

1. SHOULD WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

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Is it wrong for Christians to celebrate Christmas? Opinions are divided. Consciences differ. The debate seems to be gathering pace.

Many see no problem and enjoy the festivities, all the while claiming never to lose sight of the reason for the season. But, others are “browned off” by the crass consumerism. Many abhor the layers of mythology that over generations been added to the story --- after all, you don’t read in the Bible about Santa Claus, or his elves, or his reindeer, or his home with Mrs Santa at the North Pole.

On that score, I know a man who says that once he found out that Santa Claus was not real, he wondered whether his parents were telling him the truth about Jesus and so he suffered a crisis of belief. I understand. Centuries of myth for a lot of people means they come to the conclusion that it’s just too hard to separate the wheat from the chaff, reliable history from myth. What to do?

Many feel it’s inappropriate to celebrate Christmas in an increasingly multicultural society where other faiths might be offended by it. And let’s be honest, for many, Christmas is anything but a time for family celebration, being for them a time of loneliness, sadness, poverty, homelessness, and hunger.

Nor is this just an academic question. I know sincere Christians who are deeply exercised by the question. One lovely Christian believer told me she feels intimidated to put up Christmas lights and decorations in their family home because other Christians in their circle would not step foot in their door for fear of participating in a pagan festival.

So, is celebrating Christmas putting a Christian spin on paganism? Are we dishonouring the Jesus of the Bible?

SANCTIFYING PAGAN ORIGINS?

Most folks probably understand that the 25th December was not the real birthday of Jesus. That was the date of the Winter Solstice in the Northern Hemisphere and a day for pagan festivity in the Roman Empire.

With the increasingly widespread influence of Christianity in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, folks became uncomfortable celebrating the Unconquered Sun and felt they should be worshipping the Unconquered Son of the great Creator God instead. The culture was being progressively ‘Christianised’ by emperors and populace alike.

By the way, it’s the same for Halloween. ¹ November 1st marked the end of summer and the Celts believed the spirits of their departed dead returned to their homes on November 1st so as to visit their loved ones. Before the Gospel of Christ transformed Celtic culture, they would put on masks to ward off imposter spirits and ghosts. It’s not hard to spot how this practice lives on, judging by the masks and costumes worn by kids, even if they don’t believe they are scaring off demons.

But in A.D. 610 Pope Boniface IV decided to dedicate the festival to Christ. He moved All Saints --- or Hallows Day --- from May 13th to November 1st. All Saints Day was transformed into a Christian

¹ Those of us who are Australians have watched with increasing dismay the growing trend to “trick or treat”. It’s never been part of Aussie culture and we see it as an invasion of American culture --- with over-sized pumpkins with eyes! I hasten to add that American culture, like any culture, has positive and negative aspects.

celebration to remember all the departed faithful who had gone before and to pray that Christians might emulate that excellent example of the Faith. One would be justified in reasonably concluding this significance has virtually disappeared in today's version.

However, the Anglican [Book of Common Prayer](#) (of 1662) contains this Halloween prayer:- "And we also bless thy holy Name for all thy servants departed this life in thy faith and fear; beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow their good examples, that with them we may be partakers of thy heavenly kingdom."

A rather proper prayer, wouldn't you think? But It must be added that from the Sixteenth Century the Protestants were suspicious of anything of Roman Catholic making, and so usually abstained. (One comedian suggested that Protestants have cancelled a lot of parties over the centuries! I've also known a few Protestant party poopers!)

Thus, if we might paint in broad and general brush strokes, it's fair to ask whether two previously pagan festivals were "sanctified" by the Christian Church with the best of intentions, but that over the succeeding centuries, the festivities have increasingly reverted to their original pagan type? Has this been a harmless process or is it more sinister?

LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

Distilling it all down, the 'average' person would probably say the traditional Christmas story concerns a baby born in a stable because there was "no room in the inn", that shepherds keeping their flocks in the middle of winter were suddenly visited by angels with good news about Israel's king being born in humble circumstances, that wise men came bearing gifts to worship the baby, that the jealous King Herod tried to murder the baby, and that Joseph, Mary and the baby fled down to Egypt until the storm passed. But is it *true*?

