

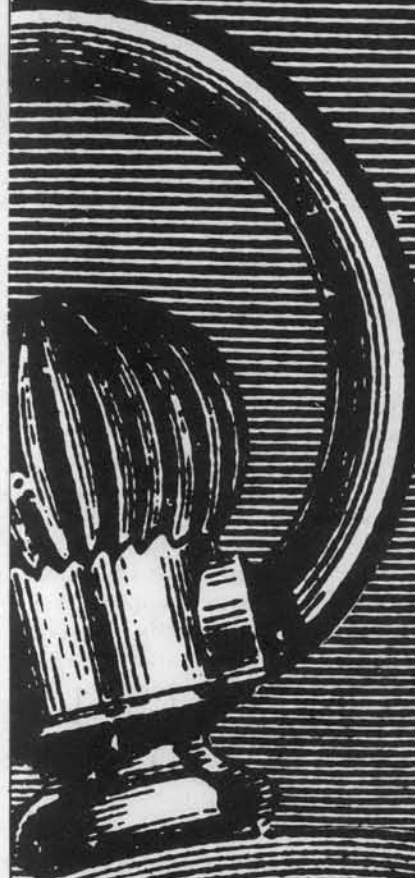
DATING THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

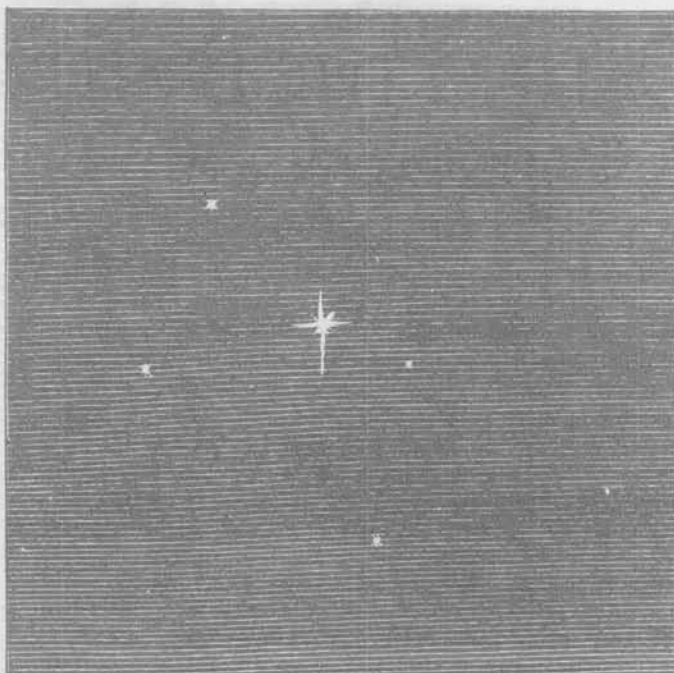
BY JOSEPH T. HEPWORTH

"The rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh, it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our country, by the will and commandment of God, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April."
Doctrine and Covenants 20:1

SPECIFYING the date of Christ's earthly advent has been the topic of much speculation. While masses of historical evidence and calculations have not brought biblical chronologists to any consensus, many Latter-day Saints believe that the question has been settled by modern revelation. But has it?

It is commonly accepted among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that Jesus Christ was born on the sixth of April. Bruce R. McConkie cites 6 April as Christ's birthdate in *Mormon Doctrine*¹ and James E. Talmage uses this date in *Jesus the Christ*,² both authors citing *Doctrine and Covenants 20:1* as the basis for this claim. Indeed, an entire monograph, *April Sixth*,³ has been written which has as its central thesis that Jesus was born on 6 April. In *April Sixth* John C. Lefgren advances historical and astronomical arguments to support a 6 April birthdate as well as the statement found in *Doctrine and Covenants 20:1*. Referring to this particular verse in the *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, Hyrum





James Talmage's reasoning that the Book of Mormon chronology sustains the correctness of the common or Dionysian system seems rather dubious.

