



Type: Journal Article

Glory to God in the Highest

Author(s): Kent P. Jackson

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 59 (2023)

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Page(s): 353–356

Abstract: What would it have been like to be among the shepherds who heard the angelic announcement of Jesus’s birth? Their story has special meaning for many of us because we feel a kinship with those shepherds through shared anonymity and shared hope and witness. By means of two favorite hymns, “Angels We Have Heard on High” and “Far, Far Away on Judea’s Plains,” Kent Jackson invites us to place ourselves in the role of those shepherds and join in singing: “Lord, with the angels we too would rejoice,” and “Come to Bethlehem and see.”

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 59 · 2023 · Pages 353 - 356

Glory to God in the Highest

Kent P. Jackson

Offprint Series

© 2023 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org.

GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST

Kent P. Jackson

Abstract: *What would it have been like to be among the shepherds who heard the angelic announcement of Jesus's birth? Their story has special meaning for many of us because we feel a kinship with those shepherds through shared anonymity and shared hope and witness. By means of two favorite hymns, "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains," Kent Jackson invites us to place ourselves in the role of those shepherds and join in singing: "Lord, with the angels we too would rejoice," and "Come to Bethlehem and see."*

My two favorite Christmas hymns are "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains." They have much in common, because both focus on the experience of the shepherds who heard the glorious announcement of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Luke tells us that an angel appeared to the shepherds, announced the holy birth, and told them where they could find the child and how they would recognize him. Then Luke writes, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:13–14).

Both "Angels We Have Heard on High" and "Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains" include those angelic words in their choruses. In our hymnbook the chorus of "Angels We Have Heard on High" is unique because it is the only phrase we sing in sacrament meeting in Latin, the language of the medieval Catholic Church: "*Gloria in excelsis deo*," which means, simply, "Glory to God in the highest." It is also unique in that we stretch the word *gloria* over four bars and eighteen notes, emphasizing our praise for the wonderful Christmas miracle.

Matthew's Christmas story introduces us to some upper-tier members of society. The magi, "wise men from the east" (Matthew 2:1),

were people who had education. They also had the financial resources to travel far and bring expensive gifts. They were looking for a king, and they ended up in the palace of King Herod in their quest to find him. Then Herod himself wanted to find the new king as well. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus traces his lineage through the royal line of Judah, connecting Jesus with most of the prominent and privileged people mentioned in the Old Testament.

Luke's account of the nativity focuses on common people. Jesus is born in a barn among animals to a poor couple far from home. Luke traces Jesus's genealogy through people who are otherwise unknown, and Jesus's birth is announced not to those of high standing in society but to the humblest and least regarded of common laboring folk — shepherds. We sometimes romanticize shepherds in the Bible, but shepherding is anything but romantic. Shepherds worked long hours, often alone, and the work was smelly and dirty. Many shepherds didn't own the sheep they watched but were working for others who were relaxing in their warm homes while the shepherds were shivering with the flocks.

The story of the shepherds in Luke's account of Jesus's birth resonates with many of us because we, too, consider ourselves one with people like those. My mother told me from time to time that she was there singing in that heavenly chorus when Jesus was born. Would that we all were so blessed!

"Far, Far Away on Judea's Plains" is likewise unique in a very important way. All our other Christmas hymns are either of traditional European origin or were composed by American Protestants. But "Far, Far Away" is special. It is a Latter-day Saint hymn. It was written by a Church member named John Macfarlane of the little pioneer settlement in St. George, Utah, in 1869 for a ward Christmas celebration. His family reported that he woke up in the middle of the night with its words and music in his mind and immediately wrote them down. This hymn is ours, and mainstream Christians have not yet discovered it. (On YouTube there are recordings of it by Anabaptist and Mennonite choirs, by choirs of the Church of South India, by immigrant congregations in North America, by a choir as part of a Filipino Catholic mass, and by a bluegrass band!) I hope many more Christians will discover this song because it is a wonderful, energetic hymn of praise and celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world.



Figure 1. On the wall of the Orthodox Church of the Shepherds near Bethlehem is this modern image of the angel and the shepherds, with the inscription, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14 ESV).

My wife and I lived in Judea four different times, in three different neighborhoods of Jerusalem. In addition, one summer I lived on a hill overlooking Bethlehem. Let me assure you: there are no plains in Judea; it is very hilly country. Shepherds watch their flocks by night on rocky hillsides, something of which Brother Macfarlane and the unknown translator from the original French of “Angels We Have Heard on High” were not aware. But those songs, despite their topographical imperfections, are perfect gems. They resonate with my heart because their common message is focused on words that belong to all of us: “Come to Bethlehem and see,” and “Lord, with the angels we too would rejoice.”

I want to join in that chorus, to give thanks to our Savior and praises to our Heavenly Father. Indeed, “*Gloria in excelsis deo*,” “Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, good will to men!”

Kent P. Jackson retired in June 2017 as a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, where he had taught since 1980. He has a BA in Ancient Studies from BYU and MA and PhD degrees in Near Eastern studies from the University of Michigan. His research interests include the Near East and the intersection of the Latter-day Saint faith and the Bible. He has authored or edited *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible*; *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible*; and *A Bible Reader's History of the Ancient World*. Jackson is a former associate dean of religion and former associate director of the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.