit, we have authority and power just as Jesus had. However, we must be careful: Jesus was able to command healing and deliverance on his own authority; we don’t have that same authority in ourselves, rather we exercise authority in the name of Jesus. Acts records several miracles performed by the apostles: in Acts 3:6 and 16:18 these are in the name of Jesus (in other places, the apostles do simply speak a word of command), whilst in the story of the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13-16), who try and fail to cast out demons in Jesus’ name, those sons hadn’t realised that a prerequisite for having the power of deliverance was a relationship with God and being filled with the Holy Spirit. So we shouldn’t be carried away by the authority we’ve been given, lest we forget that authority comes from Jesus and that we are to exercise it as his representatives.

Our relationship with God and filling with the Spirit is made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection; but our model of all

that being a disciple of Jesus can – and should – mean is the three years of Jesus' life before his death, the three years recorded in such detail in the gospels. The birth narratives occupy just 4 chapters of the 89 chapters of the gospels; the Passion narratives perhaps 9 chapters, the resurrection accounts 5 chapters; that leaves 71 chapters that chronicle those three years. Jesus' told his disciples 'the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.' (Jn 14:12). Who will do those works, those greater works<sup>1</sup>? The one who believes in Jesus. How? As Paul writes in Eph 1:19-20, through 'his incomparably great power for us who believe' (NIV). And in I Jn 4:4 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (NIV).

So let's rejoice in the incarnation, because:

- Jesus identifies with us in all that we go through in life;
- Jesus calls us to be his disciples, and has shown us through his life what that means;
- Jesus, as a man in relationship with God, showed us how we can do in his name the works he did, and greater works.

However, if we are not only to rejoice in the incarnation but celebrate it, the question arises, when should we celebrate it? (The further question, how should we celebrate it, may depend on the answer to this question.)

It's generally agreed by scholars that Jesus wasn't born on 25th December. Before looking at when they do suggest he was born, let's consider whether it is possible he was born on or around that date. It's generally discounted for three reasons:

<sup>1</sup>How does Jesus expect even those who followed him as his disciples to do greater works than they had seen him do? As already noted, he had laid down a challenge, at the feeding of the 5,000, to exercise faith and do something they hadn't seen him do.

1. We know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at the time of Jesus' birth. But shepherds would not have been out in the fields watching over their sheep in December as it would be too cold and rainy; instead, they would have been brought indoors. However, there is a breed of sheep, the Awassi, found in that part of the world: a particular characteristic of the breed is that they are able to tolerate extreme temperatures, so it's possible that at that time they could have remained outdoors throughout the year.
2. The date of 25th December for celebrating Jesus' birth appears to have been fixed only in the 4th century, by Constantine. Indeed, the early church doesn't appear to have marked Jesus' birth at all. By around 200 CE, Jesus' birth was thought to have been on January 6th, based on an ancient tradition that prophets died on the same day as their conception and an assumed date of April 6th for Jesus' crucifixion.
3. Jesus' birth took place during a census. The Romans would have been unlikely to require a census during winter months, when travel would have been difficult. It's more likely they would have held the census at a more clement time of year, and the pilgrim feasts (Passover, Shavuot, Sukkot) would have provided a suitable opportunity as people would in any case have been travelling at that time.

So, if Jesus wasn't born in December, when was he born? Many scholars argue for the Feast of Tabernacles. This is argued from the bible in two ways:

1. The angel appeared to Zechariah during his temple service to announce John's conception. Since we know he served in the priestly division of Abijah (Lk 1:5), and that Abijah's division was the eighth of the cycle (I Chron 24:7-9) of 24 divisions. Each division served for two separate weeks per year, and all divisions served during the three feasts. This suggests that Zechariah was serving in the temple in late May/early June



and late November/early December, if the cycle begins at the start of the year (Nisan, around the end of March). Since Mary became pregnant with Jesus during the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Jesus would have been born around fifteen months after the angel appeared to Zechariah, hence around September or March. The September date would fit Tabernacles; the March date would fit Passover, another suggested date (see below). However, this calculation assumes that the cycle of priestly service starts afresh at the start of the year; yet the cycle lasts 51 weeks (48 weeks of individual divisions plus the 3 weeks of feasts when all divisions served) whereas the calendar year lasts just less than this except in the years when an extra month is inserted (6 years in 19). So, by itself, this argument doesn't definitively lead to a Tabernacles date for Jesus' birth.

