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Kristine Wardle Frederickson

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MUSINGS ON THE BIRTH OF THE SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

Kristine Wardle Frederickson

Abstract: *In this essay, Kristine Wardle Frederickson muses about “the babe born in Bethlehem,” and who he was — and is — in consideration of those who nurtured, loved, and welcomed the infant Jehovah to Earth. Certain women played critical roles in preparing him for his infinite and eternal Atonement, and that preparation began long before Jesus came to Earth. Four women stand out as devoted mentors, disciples, and witnesses of Jesus Christ’s mission, and of his sublime perfection even on that first Christmas day: Heavenly Mother, Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna. At Christmastime, their witnesses are worthy of deep contemplation as they reinforce the majesty and glory of Jesus Christ, who condescended to enter mortality as an innocent baby, under humble circumstances. Carefully nurtured and loved, he lived a perfect life, pointed the way to salvation, and sacrificed his life that all might live.*

As I grow older, I find myself looking forward to Christmas with greater delight, anticipation, and appreciation. Over the years, it has taken on greater and greater meaning although my focus remains the same:

- **Jesus Christ,** his humble beginnings, his being “[brought] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4), his masterful ministry, and his infinite Atonement.
- **Home.** Not just a house, but a place where family gathers, where individuals are nurtured and loved, and where memories are made.
- **Family.** The basic unit in society, traditionally a husband and wife, or a single parent or caregiver(s); families

nurturing and rearing children, including generational and extended family, and a family and treasured friends united in love.

While working on a manuscript this past year on Jesus and women, I have gained a heightened appreciation of the Savior, of his unparalleled ministry, of how carefully he was prepared and nurtured to his task. As Christmas approaches, to better understand and appreciate who “the babe born in Bethlehem” was — and is — it is profitable to consider those who nurtured him in his pre-mortal life and in his infancy. It is also important to consider who nurtured his mother Mary for her enormous responsibility, as doing so helps us understand the divinity of the baby born on the first Christmas day. Four women stand out as devoted disciples and witnesses of his mission and his sublime perfection: Heavenly Mother, Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna. At Christmastime their witnesses serve to remind us of the majesty and glory of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of the world.

First-Hand Accounts of Christmas

As iconic as Christmas is, there are few primary source documents on the birth and life of Jesus Christ.¹ While millions of pages have been written about Jesus, actual written accounts by those who walked, talked, or observed the Savior during his lifetime are in short supply. We have the New Testament gospels, a scant 178 pages.² The paucity of information dramatically increases

1. Primary source documents “provide firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning an historical topic [or individual]. ... [They] are original documents created or experienced contemporaneously with the [person] being researched ... [and] enable researchers to get as close as possible to what actually happened.” (“What Are Primary Sources?” UCI Libraries, <https://www.lib.uci.edu/what-are-primary-sources>) Primary source documents affirm that Jesus existed. We know the geography he traversed. We have access to myriad primary source documents on the Jewish and Roman worlds in which he lived. See Christopher Klein, “The Bible Says Jesus Was Real. What Other Proof Exists?” *History* (website), <https://www.history.com/news/was-jesus-real-historical-evidence>. Archaeological evidence, however, does not exist. (The earliest known image of Christ dates to the mid-200s AD, long after Jesus died. The provenance of artifacts purportedly associated with Jesus cannot be verified.) Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus twice. Roman historian Tacitus mentions Jesus’s death at the hands of Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. A letter from Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan mentions “Chrestus.”

2. The New Testament gospels include Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The 178 pages refers to the Authorized LDS King James Version. The Bible is what historians call a primary source document. If Jesus’s time in the Americas in

when the focus is the Christmas story — the annunciation through the proverbial visit by “the wise men.”³ It totals a mere 88 verses, some five pages of text.⁴ Only one verse describes Jesus’s childhood.⁵ Another ten are dedicated to a single incident during his twelfth year.⁶ His adult life and ministry through his ascension fill the remaining pages.

However, as readers connect the dots on events surrounding Jesus’s birth to his teachings and doctrine, there is much more that we can learn. A deeper dive into Jesus’s life and the times in which he lived can lead us to a greater appreciation for that first Christmas, for loving, caring Heavenly Parents; for extraordinary women; and to a more profound veneration for the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Some musings with these things in mind, follow.