Let's explore a bit deeper and try to peel back the superstition from fact in one part of the story as retold by Dr Luke.

"NO ROOM IN THE INN"

[Kenneth Bailey](#)² highlights that the traditional understanding of the Christmas narrative from [Luke 2: 1-18](#) contains a number of "critical flaws". He lists them as follows;

1. Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East, historical memories are long, and the extended family, with its connection to its village of origin, is important. In such a world a man like Joseph could have appeared in Bethlehem, and told people, "I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthat, the son of Levi" and most homes in town would be open to him.

By the way, did you know that the village of Bethlehem had a meagre population of around 150 people when Jesus was born there? (And Nazareth only had around 200 residents.)

2. Joseph was a "royal". That is, he was from the family of King David. The family of David was so famous in Bethlehem that local folk apparently called the town the "City of David". The official name of the village was Bethlehem. Everyone knew that the Hebrew Scriptures referred to Jerusalem as the "City of David." Yet locally, many apparently called Bethlehem the "City of David" ([Lk. 2:4](#)). Being of that famous family, Joseph would have been welcome anywhere in town.

3. In every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the

² The following summary points are from Kenneth E. Bailey's excellent book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, IVP, 2008, chapter one.

circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception? Was there no sense of honour in Bethlehem? Surely the *community* would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendent of David in the “City of David” would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.

4. Mary had relatives in a nearby village. A few months prior to the birth of Jesus, Mary had visited her cousin Elizabeth “in the hill country of Judea” and was welcomed by her. Bethlehem was located in the center of Judea. By the time, therefore, that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they were but a short distance from the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. If Joseph had failed to find shelter in Bethlehem he would naturally have turned to Zechariah and Elizabeth. But did he have time for those few extra miles?

5. Joseph had time to make adequate arrangements. Luke 2: 4 says that Joseph and Mary “went up from Galilee to Judea,” and verse 6 states, “while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered”.³ The average Christian thinks that Jesus was born the same night the holy family arrived --- hence Joseph’s haste and willingness to accept any shelter, even the shelter of a stable. Traditional Christmas pageants reinforce this idea year after year.

True. The NT does not specify how long Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem before Jesus’ birth. But given that Luke 2: 6 is adamant it was “days”, we can be sure it was long enough to find adequate lodgings. So where does this late-night imminent-birth idea that is so ingrained in our collective psyche stem from?

THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

Modern folks are unaware that the source of our popular misunderstanding can be traced to a novel written about 200 years after the birth of Jesus. Although titled *The Protoevangelium of James*, James had nothing to do with this anonymous piece of fiction. It was originally written in Greek but was translated into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Coptic and old Slavonic. We know the writer was not even Jewish because he clearly did not understand Palestinian geography or Jewish tradition. And it’s packed full of imaginative speculations.

The author had obviously read the NT Christmas Gospel narratives but then let his imagination run wild. For in the novel, as they approach Bethlehem, Mary says to Joseph, “Joseph, take me down from the ass, for the child within me presses me to come forth.”⁴

Responding to Mary’s request, Joseph leaves Mary in a cave and rushes off to Bethlehem to find a midwife. Along his hurried way, Joseph sees fanciful visions. He returns with the midwife only to find baby Jesus has already been born.

A bright light is overshadowing the cave. Suddenly, out of nowhere a woman by the name of Salome appears and the midwife announces to her that a virgin has given birth yet is still a virgin. When Salome expresses doubt at this marvellous story, her hand turns leprous.

After an examination, the claim about Mary’s virginity is vindicated. Suddenly an angel stands before Salome and instructs her to touch the baby. When she touches baby Jesus, Salome’s hand is miraculously healed --- and the novel spins on from there. A nice story spiced with lots of good imagination.

³ KJV, italics added. Some modern translations hide the fact that a number of days passed in Bethlehem before Jesus was born. The original text (along with KJV, NASB & some others) is precise.