M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl relate that the date for organizing the Church, 6 April, "was chosen in accordance with a divine command. In all probability the 6th of April is the anniversary of the birthday of our Lord."⁴ They cite Griswell as saying that Christ was born on 5 April and reason that since in Judaic culture the day ends at sunset, Christ's nighttime birth therefore occurred on 6 April. Unlike Griswell, however, most scholars have not attempted to pinpoint the day on which Christ was born, but rather have chosen to explain our current tradition of celebrating the birth of Christ on 25 December.⁵

The most common explanation for the 25 December date is that it was adopted solely for convenience.⁶ To begin with, that was the day the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the sun god (*natalis solis invicti*).⁷ Also, the Saturnalia, a great festival at the end of the vintage and harvesting, was held 17-23 December.⁸ According to one study, "it is thought that the early Christians adopted this day for their Christ-mass so that they would be less conspicuous in the observance of their holiday."⁹ It is also possible that there were less pious reasons for utilizing the date of a pagan holiday; e.g., it would be an excellent opportunity for the church "to turn the people from a pagan observance of the winter solstice to a day of adoration of Christ."¹⁰

These secular explanations of the winter tradition of Christmas are so widely accepted that few historians would insist on taking our current day of celebration as the actual historic day of Christ's birth. Indeed, Luke's reference to "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8) makes a springtime advent more plausible: Shepherds would not

be in the fields at night during the winter, but a nocturnal watch would not be uncommon in the spring with its more favorable climate and the obvious need to protect the young lambs from predators. Thus, even to the secular world, dating Christ's birth as 6 April would probably be more plausible than the current Christmas tradition of 25 December.

Of more concern to the biblical chronologists than the actual day on which Christ was born has been the year of his birth. The issue of placing the correct year of our Lord's advent undoubtedly seems perplexing to many people; after all, are we not living in the "Christian Era" with our present chronology of years dated "in the year of our Lord" (*Anno Domini* or A.D.) and those years prior to his birth recorded as "Before Christ" (B.C.)? This apparently was the intent of Dionysius Exiguus when he introduced our current mode of reckoning years in about the year 525.¹¹ According to Dionysius's calculations, the year of our Lord's birth (A.D. 1) was the year 753 A.U.C. (*ab urbe condita*, "from the founding of our city," reckoned from the reputed year in which Rome was founded).¹² The year of Christ's birth becomes an issue, however, because Dionysius's calculations seem to have been wrong. According to historical records, Herod ascended to the throne in 716 A.U.C. (37 B.C.) and reigned for 33 years before his death in 749 A.U.C.¹³ Equating A.D. 1 with 753 A.U.C. would place Herod's death in 749 A.U.C. at 4 B.C. New Testament scriptures unequivocally state that "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (Matt. 2:1) which would suggest that his birth could be no later than 4 B.C. Indeed, 4 B.C. seems to be the year given most frequently as the year of Christ's birth.¹⁴

Although commonly accepted, 4 B.C. is by no means universally agreed upon as the actual year of Christ's advent. To be sure, there is enough confusion about this point that Talmage refers to the following treatment of this topic by Dr. Charles F. Deems (*The Light of the Nations*, p. 28): "It is annoying to see learned men use the same apparatus of calculation and reach the most diverse results. It is bewildering to attempt a reconciliation of these varying calculations. . . . For example: the birth of our Lord is placed in B.C. 1 by Pearson and Hug; B.C. 2 by Scalinge; B.C. 3 by Baronius and Paulus; B.C. 4 by Bengel, Wieseler, and Greswell; B.C. 5 by Usher and Petavius; B.C. 6 by Strong, Luvin, and Clark; B.C. 7 by Ideler and Sanclemente."¹⁵ However, even with this great diversity of opinion regarding the year of Christ's birth, most scholars (and all cited here by Deems) agree that Dionysius was wrong in his calculations, placing Christ's birth too late.

Whereas the hypothesis of 6 April as Christ's birth date presents no immediate difficulties (beyond its surprising specificity) in reconciling secular and Mormon estimations, rendering an appropriate year is more problematic. If we as Latter-day Saints accept Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 as literally dating Christ's birth then we should accept not only 6 April as the day, but also "one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh" as indicating that the year of Christ's birth was 1 B.C. Actually, if this scripture is accepted as a revelation specifying the exact time of Christ's advent rather than just indicating "the precise day upon which, according to his will and commandment, we should