Our Heavenly Parents and Heavenly Home

I trust Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother carefully discussed and likely consulted Jesus as to who should be his earthly parents — maybe they even held a heavenly “family council” on this matter. In pre-mortal life it stands to reason his Heavenly Parents, in preparing for Jesus’s advent into mortality, carefully placed individuals into his life who would witness to his divinity; who would tutor his young, innocent mother; and who would continue loving and nurturing their beloved son as they — his Heavenly Parents — had done. As Bruce R. McConkie affirmed, “We cannot but think that the Father would choose the greatest female spirit to be the mother of his Son.”⁷

The family into which Jesus was born that first Christmas morning and the values of that home were critically important to Jesus’s development. *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* is timeless in its eternal sweep and scope and teaches about our eternal home. It says, “All human beings

3 Nephi is counted — although Jesus was then a resurrected being — we have an additional contemporaneous 37 pages, give or take a few.

3. See Luke 1:26-56; 2:1-39, and Matthew 1:18-25; 2:1-12. Although by the time the wise men visited, Jesus could have been up to 2 years old.

4. Only two of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke, treat events surrounding Jesus’s birth. In John 1:14, it does state, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”

5. See Luke 2:40; passing reference in Matthew 2:21.

6. Luke 2:42-52.

7. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah, Book 1: From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 327; see also Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, Vol. 1: The Gospels*, (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1973), 85.

— male and female — are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of Heavenly Parents, and as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. ... In the premortal realm, spirit sons and daughters knew and worshiped God as their eternal Father and accepted His plan.”⁸

We can assume our Heavenly Parents chose Mary and Joseph because they would spiritually and physically nourish Jesus’s development, encourage him, care for him, and educate and instruct him in the ways of God. They chose a man and woman who were of equal stature and unimpeachable integrity, spiritually intuitive, faithful, dedicated to nurturing their children in eternal verities, and above all, loving — because to do what he had to do, the Messiah had to learn and become the very embodiment of love.

Our Heavenly Parents would have chosen earthly parents who strove to follow godly practices. *The Family, A Proclamation to the World* provides a suitable working model for these godly practices. It stipulates that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and ... the family is central to the Creator’s plan for the eternal destiny of His children.”⁹ It explains God’s first commandment to Adam and Eve “to multiply and replenish the Earth remains in force.” Further, “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity,” and with gender come certain gender-specific roles for each parent.¹⁰ Both are “to love and care for each other and for their children” and are “obligated to help one another as equal partners,” but the father is to “preside ... in love and righteousness and ... provide the necessities of life and protection for [his family]. Mothers are primarily responsible for the **nurture** of their children.”¹¹

Not just Mary but Heavenly Mother nurtured Jesus. Muse about Heavenly Mother’s feelings when her beloved son prepared to leave his heavenly home — the joy, the aching, the confidence, the concern, and knowing that with his departure there would be a longing, a palpable emptiness in that Heavenly Mother’s heart. Imagine the heightened

8. Everyone would benefit by closely studying and prayerfully pondering the entire text of the *Proclamation*. See The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” (proclamation, General Relief Society Meeting, Salt Lake City, September 23, 1995), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., emphasis added.

difficulty of Heavenly Mother's task, sending her son off to suffer "pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and ... he will take upon him the ... sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities ... [and he will] take upon him the sins of his people" (Alma 7:11–13).

Jesus was loved, revered, and worshipped by many throughout his life. He knew joy and happiness. Yet, his mortal experience would be grueling. We know little about his youth, but his necessary mortal experiences suggest trials and challenges in his childhood and teen years. We know when he entered into his public ministry he was mocked, tortured, and endured an agonizing, humiliating death. When it was time for his departure, did Heavenly Mother cling longer before letting her son go? How could she let him go? Tears clouding her eyes, did she thank him for his goodness, for the reverence and respect he had shown her, for his courage and determination to love and serve others, and to do his Father's will? What last, tender words did Heavenly Mother share with her beloved son before he descended to Earth?