⁴ *The Protoevangelium of James* 17:3

Now here's the point. An important aspect of the novel's storyline is that Jesus was born before his parents arrived in Bethlehem. The seeds of the popular myth were planted. And the harvest today is that most folks --- even though they have never heard of [The Protoevangelium of James](#) --- have been deeply influenced by it.

Pulling these strands together so far, we are to understand that --- Joseph was of the royal family of King David and was returning to his home village for the Roman census. Joseph was "Jewish royalty" for [Luke 2: 4](#) mentions that, **he was of the house and lineage of David**. No doubt he had any number of relatives and hospitality options open to him. Mary also had relatives a few short miles away. Besides, a Jewish village in that culture would not fail to help a young pregnant mother about to give birth.

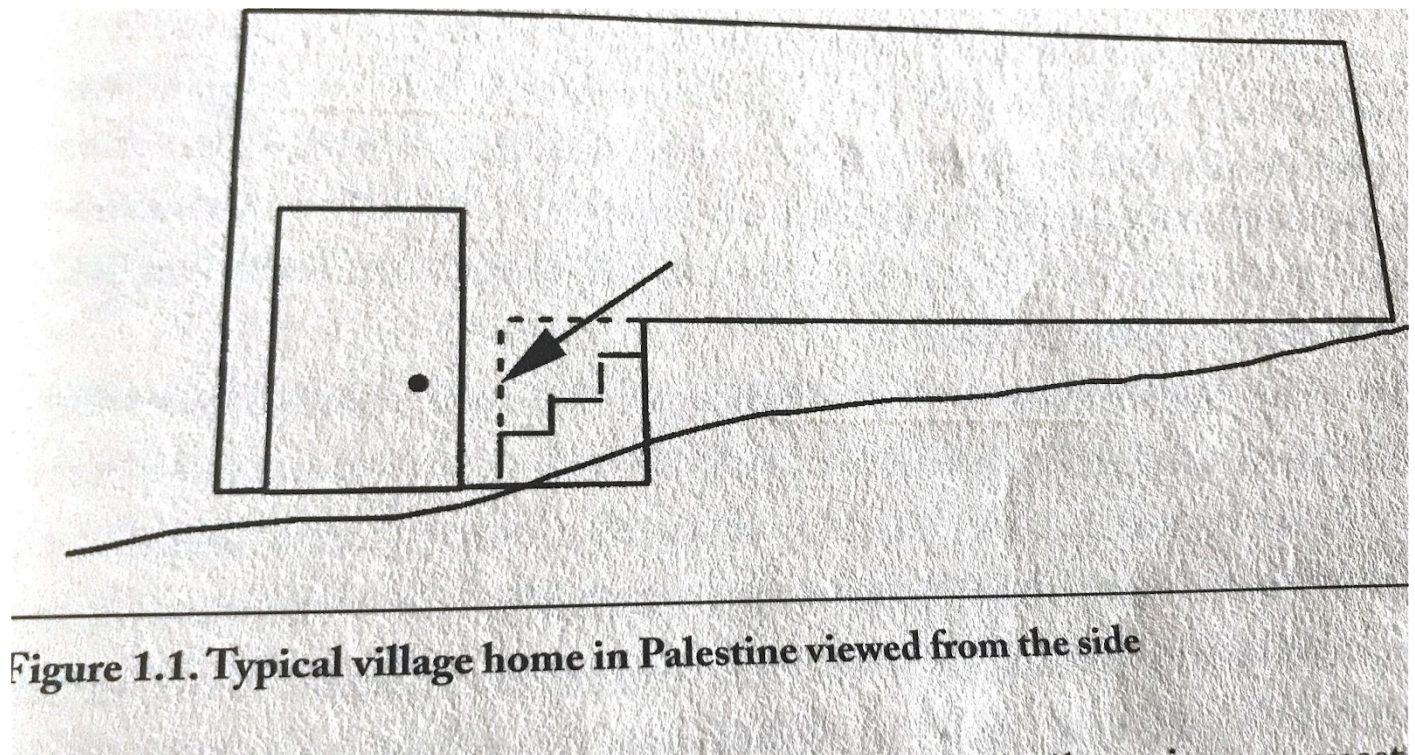
TWO KEY QUESTIONS

So, according to Luke, the couple arrived in plenty of time before the birth --- at least "days" before the birth. This brings us to two critical questions: Where was the "manger" and what was the "inn"?