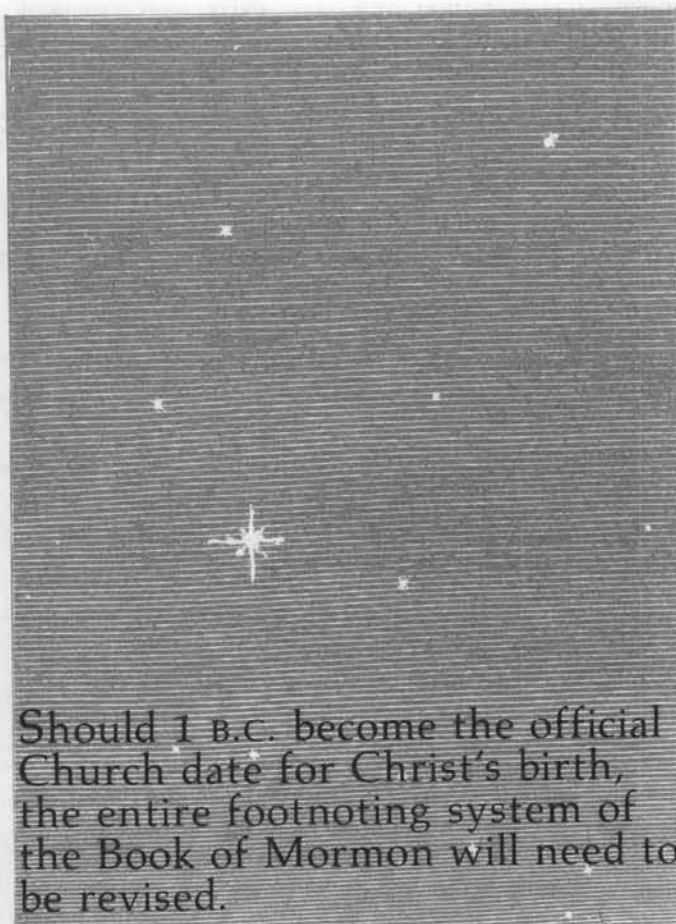
proceed to organize his Church once more here upon the earth" (D&C 20, headnote), that "precise day" being specified according to the calendar currently in use, then one should be more willing to accept 1 B.C. as the birth year than 6 April as the birth day. There is a direct link between the year and the coming of the Lord in the flesh, but the month and day seem to refer primarily to the day of the organization. The assumption that it was one thousand eight hundred and thirty years *to the day* since the coming of the Lord in the flesh does not seem necessary or warranted.

Both Elder Talmage and Elder McConkie seem to accept this verse of scripture as a chronological revelation, rather than as merely an introductory statement indicating the day and year on which the Church should be organized. Elder Talmage states, "Without attempting to analyze the mass of calculation data relating to this subject, we accept the Dionysian basis as correct with respect to the year, which is to say that we believe Christ to have been born in the year known to us as B.C. 1."¹⁶ Elder McConkie concurs, "Though there is considerable controversy and uncertainty among scholars of the world as to the actual year of Christ's birth, the revelation given on the day the Church was organized in this dispensation apparently intends to convey the thought that he was born April 6, B.C. 1. (D&C 20:1.)"¹⁷

While revelation, prophecy, and scripture do not need secular justification (see D&C 1:37-38), Elder Talmage offers additional support for placing Christ's birth in the year 1 B.C. Secular scholars and chronologists have not used Book of Mormon evidences in their calculations, yet here is a source apparently uncontaminated by translation problems (A of F 8). Elder Talmage points out that Lehi and other prophets declared that Christ would come six hundred years after Lehi and his party left Jerusalem and that according to the Book of Mormon, Lehi and company made their departure in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, or 597 B.C. Since (1) secular history dating Christ's birth differs by three or four years from the Dionysian system and since (2) Christ's birth year calculated as 600 years from the first year of the reign of Zedekiah also shows a discrepancy of about three years, Elder Talmage concludes that "Book of Mormon chronology therefore sustains in general the correctness of the common or Dionysian system."¹⁸

The reasoning here seems rather dubious. If Zedekiah began his reign 600 years before the birth of Christ and if according to our current system of reckoning time that was in 597 B.C., then according to that account, Christ's birth would be placed in A.D. 4 according to our current system, an error even larger than the sectarian world makes if the actual year was 1 B.C.! Perhaps Elder Talmage felt the Dionysian system was in general correct because according to that calculation the error was in the other direction, placing Christ's birth too late.