Besides the angel Gabriel,¹² sent to minister to Mary, did Heavenly Mother commission other angels — perhaps female angels — to watch over and minister to Mary and Jesus at his birth and throughout Mary and Jesus's lives? Did she whisper through the Spirit to her precious daughter as Mary formatively nurtured Jesus? In the heavenly choir of angels convened that glorious first Christmas, how many female angels sang praises to the long-awaited Messiah — because no choir is complete without a full complement of virtuoso sopranos.

So it was that first still Christmas day — Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father sent their beloved son to Earth for the benefit of all mankind. Jesus condescended to come, out of his boundless love for each of us, and it was the love of our Heavenly Parents and their selfless son combined, that are the essence of the Christmas story.

Musings About Mary and Joseph

Certainly, Joseph nurtured Mary and Jesus. He loved Mary. We see this when finding she was pregnant, he chose to put her away quietly rather than shame her. Then, when an angel directed him to marry Mary and care for her and her son as his own, he readily obeyed. As

12. Luke 1:26. In Latter-day Saint theology the angel Gabriel is identified as Noah. See Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Gabriel," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/gabriel?lang=eng>.

household head, it would have been Joseph who instigated the family's annual religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Because of Joseph's careful attention to Jesus's religious education, at age twelve and thereafter, "the feast of the Passover marked significant milestones during the mortal ministry of Christ."¹³ Joseph nurtured and protected his wife and son and was a witness of Jesus's divinity.

Mary, however, is mentioned in scripture far more often than Joseph.¹⁴ Mary was Jesus's hands-on, primary caregiver, his first teacher and exemplar. In so many ways it was her task to nurture and point the way as Jesus, "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52, NIV).

Even as a young teen, Mary displayed a spiritual maturity far beyond her years. The angel Gabriel told Mary she was "highly favoured, the Lord *is* with thee: blessed *art* thou among women," and that she had been chosen to give birth to, "JESUS ... the Son of the Highest ... and of his kingdom there shall be no end."¹⁵ As astounded as she must have been, Mary at least partly comprehended his words. Her first question indicated her commitment to the law of chastity: "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34)

The angel's response demanded unbelievable faith and trust: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee ... [and] born of thee shall be ... the Son of God. ... For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:35, 37). Mary's heartfelt response: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). The young Mary had at least some inkling of the monumental task before her and of the social stigma that would forever plague her. Still, her single-minded desire was to do God's will, accept the derision of others, and embrace her daunting charge to nurture, teach, and love God's son.

Musings About Mary's Time with Elisabeth

Shortly thereafter, Mary traveled to stay with her cousin for three months before the birth of Elisabeth's son, John the Baptist. How carefully our

13. Howard W. Hunter, "Christ, Our Passover," *Ensign* (May 1985), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1985/04/christ-our-passover?lang=eng>.

14. Tradition holds Joseph was somewhat, if not significantly, older than Mary and died well before Jesus's public ministry, which would be one reason he is mentioned far less than his earthly wife. However, if such was the case, it additionally highlights the critical importance of Mary's role as the only parent in Jesus's life for a long period of time.

15. See Luke 1:28-33.

Heavenly Parents oversaw Mary's preparation for Jesus's birth on what became the first Christmas by sending her to be tutored by an inestimably wise and righteous woman.

When Mary arrived at Elisabeth's home, upon seeing Mary, "the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed *art* thou among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of thy womb. And whence *is* this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"¹⁶ Elisabeth was the third earthly individual to bear witness to Jesus's divinity.

At the time, she was well past her childbearing years. Nevertheless, while Zacharias, her husband, was officiating in the temple an angel appeared to him and announced Elisabeth would give birth to their son, who would "be great in the sight of the Lord and ... filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God."¹⁷

When the baby leaped in Elisabeth's womb and when she spoke to Mary under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, both Mary and Elisabeth were enlightened and empowered by her prophetic words. As well, both could later nurture their sons, using this meeting to help them to a greater understanding of who and what they were to become.