In our day and culture the word "manger" elicits images of barns and stables where animals are housed separately from the family home. Back then, in traditional Middle Eastern villages this was not the case. Humble village homes usually only had two rooms. ⁵

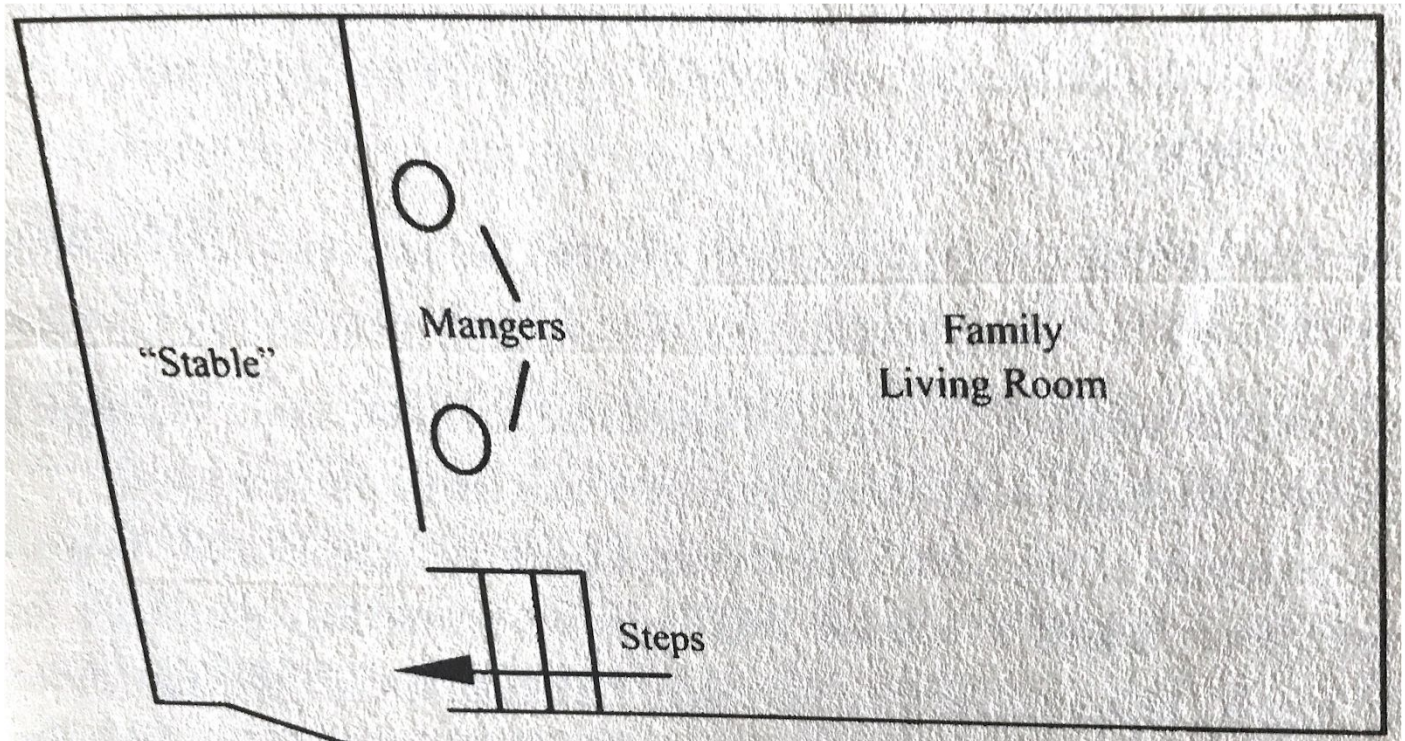
The first and main room was where the family lived, and cooked, ate and slept. Part of that room was partitioned off --- usually by a drop in the floor-level on the animals' side, or set apart by some heavy timbers as a low barrier for the animals. Every night the family cow(s), donkey(s) and a few sheep and goats would be ushered into their side of that room. The animals would be safe and added extra heating on cold winters' nights!

