



May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, our strength, and our redeemer.

It is the custom in the Jewish faith that all males should be circumcised. This is called the Covenant of Circumcision and was instituted by God in Genesis 17: 1 to 14. Abraham was 99 years old when God said to him that he would make him the Father of Many Nations and part of the covenant is recorded in Genesis 17: 9 -14:

⁹ Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. ¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

So it was, on the eighth day after He was born, Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to the temple in Jerusalem, a distance of about five and a half miles. I was curious about why the eighth day. What I found is quite intriguing and there are several reasons stated.

First, it is considered that the child will be strong enough by the eighth day for the circumcision and that there will be no danger of blood clotting.

Second, under Jewish lore a woman was considered to be ritually unclean for seven days after the birth of a child.

A third reason is that God was believed to have created the world in six days and He rested on the seventh day. Seven is considered special in the Jewish faith. There are seven weeks in a sabbatical year. There are seven years of the Jubilee when all debts are forgiven and cancelled. These are things seen to have happened in the natural world – the world we live in.

Eight, however, is considered supernatural, and that is what God is – He is above nature for He created nature. The circumcision on the eighth day, a feature within a religion founded in faith to God and for God, is seen as a symbol of the covenant with God and linking the child with the infinite as the child will have lived through a whole week that includes a Sabbath.

Today, within the Christian faith, and not limited only to boys, baptism links us to the infinite through Jesus Christ, through whom we have access to eternal life.

So it was that Joseph and Mary carried Jesus the five and a half miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to enter the Temple. On their arrival they would have made offerings to God. This was a lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon for a sin offering. There was a concession here as poor people could offer doves or pigeons for both offerings. Poverty is not dishonourable in God's sight.

We are not told what Joseph and Mary offered. We are not told if they were poor or otherwise. The fact that they could only find accommodation in a stable does not indicate their financial status. There was no other accommodation in Bethlehem. We should not forget the possibility – or is it probability – that God planned for Jesus to be born in the stable. It was a symbol of Jesus humbling Himself.

What we can be certain of is that, if Joseph and Mary could have afforded the more expensive offering they would have done so.

Enter Simeon. Sometime ago, I began to reflect on who was the most fortunate person in the Bible. I came up with two and Simeon was one of them. What do we know about Simeon?

Luke says that he was righteous and devout and that the Holy Spirit was upon him. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And so it was.

Mary and Joseph entered the Temple and it was revealed to Simeon that what the Holy Spirit had promised had occurred.

We cannot help but wonder what Mary and Joseph thought when this old man, a stranger, picked the baby Jesus up. What mother would not wonder if a stranger picked up her baby? We have to conclude that both received a reassuring word from God that they need not worry.

Then came those beautiful words from Simeon:

*²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss^[c] your servant in peace.
³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."*

It is written that Mary and Joseph marvelled at those words. Both must have wondered what was meant about the child Mary was carrying. They were, after all, common people. Why had Mary been singled out?

Now, in the words of an old man, part of the answer had been given to them and more was about to come and they were not words of hope. They were words of warning of what this baby would achieve and that Mary would suffer in years to come. She had received both words that would have warmed her and those that would have given her shivers.

And there was more to come. As Luke tells us, a woman whose name was Anna was also there. She, like Simeon, was waiting for the Messiah. She was 84 years old and had been a widow for decades. In those years she had dedicated her life to being in the Temple. Luke says that she never left it.

Anna comes up to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and gives thanks to God, speaking of Him as the redemption of Israel. These are words of hope, not melancholy as the words that Simeon also uttered.

We hear no more of Simeon or Anna. Given their age they may died soon after, their dreams fulfilled.

What of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? Mary would still not have been ritually purified. It would be another 33 days before that would happen and Jesus would again be presented at the Temple. According to Leviticus 12:1-5 –

12 The LORD said to Moses, ²“Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. ³On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. ⁴Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.

From this it is clear that the circumcision of Jesus did not take place in the Sanctuary.

We do not know where she, Joseph and Jesus lived during this time. The stories around that time show the Magi meeting them in the Temple however they may have moved from there. We do not know exactly when the Magi visited them. Given that Herod ordered all boy children up to the age of two years old to be slaughtered, some time must have passed.

Luke says in 2:39 that Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth with Jesus however Matthew says that an angel came to Joseph in a dream, telling him to take Jesus to Egypt.

Why is there a difference in the accounts? Was it because Luke was a Gentile and Matthew a Jew? Matthew would have known the history of his people and the words of the prophets. Hosea 11:1 – *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.*

If Joseph had gone straight back to Nazareth, it is possible that word might have come back to Herod of the whereabouts of the Holy Family. In Egypt, it is said, there may have been a million Jews living in that land at the time of Jesus. The Holy Family would have been anonymous among them. Furthermore, Egypt was away from the jurisdiction of Herod. It is some 300 miles from Jerusalem to Alexandria.

It was also the land where earlier generations of Israelites had taken refuge. It may be startling to consider this but Jesus was once a refugee.

In Jesus, we have the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that he would be the father of nations. It was through Abraham's fathering of Isaac who, in turn, fathered Jacob, later called Israel by God, and whose twelve sons, conceived by his wives and concubines, became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel, from which, through Judah, would ultimately be born Jesus. In that sense Jesus is Israel who was twice brought out of Egypt. This means that Jesus' life movements replicated those of Israel.

When was Jesus brought out of Egypt?

Matthew states in 2: 19-21 –

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

Herod the Great is said to have died in either 4BC or 1BC. This causes confusion over when Jesus was actually born. Luke adds to this confusion. He states in 2:1-2 that Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken across the Roman world. This was when Quirinius was governor of Syria. He was appointed to that position in AD6.

The terms BC and AD were not used until 525AD. A monk, Dionysius Exiguus, or Dennis the Little, proposed the terms but he did not use them for dating historical events. It is, however, generally agreed that Jesus was born between 7BC and 4BC. It was, in fact, not until 731AD that AD, or Anno Domini, was used in Western Europe but it was not in widespread use until the 15th Century.

The important matter is not when Jesus was born, it is that He was born. As to when He was brought back to Palestine and to Nazareth, He may have been three years old or six years old, depending on the actual date Herod died.

What do we learn from these verses?

We learn about God's love for the people He created despite their rebellions against Him. From the time that humankind was expelled from the Garden of Eden, God set about developing a way for their return. It took centuries during which there were constant

rebellions. That God continued His plan shows His patience, although it is not without some limits.

We learn that God keeps His promises. He promised Abraham that he would be the Father of Nations.

God showed that He was willing to humble Himself, becoming, as Paul wrote in his Letter to the Philippians 2:5b-8:

Christ Jesus:

*⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;*

*⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

We should always remember that the Cross is the other tree of Christmas.

Christmas is over for another year, although it will be another ten days before, traditionally, our Christmas decorations are put away. We should, however, keep the meaning of Christmas in our hearts for the other 364 days of the year.

I will end in a prayer.

*Christ our brother,
in You there is neither Jew nor Gentile,
neither male nor female,
yet You received the mark of the covenant,
and took upon Yourself
the precious burden of the law.
May we so accept in our bodies
our own particular struggle and promise
that we may also break down barriers,
In Your name. **Amen.***