Mary responded to Elisabeth's prophetic words by sharing the stirring words of the Magnificat.¹⁸ In her moving canticle, Mary expresses joy, faith, humility, and her willingness to subsume her will to Heavenly Father's will and to embrace the holy commission given her — although incapable of fully understanding all that lay before her, least of all comprehending the grief and pain that would be required of her. Gratefully she praised God:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for,

16. See Luke 1:41-45.

17. See Luke 1:15. Zacharias, or Zechariah, was of the tribe of Levi, a descendant of Aaron and thereby commissioned as a holder of the Aaronic priesthood to officiate in the temple. On this occasion, the lot for performing the incense offering had fallen to Zacharias. To be so honored was a once-in-a-lifetime, if at all, experience for any Levitical priest.

18. Mary's response to Elisabeth's pronouncement, as recorded in Luke 1:46-55 has come to be known as the Magnificat. It is a canticle, also known as the Song of Mary, the Canticle of Mary and, in the Byzantine tradition, the Ode of the Theotokos. It is traditionally incorporated into the liturgical services of the Catholic church and of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy
is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to
generation. He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath
scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from *their* seats, and exalted
them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he
hath sent empty away.

He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of *his*
mercy;

As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed
forever.” (Luke 1:46–55)

Set to music, the Magnificat is one of Christianity’s most enduring hymns. As the renowned pastor and German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted:

The *Magnificat* is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, and one might even say, the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. ... This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is, instead, a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of mankind. There are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary’s mouth.¹⁹

Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father wisely placed Mary and Elisabeth in one another’s paths prior to Jesus’s birth on that first, glorious Christmas day, that Mary might gain a deeper understanding of her situation and who her son truly was from Elisabeth and Zacharias.

Both of them were from the priestly family of Aaron and “righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Luke 1:6–7). Elisabeth was holy, scrupulously honored her covenants, and walked in *all* the commandments of God. Zacharias’s duties in the Levitical priesthood and in the temple in Jerusalem, combined with Elisabeth’s Aaronic lineage, purposed both to a higher spiritual plane. Their

19. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Mystery of Holy Night* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad, November 25, 1996). See also Michael Austin, “Magnificat,” By Common Consent (blog), December 29, 2018, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2018/12/29/magnificat-2/>.

understanding of temple rituals, performances, and symbols — all pointing to the Messiah — were well developed and spiritually mature. Imagine the wealth of instruction they provided their sweet, young protégé about her son — the great Jehovah — with his birth quickly approaching.²⁰

Musings About Jesus's Birth, that First Christmas Day

The New Testament is silent, save one verse, on the birth of Jesus.²¹ It does mention the extraordinary events on that first, glorious Christmas, and showcases those who were witnesses of the Savior's birth and of Jesus's divinity with a new star in the heavens, a heavenly choir of angels singing praises to the Messiah, and the pilgrimage of nearby shepherds to where the virgin Mary lay.

In humble circumstances, free from pomp or ceremony, the King of Kings entered mortality. His earthly mother would have been exhausted and joyful. It is easy to imagine exultant tears slipping down her cheeks onto Jesus's little, trembling frame as Mary nestled him against her warm breast. Overcome by love, her protective maternal instincts would have permeated her soul as she cradled Jesus's tiny, defenseless body protectively in her arms, wholly focused on his welfare.

That Jesus was loved by Mary and Joseph was of the utmost importance. Tragically, some individuals go through life never feeling love or being loved. A person cannot love another or love God until he or she experiences love. Jesus was deeply loved before and from the moment he was born that pristine Christmas day.

The record states that as that wonderful day drew to a close, "Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Thank heaven for women and men who pray and ponder upon the things of eternity! Imagine Mary's thoughts and prayers on that miraculous first Christmas. All these things, when appropriate, would be shared with Jesus — reinforcing his purpose-driven life as God's son, the Savior and Redeemer of the world.

20. Though Zechariah was struck dumb while officiating in the temple and therefore mute during the time Mary resided in his and Elisabeth's home, this does not mean he was incapable of teaching and instructing her, as the scriptures state he was able to write. Also, there has been speculation as to whether Mary was still with Elisabeth when she gave birth to John the Baptist. That too would have blessed Mary's understanding of events ahead. However, the record says only that she returned home after three months.