2. In Jn 1:14 we read that "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (NKJV). The Greek word used for "dwelt" is ἐσκήνωσεν (eskenosen), from the root σκηνώ (skenoō), which according to Strong's Concordance means "to have one's tent" and Thayer's Greek Lexicon "to fix one's tabernacle, abide (or live) in a tabernacle". Although writing in Greek, John was Jewish and would surely have been aware of the symbolism of choosing that word. However, in Rev 21:3 John again uses the related words σκηνε (skene: tabernacle, as a noun) and σκηνώ: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men [NKJV], and He shall tabernacle with them [OJB/TLV]"; so this is John's preferred word for Jesus' and God's dwelling with us. By contrast, he uses a different word, κατοικέω (katoikeo), elsewhere in Revelation when referring to those "dwelling on the earth"; so he intentionally uses σκηνώ in a very specific way.

Whilst the argument based on Jn 1:14 carries some considerable weight, it appears to be used in isolation rather than in consideration of all seven biblical Feasts and their prophetic Messianic application. Sukkot is the last of the seven Feasts, which fall into three groups: the spring Feasts (Passover, Unleavened





Bread, Firstfruits); Shavuot; and the autumn Feasts (Trumpets; Yom Kippur; Sukkot). Whereas the spring Feasts and Shavuot are considered by many to have been fulfilled<sup>2</sup>, the autumn feasts are yet to be fulfilled, starting with Jesus' Second Coming (see e.g. The Messiah Pattern by Peter Sammons). Sukkot falls at the end of the cycle, not at the beginning! So Sukkot very definitely looks forward to a future time. But is it as yet unfulfilled? In Walking an Ancient Path Alex Jacob suggests that there is a dual meaning to Tabernacles: that Jesus tabernacled among us and that God will tabernacle among us. Certainly, some biblical prophecies can have more than one application: one near at hand (and subsequently fulfilled), one to be fulfilled at some future time. So, as Sukkot is prophetic along with all the Feasts, it too may have a dual application; but an examination of this (and more generally of dual application of biblical prophecies) is well beyond the scope of this paper.

A practical reason to question whether Jesus could have been born at Tabernacles arises from her visit to her relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth and Zechariah lived "in the hill country of Judah" (Lk 1:39). This was in the vicinity of Jerusalem, at least three days' journey from Nazareth. If her visit was around the time of her falling pregnant, then (working back nine months from Tabernacles) she would have had to make that journey in the depth of winter: it seems unlikely that she would have done so at that time. If, on the other hand, Jesus was born in the spring, she could have travelled in the early summer: a much more clement time to travel. She would then have returned home before winter weather arrived and quite possibly in time for the autumn Feasts so as to be with Joseph.

So it may be that Jesus was born at Sukkot, in which case that would be an appropriate time to celebrate his incarnation, but the evidence isn't conclusive.

<sup>2</sup> Passover = Jesus crucified; Unleavened Bread = Jesus buried; Firstfruits = Jesus' Resurrection; Shavuot = Pentecost.

Various scholars have sought to combine biblical evidence with astronomical and historical information. From this, some present convincing evidence that Jesus must have been born at the time of Tabernacles; others present equally convincing evidence for a spring birth, either on Nisan 1 or Passover (Nisan 15). This follows around six months after the autumn Feasts. Now John the Baptist was around six months older than Jesus, in which case he could have been born at that time. If the Feast of Trumpets heralds Jesus' Second Coming, perhaps it also heralds his first coming – and John was the herald who announced the coming of the Messiah.

## Conclusion

Firstly, we should rejoice in the incarnation of Jesus: without the incarnation, we jump straight to Passover/Easter and miss key elements of Jesus' life immensely relevant to our own discipleship.

Secondly, if we wish not only to rejoice in the incarnation but to celebrate it, then we should be free to choose whether to do so at Sukkot or at some other time.

Thirdly, if we have non-Jewish family or friends, there is a powerful argument for celebrating it at Christmastime: we can use it as an opportunity to share the good news about Jesus, explaining the true meaning of Christmas to them at a time when they are at least dimly aware that it has some significance beyond eating, drinking and spending to excess. We can invite them to carol services, where they will hear the bible readings related to Jesus' birth – never underestimate the power of the word of God! – and they may hear a gospel message. Even a Christmas card with a picture and words, perhaps including a bible verse, that have something to do with Jesus' nativity (and hence incarnation) will send a message to them. So let's use Christmastime to tell the true reason for the season!











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