It could even be argued that the Book of Mormon account could place the birth of Christ even later than A.D. 4. Although Elder Talmage states that "these scriptures fix the time of the beginning of Zedekiah's reign as six hundred years before the birth of Christ," it actually appears that 600 "B.C." (in the Book of Mormon system) is the latest possible date for the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.¹⁹ In 1 Nephi 1:4 we learn that "in the commencement of the first year of the reign of



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Zedekiah . . . there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent." Afterwards Lehi prayed, had a vision (or visions), and preached unto the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Jews became angry with Lehi and sought his life (1 Ne. 1:20). The Lord warned Lehi of this in a dream and commanded him to depart into the wilderness (1 Ne. 10:4; 1 Ne. 19:8; 2 Ne. 25:19). It is conceivable that all this could have occurred in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, but it is also plausible that the events leading up to and including Lehi's mission to the Jews were of a longer duration. If the latter hypothesis is correct, then Zedekiah's reign, according to Book of Mormon chronology, would have commenced 601 years before Christ's birth or even earlier, which would place the birth date at A.D. 5 (according to the Dionysian chronology) or later.²⁰

In dealing with Book of Mormon chronology, one is tempted to speculate on the importance of dating anyway. Nephi and the other Book of Mormon authors were not writing primarily to record history (although they did that too) but, as the title page of the Book of Mormon states, "to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations." If the Lord's advent was actually 593 years from the time Lehi left Jerusalem, one wonders whether Nephi would have reported it as 593 or 600 years. A historian undoubtedly would have chosen the former, it being a more exact date, but a prophet may well have

chosen the latter knowing that the extreme exactness of the former date would focus one's attention more on the time than on the message. A prophet's focus would be on the message, the coming of the Messiah; an exact time would be of relatively little importance.

Also, in order to question the accuracy of a date or time, one must first know the precision of the number. With what precision was Nephi (or the Lord) dating the Lord's advent? If only one significant digit was used, this date would be "correct" if Christ was born plus or minus 50 years from the date specified. If we assume three significant digits, should we also assume it is accurate to the day, i.e., that Lehi left Jerusalem on 6 April?²¹

Dating Christ's birth without the aid of direct revelation must be equivocal at best. Even using Book of Mormon evidences cannot insure us of correct deductions because although we believe the Book of Mormon to be translated correctly, Moroni himself admits of the possibility of errors in the record (Morm. 8:17).

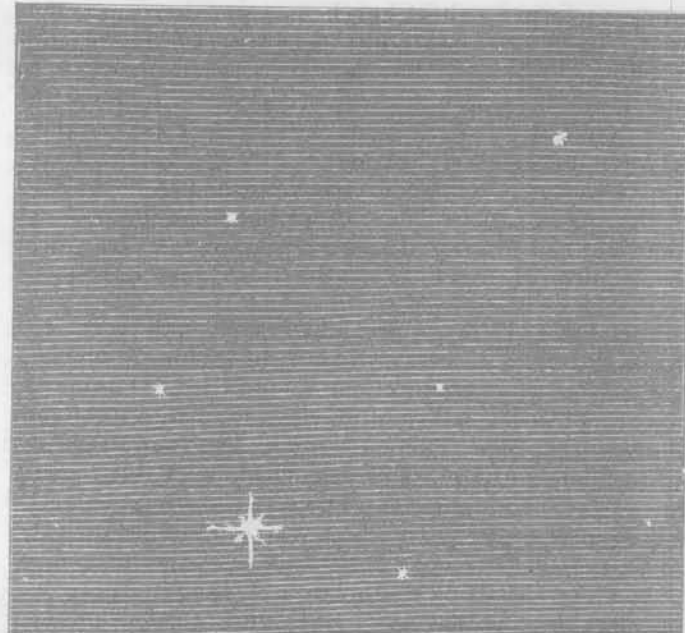
The central issue seems to be how one interprets the first verse of the twentieth section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Many Church members accept this scripture as dating the mortal advent of Jesus Christ and agree with James Talmage and Bruce McConkie that Jesus Christ was born on 6 April 1 B.C. This scripture however has not always been interpreted in that manner. J. Reuben Clark indicated this in the preface to his book *Our Lord of the Gospels*:

Some may sharply disagree with the computations (now accepted by many scholars) that fix the date of the Savior's birth at the end of 5 B.C. or the beginning or early part of 4 B.C. The Church has made no official declaration on the matter, beyond that contained in Verse 1 of Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In the early editions of the *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* (by Brothers Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl) this verse was . . . hardly . . . regarded as giving divine authority to the commonly accepted calendar. . . . All that this Revelation means to say is that the Church was organized in the year that is commonly accepted as 1830, A.D." (p. 138).

This statement has been omitted in the latest edition of the *Commentary*.