21. See: Luke 2:7, "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger." There is also a passing reference to his birth in Matthew 2:1, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem ..."

Sometime later, wise men from the East came to worship Jesus as the Christ. All these glorious otherworldly manifestations, each a witness to Jesus's destiny, solemnly reminded Mary of her duty to nurture, teach, and love her fragile, innocent, magnificent child. Certainly, as he grew, Jesus's godly identity rapidly inclined him to extraordinary spiritual acuity, to understand he was God's very Son, chosen to be Savior and Redeemer of mankind. Yet parental love and care was essential to his early years and his spiritual development.

Consider Jesus's birthplace that resplendent Christmas day. The Bible describes no room for them "in the inn" in Bethlehem,²² and after his birth Jesus's being "swaddled" and "laid in a manger" (Luke 2:7). These few details have led many to surmise Jesus was born with only his parents attending his birth, surrounded by animals in a lowly stable.

However, in Joseph and Mary's day, with Bethlehem their ancestral home, they likely had family there, and "the customs of first-century Palestine required [Joseph] to stay with relatives and not with strangers."²³ Interestingly, what little the record shares accords with the design of Palestinian homes: "Most families lived in a single-room house, with a lower compartment for animals to be brought in at night and either a room at the back for visitors, or space on the roof. The family living area would usually have hollows in the ground, filled with straw, in the living area, where the animals would feed."²⁴

Some scholars and theologians have suggested Joseph and Mary were staying with relatives, likely in crowded circumstances, when Jesus was born.²⁵ The Reverend Ian Paul surmised, "In the Christmas story, Jesus is not sad and lonely, some distance away in the manger, needing our sympathy. He is in the midst of the family, and all the visiting

22. According to the Reverend Ian Paul, the Greek word *kataluma*, usually translated as "inn," was in fact used for a reception room in a private house — the same term is used to describe the "upper room" where Jesus and his disciples ate the last supper. An entirely different word, *pandocheion*, is used to describe an "inn" or any other place where strangers are welcomed." See Andrew Brown, "Jesus was not born in a stable, says theologian," *The Guardian* (website), December 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/23/jesus-christ-not-born-in-stable-theologian-new-testament>.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. The idea was first posited and recorded by Spaniard Francisco Sanchez de las Brozas in 1584, and has been periodically reasserted by various other New Testament scholars. See Brown, "Jesus was not born in a stable, says theologian."

relations.”²⁶ In this possible scenario, Jesus’s birth would have included people coming and going and animals wandering about. With the onset of labor, Mary likely found a more private place in the compartment of her relative’s home, and capable women — female relatives or midwives — would have attended her delivery. She would have been nurtured, cared for, and loved by family.²⁷ After Jesus’s birth on that celebrated Christmas day, though physically exhausted and emotionally drained, Mary would have swaddled her son and laid him in a manger.

While still risky in our day, in Mary’s day childbirth was extremely dangerous, aptly described by one woman as “exquisite torment,” survived by mother and child only because of “the infinite providence of God, in great mercy.”²⁸ As did Mary, every mother risks her life to bring a child into the world. As it is feasible that Mary was with family when she gave birth, is this perhaps a tender mercy of her Mother in Heaven? Mary was so young. She was away from her home and family. She had to be worn out and frightened when she went into labor. She had walked or ridden on the back of a donkey while large with child. Every step and every clip-clop of the donkey’s hooves had to be jarring as she traveled the long, dusty roads — in utter misery. With her Heavenly Mother and angels looking out for sweet Mary — who had willingly sacrificed so much, so young, for God — perhaps she gave birth not in luxury but at least surrounded by caring, helping, nurturing women relatives.

26. Brown, “Jesus was not born in a stable, says theologian.”

27. In one uncanonized, apocryphal gospel, omitted from the New Testament, the *Protoevangelium of James*, the text describes two midwives being present at Jesus’s birth, with one standing as a witness to Mary’s virginity. Whether factual or not, it was unlikely Mary delivered her child without the aid a midwife — midwives being mentioned as far back as the Book of Exodus in the Bible. First-time labor, any labor, was difficult and dangerous, and a first labor usually lasts between 12 and 36 hours, meaning there would have been ample time for Joseph to secure assistance for his wife. See Patricia Harman, “Was There a Midwife at the Manger? Here’s What the History of Childbirth Says About the First Christmas,” *Time* (website), 12:31, <https://time.com/5481431/birth-of-jesus-midwife-history-christmas/>.