An outside view of the home looked like this;



⁵ All diagrams are from Kenneth Bailey, *Ibid*, pp 29,33

As you can see, there was only one common door for both people and their animals, with internal steps leading up to the family's quarters. From above, this typical Middle Eastern house looked like the following sketch --- note the "mangers" or animal feeding troughs in the Family Living Room!



Every morning the animals were let outside and the "stable" would be cleaned for the day.

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

Such simple homes existed from the time of King David and were still seen up to the middle of the Twentieth Century! You can read about one such home in a famous story in the OT. Remember when King Saul visited the house of the Witch of Endor ([1 Samuel 28](#))? As a guest in the medium's house, the woman insisted that Saul eat something. He refused. Nevertheless the woman took a fatted calf "that was in the house" ([v. 24](#)), killed it, cooked it, and gave it to the king and his attendants.

She did not have to run out into the paddocks or outside barn to fetch the calf! It was *already in the house*.

A SABBATH LOOSING

And the NT hints at this practice too. One Sabbath day in the synagogue Jesus said to a woman all bent over and twisted up, "Woman, you are loosed (untied) from your infirmity" ([v. 12](#)). After being castigated by the head of the synagogue and his cronies for healing this daughter of Abraham on the Sabbath Day, Jesus rebuked them in return,

"You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it ([Lk. 13: 15](#))?"

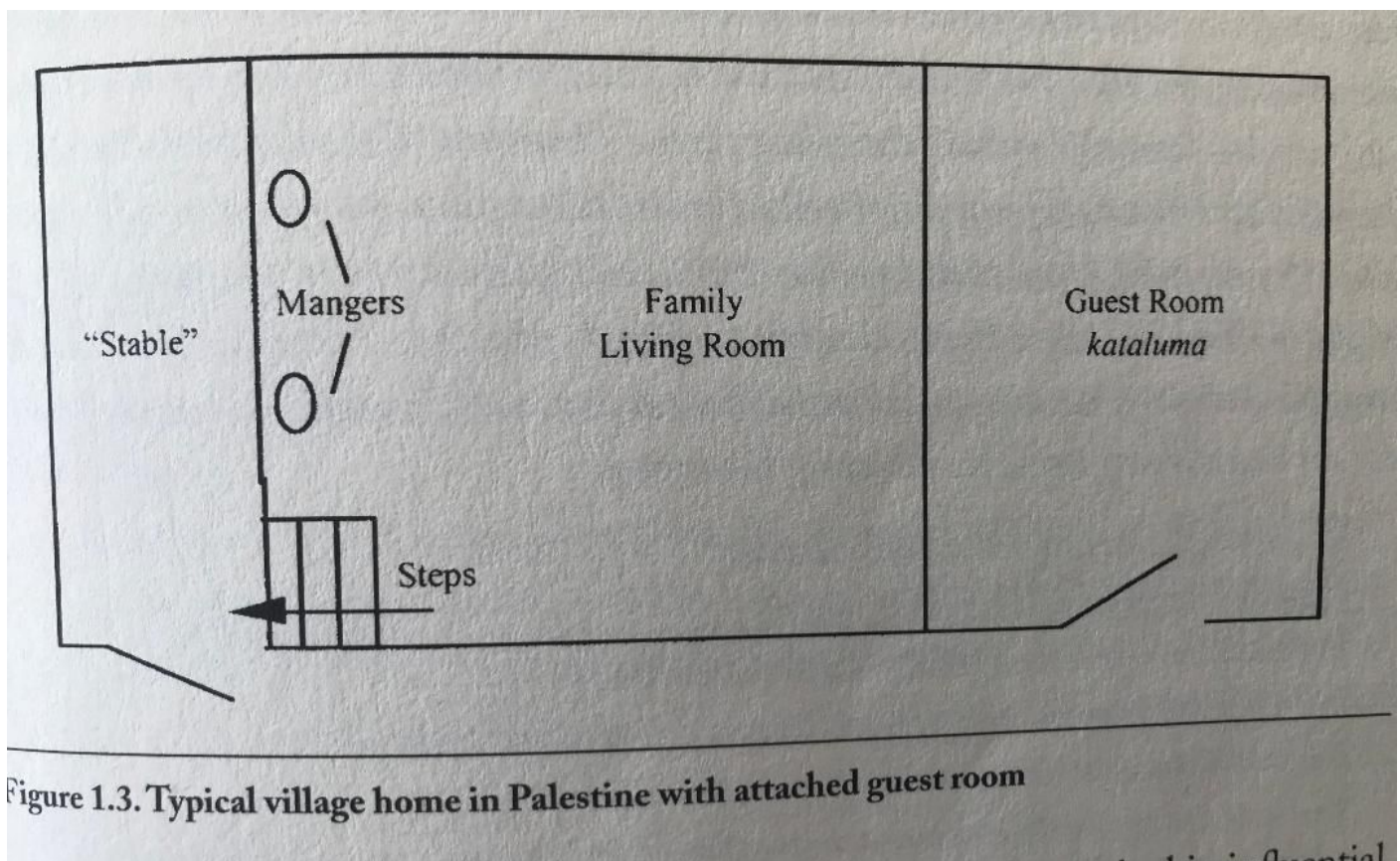
Jesus knew that each of them had already, on that very sabbath day, untied his animals and let them out of their houses. In that culture many had a "stable" and a "manger" inside the family house!