I am not proposing any date as the true date.²²

However, it appears as though the Church as a whole may be moving towards the acceptance of the 6 April 1 B.C. date for our Lord's birth. In 1979 when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published its special edition of the Bible, it also included "a new dictionary that was more useful to Latter-day Saints."²³ Although the preface to the Bible Dictionary states that it "is not intended as an official or revealed endorsement by the Church of the doctrinal, historical, cultural, and other matters set forth," it also mentions that "chronology and various matters connected with the Bible antiquities have also received attention." Interestingly, the dates for the "Birth of Jesus Christ" through "The Crucifixion" are conspicuously missing from the new Bible Dictionary whereas in the old "missionary edition" dates are given with the "Birth of Jesus Christ" being placed at 4 B.C. This decision not to date the events during Christ's lifetime is a step away from the traditional chronology. One wonders why James Talmage's estimate of Christ's birth at 1 B.C. is not included in the current edition of the Bible Dictionary, and whether that dating change will be incorporated in



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the next revision. Could it be that while the 4 B.C. date is not acceptable, the evidence supporting a 1 B.C. date is not sufficient either?

Should the 1 B.C. date become the official date for Christ's birth in the Church, changes in more than just the Bible Dictionary will be needed. The entire footnoting system of the Book of Mormon will need to be revised if the B.C./A.D. designation of years is to conform to the Dionysian system we are currently using. As it now stands, Book of Mormon chronology assigns the year A.D. 1 to the year of Christ's birth (see footnote to 3 Ne. 1:1). This would need to be changed to 1 B.C. and all other dates would have to be shifted back one year. Thus Lehi would have left Jerusalem in 601 B.C., that being 600 years before the birth of Christ in 1 B.C.

Movement towards accepting 6 April 1 B.C. as the birth date of Jesus Christ and the subsequent changes it would entail is the direction we should be taking if D&C 20:1 was intended to reveal the exact day and year of Jesus' birth. However, if, as Hyrum M. Smith says, "all that this Revelation means to say is that the Church was organized in the year that is commonly accepted as 1830, A.D.,"²⁴ then our rigid adherence to that date will only prove counterproductive to scholarly advances in biblical and Book of Mormon chronology. Brigham Young University Professors S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen seem to concur with the earlier *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary* when they ask, "Is it not just as likely that the phrase 'one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh' constitutes a passing acknowledgment by the Lord of the date on which, according to our current calendrical system, the

Church was being organized?" These authors also dismiss the book *April Sixth*, which supports a 1 B.C. date, as "at best largely unscholarly, misleading, and clothed in doubt."²⁵

There seems to be something magical about dates and numbers. When we can put a number on something, we feel as if we understand it. Uncertainty is uncomfortable; we have a human need for conviction. Perhaps that is why Joseph Smith prayed earnestly to know the time of the coming of the Son of Man (D&C 130:14-17). Perhaps that is why we so eagerly interpret a scripture to mean, possibly, more than it really does. In a conference address delivered by Charles W. Nibley, April 1930, this need seems quite apparent:

A wonderful day, the sixth of April! Many notable things have occurred on it. The organization of the Church for one great and notable thing. The prophet Joseph recites in his own story that it was early in the spring of 1820, one hundred and ten years ago, when he went into the woods to pray. I like to think of that also as being on the sixth day of April. We have no definite knowledge of it, but I believe it in my heart and in my soul. . . . I believe with all my heart and soul that the sixth day of April was the birthday of the Lord Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer. . . . More likely was it in the spring of the year than on the twenty-fifth day of December, which is celebrated as the birthday of the Savior; yet we go on celebrating that day, and it is all right to do so, inasmuch as that is the day the world generally accepts. But I repeat, it is my individual opinion, firmly fixed in my mind that the sixth day of April is the birthday of the Savior of the world. I further like to believe that the resurrection of the Redeemer, which marked his triumph over death and the grave, also occurred on the sixth of April, though I have no definite proof.²⁶

Concerning the actual date of the birth of Jesus Christ, it seems as though we have no definite proof. Perhaps the scripture is as true of his advent in the meridian of time as it is of his second coming: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons" (Acts 1:7).