28. Infant mortality rates in the first century Roman Empire were about 30%. Maternal mortality figures are available only through comparison to later societies with more records, with maternal mortality about 25 per 1000 births. See Todd Brisbane, “Childbirth in ancient Rome: from traditional folklore to obstetrics,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 47, no. 2 (Mar 8, 2007): 82-85, doi:10.1111/j.1479828X.2007.00691.x. The woman’s first-hand account from 1657 describing her “exquisite torment,” etc., see Louis Schwartz, “17th-century childbirth: ‘exquisite torment and infinite grace,’” *Perspectives* 377, no. 9776 (April 30, 2011): 1486-87.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus would have remained for some time in Bethlehem. Eventually, after being directed to do so by an angel, they fled to Egypt. Upon their return, they settled in a humble home in Nazareth,²⁹ where Jesus, cherished by his parents, learned to work, love, and serve others. In their home, “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

Musings About Anna’s Prophecies

Eight days after Jesus’s birth, in obedience to Mosaic law, Jesus was circumcised, another indication of Joseph and Mary’s resolute religiosity (see Luke 2:21). Forty days after that little-noticed, world-changing first Christmas, Joseph and Mary then ceremonially presented their son — he who was the very giver of the Mosaic Law — at the great temple in Jerusalem.³⁰ Two noble souls were in the temple that day, the “just and devout” Simeon and Anna, a woman at least 84 years old.³¹ Since her husband’s death some 50–60 years earlier, and likely longer, Anna had devoted herself to God’s holy house. She “departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:37).

When Joseph and Mary presented Jesus in the temple, both Simeon and Anna thanked God for the privilege of seeing the Son of God in the flesh. Both prophesied that Jesus was the chosen Messiah. Anna’s words

29. Joseph faithfully obeyed the command of an angel and, the very morning after being so directed, took his wife and Jesus and left for Egypt. When directed by an angel to return, still cautious for Jesus’s safety, the family settled in a humble home in Nazareth. Joseph was directed to Egypt after Herod the Great ordered the Massacre of the Innocents, the killing of all the children under age two in Bethlehem and the regions round about (Matthew 2:16). When an angel told Joseph of Herod’s death, he returned to his homeland, but upon learning that Herod Archelaus (son of Herod the Great) ruled over Samaria, Judea, and Idumea, he took his family to live in Nazareth.

30. See Leviticus 12:2-8 on the requirements for Mary’s purification. Joseph and Mary went to the temple and presented a pair of turtledoves or pigeons to the temple priest for a burnt offering. Their offering indicated their humble circumstances. It also signified the ceremonial ransoming or redeeming of their Jewish firstborn son. See McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, Vol. I, 99.

31. “The Greek text states καὶ αὐτὴ χήρα ὡς ἐτῶν ὀγδοηκονταεσσάρων, generally translated as “she was a widow of eighty four years.” The passage is ambiguous: it could mean that she was 84 years old or that she had been a widow for 84 years. Some scholars consider the latter to be the more likely option. On this option, she could not have married younger than about age 14, and so she would have been at least $14 + 7 + 84 = 105$ years old.” See Wikipedia, s.v. “Anna the Prophetess,” 15:37, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_the_Prophetess#cite_ref-7.

were not fully recorded but mirrored Simeon's, who "lifted [Jesus] up in his arms and praised God, saying: 'Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word, because I have seen with my eyes your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel'" (Luke 2:28-32, Wayment). Anna added her witness, speaking of Jesus "to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."³²

It is not hard to imagine that the grandmotherly Anna sat and cuddled that sweet infant, recently with God, in her arms, unfastened his wrap, cooed, laughed, and delighted at his little flailing arms and legs. As she gazed lovingly at his face and lively eyes, perhaps she shared more thoughts and prophecies with the astounded Mary and Joseph.