THE SECOND ROOM

Now, I mentioned that traditional Middle Eastern houses had two rooms. We've looked at the first and main family room. What was the second room? Well, it was the Guest Room. Hospitality was a big thing in that culture, and every house, no matter how humble, had a separate room for visitors.

That second guests' room was either on the same level as the house (but was completely partitioned off by a solid wall from the main family area) or was built on top of the house. Whether downstairs or upstairs, the guest room was accessed only by outside steps.

Now here is the critical piece of information we need. In the diagram below you will note the word in *italics* under the Guest Room. It's the Greek word *kataluma*. It's the word usually translated as "inn" in [Luke 2: 7](#) ;



And Mary brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn [*kataluma*].

Note. The Greek word *kataluma* is the typical word for the Guest Room in a family's house. It's not the word used for a commercial inn [*pandocheion*]. ⁶ Luke knows the difference between a private guest room and a commercial inn, as we'll now prove.

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

If you turn to the story of the Good Samaritan in [Luke 10: 25-37](#) you will recall the Samaritan put the man who had been beaten up by thugs onto his own beast and took him to an inn [*pandocheion*] (v. 34). He said to the innkeeper [*ho pandocheus*], "Take care of this man. Here are two denarii (equivalent to two day's wages) and when I come back from my journey, if I owe you any more I will pay you the remainder."

⁶ *Pandocheion* is a combination of two words *pan* = "all", and *docheo* = to receive, to take.. Literally the *Pandocheion* was a place that received and welcomed all --- that is, a commercial inn.

Luke is clear. The *pandocheion* was a commercial inn that took in travellers. And if Luke wanted us to understand that Joseph and Mary found the “No Vacancy” sign up outside every commercial inn in Bethlehem, he would have used that word for a commercial inn. He did not. He wrote there was no room in the *kataluma*. So what’s going on here?

THE LAST SUPPER

Before we answer that question, let’s add one more piece of vital information. Later in his Gospel Luke defines exactly what a *kataluma* is. In **Luke 22** Jesus tells his disciples,

Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him into the house which he enters, and tell the householder, “The Rabbi says to you, Where is the guest room [*kataluma*] where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?” And he will show you a large upper room furnished; there make ready (vs. 10-12).

Notice **the guest room [*kataluma*]** is defined as being in someone’s house. The Last Supper with Jesus’ disciples was in an upstairs Guest Room in a family’s private house. We are now in a position to answer the question ...

WHERE WAS JESUS BORN AND SHOULD WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS? To find out the surprising answer, why not take a well-earned coffee break before turning to our powerful conclusion in part two of ...

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