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Notes

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), p. 132.
2. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 11th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1982), p. 104.
3. John C. Lefgren, *April Sixth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980).
4. Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1951), p. 98.
5. Eunice Riedel, Thomas Tracy, and Barbra D. Moskowitz in *The Book of the Bible* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981) state, "Throughout antiquity other dates for the birth were advanced—25 March, 19 April, 17 November, among others—but there is no evidence, literary or historical, that supports any of these dates" (pp. 311-12).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
7. *Collier's Encyclopedia*. [33 ed.], s.v., "Christmas."
8. *Ibid.*, s.v. "Feasts and Festivals."
9. Riedel, Tracy, and Moskowitz, *The Book of the Bible*, p. 311.
10. *Collier's Encyclopedia*, s.v., "Christmas."
11. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 132.
12. Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The Old and New Testaments* (New York: Avenel Books, 1981), p. 125.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

14. A comprehensive listing of sources using 4 B.C. as the year of Christ's birth will not be given here. It may be sufficient to note that in the old Bible Dictionary which accompanied the LDS "missionary edition" of the Bible, 4 B.C. was the year affixed to Christ's birth in the chronological tables. This issue is addressed later in the paper.

15. As cited in Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p. 109, n. 6.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 103. Elder Talmage appears to be inconsistent here, for if the Dionysian system were correct, the year of Christ's birth should be A.D. 1, not 1 B.C. as Talmage states.

17. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, pp. 131-32. Elder McConkie reiterates the 6 April 1 B.C. position in his later work, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, [1965]-73), 1:91. Yet in a still later work, he writes, "We do not believe it is possible with the present state of knowledge—including that which is known both in and out of the Church—to state with finality when the natal day of the Lord Jesus actually occurred" (Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*, 4 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979-81], 1:349-50, n. 2). While this may seem to contradict his previous statements, it is not necessarily the case that Elder McConkie has changed his mind. It is not inconsistent to believe that 6 April is Christ's birth date and at the same time believe that we do not know that for certain. Indeed, Elder McConkie appears to accept the 4-5 B.C. birth date of the Savior only as a matter of convenience in working with biblical commentaries.

Furthermore, the statement in *Mormon Doctrine* itself is indicative of the interpretive problems associated with dating events. In this work, Elder McConkie indicates the revelation D&C 20 was given on 6 April 1830, whereas the headnote to that section only indicates "April, 1830." William E. Berrett, in *The Restored Church*, 12th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1965), states that "on the date designated, April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and members of the Smith and Whitmer families, met in the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr., in Fayette, Seneca County, New York. After appropriate songs and prayer the revelations concerning the organization of the church were read to the assembled people." (P. 70.) It is conceivable that the revelation(s) could have been received earlier in the day, as a literal interpretation of McConkie would indicate, but it is more plausible to assume the revelation was given earlier in April and then carried out on 6 April 1830.

18. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, pp. 103-4. Interestingly, while Orson Pratt also used the Book of Mormon to calculate the birth date of Christ, he came up with a different result: His scriptural and historical arguments led him to place Jesus' birth date on 11 April and the Crucifixion on 6 April (Discourses by Orson Pratt, 10 April 1870 and 29 December 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. [London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854-86; reprint ed., 1967], 13:126-27; 15:254-57).

19. In referring to Book of Mormon dates the B.C. designation is here enclosed in quotation marks because it seems to refer literally to the number of years "before Christ" and not to the Dionysian system of reckoning time.

20. This analysis assumes that Zedekiah's reign began in 579 B.C., a date also accepted by the new LDS Bible Dictionary. If the year 597 B.C. is actually 600 years before the birth of Christ, Christ would be born in A.D. 4. If the year 597 B.C. is 601 years before the birth of Christ, his birth would be in A.D. 5, and so forth.

21. It is difficult to know where one would stop this line of reasoning. If we also accept Christ's birth as occurring at night, then we might be tempted to surmise that Lehi stole away from Jerusalem in the middle of the night on April 5/6.

22. J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Our Lord of the Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1954), pp. vi-vii.

23. Robert J. Matthews, "Using the New Bible Dictionary in the LDS Edition," *Ensign* 12 (July 1982): 48.

24. Hyrum M. Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants Containing the Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the Prophet, with an Introduction and Historical and Exegetical Notes* (Liverpool: George F. Richards, 1919), p. 138. This is apparently the edition referred to by J. Reuben Clark (see herein, n. 22).

25. S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, Book Review, *Brigham Young University Studies* 22 (Summer 1982): 383. Other scholars, however, have a more favorable view of Lefgren's book. The debate continues in John P. Pratt, S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, "Afterwords," *BYU Studies* 23 (Spring 1983): 252-55.

26. As cited in Roy W. Doxey, *Latter-day Prophets and the Doctrine and Covenants*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1963-65), 1:209.