This encounter, often less noted at Christmastime, is critical to the Christmas narrative. Consider that Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna were all temple-going women.³³ They attended the temple to show their love and devotion to God, to do their duty before him, to feel of his presence, and to deepen their understanding of godliness and of eternity. This occasion had to be especially poignant. Within the confines of the great temple at Jerusalem, the holiest sanctuary in Israel's long and storied history, Anna and Simeon prophesied and witnessed that the tiny infant, Jesus, was God's son, the chosen Messiah, destined to redeem mankind — marvelous prophecies for Mary to ponder and later share, when appropriate, with her son.

Final Musings

Three mortal women — Mary, Elisabeth, and Anna — loom large in the Christmas story.³⁴ The myriad majestic miracles and these women's

32. See Luke 2:38. Thomas Wayment points out that "Anna is a prophetess. [She] speaks of the *redemption* or *ransom* of Jerusalem, whereas Simeon speaks of *consolation*. The word that Anna used refers more specifically to forgiveness of sin." See Thomas A. Wayment, *The New Testament: A Translation for Latter-day Saints: A Study Bible* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 113, footnotes to Luke 2:35, 37.

33. As a temple worker, I cannot begin to calculate the imprint the temple has had on my life and the lives of others who work or regularly attend the temple, as a place to be educated with eternity in view, a place of comfort, peace, joy and revelation.

34. We can also never forget the myriad stalwart, faithful women, particularly his female Galilean disciples, who played central roles in nurturing Jesus during his public ministry. As dedicated disciples, these women acted as key players organizing and managing Jesus's ministry, financially supporting him, and providing him lodging, treasured friendships, and homes away from home. These women believed

witnesses remind us of the grandeur and glory of this being whose birth we celebrate each Christmas season. Long before this life, Jesus was nurtured in the realms of glory by his Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father. After descending to Earth, memories of his Heavenly Parents and his heavenly home certainly imbued Jesus's infancy and early years. William Wordsworth poignantly described each infant's and child's capacity to retain at least fleeting memories of pre-Earth life:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!³⁵

On Earth, Jesus's first and principal nurturer and teacher was his mother Mary. She held him in her arms and swaddled, nursed, cooed, and sang to him. She kept him from the fire when he began to crawl, encouraged his first wobbly steps, picked him up and soothed him after his tumbles. She spoke to him of God, listened to his first babblings, and helped him say his first prayers. Other women in Jesus's pre-mortal and early life — Heavenly Mother, Elisabeth, and Anna — mothered and nurtured Mary and Jesus. Because of their love for him, Jesus learned about love, how to love, and the power of love to transform lives. This is the essence of Christmas.

At this Christmas season, I am grateful for the love of the Savior, for home and family — all holistically united under God's grand design. I am grateful for the concern and care shown our glorious Savior long before his birth, at his birth, and during his life on Earth. I am mindful of the compelling witnesses of his divinity. Above all else, I am grateful for Jesus Christ, as Son of God, Savior, and Redeemer of the world, who condescended to come to Earth that first magnificent Christmas day, who lived a perfect life, who pointed the way to salvation, and who gave his life that all might live.

Jesus to be — as Mary, the sister of Martha, triumphantly proclaimed — “the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world” (John 11:27).

35. William Wordsworth, “Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” Poets.org, <https://poets.org/poem/ode-intimations-immortality-recollections-early-childhood>.

Kristine Wardle Frederickson is an adjunct at Brigham Young University and Utah Valley University, where she teaches religion and world, European and American history. She received her PhD in history from the University of Utah. Her dissertation explored the religious underpinnings in the activist efforts of 19th-century British Christian feminist Josephine Butler. She writes and presents on a wide range of doctrinal and historical topics, individuals, and events in Latter-day Saint, American, and European history. She is the author of *Extraordinary Courage: Women Empowered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. She also writes and speaks on human trafficking—women and children in sexual servitude—and is currently readying a book on trafficking for publication. She writes a bi-weekly column for *Deseret News*, “Mormon Times,” focused on the international church and Latter-day Saint church practice and doctrine.

