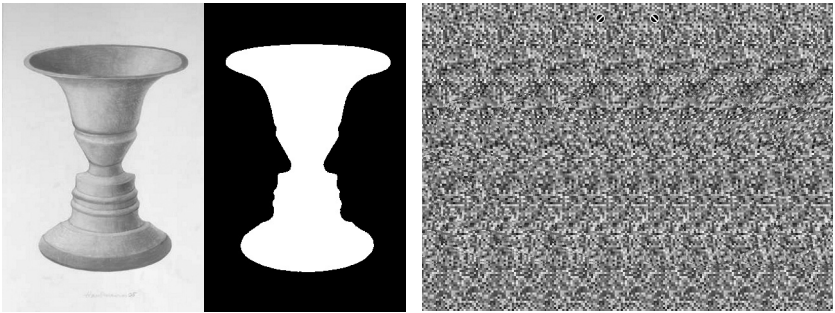


## 1

## SEEING CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Years ago, I saw a picture that can be seen as either a vase or two faces looking at each other. Later, 3-D images became popular.



2-D Rubin's goblet-profile<sup>1</sup>

3-D Teapot © Hidetomo Katsura

Although a 3-D picture doesn't change, where you *focus* your eyes determines what you *see*. Some people only see a strange pattern while others see a 3-D image. What you *see* determines how you *feel* and how you respond. Some people *love* these pictures because they can see a 3-D image. Others *hate* them because they have tried many times but have not been able to see a 3-D image. After a 30 second "eye exam," I have helped over 100 of these people see a 3-D image within about five minutes. I enjoy seeing how their feelings change from frustration to excitement when they see it the first time.

<sup>1</sup> "Rubin's Goblet-Profile" (*Stereogram*, Candace Books: 1994, p. 15) is a 3-D version of the vase-face illusion.

Epictetus, a Greek philosopher said, “We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens to us” (Katie, viii). People are disturbed not by looking at a 3-D picture like the one above but by their thoughts about it (e.g., why can’t I see a 3-D image like everyone else?).

Some people are disturbed not by the *Christus* statue but by their thoughts about it. They see a “graven image” expressly forbidden by the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:4). Other people see a reminder of the glory and love of the Savior, but they do not worship the statue.



Likewise, some people are disturbed not by Christmas traditions but by their thoughts about the traditions. They feel “Xmas” takes Christ out of Christmas and that “holiday” has lost the meaning of “holy day.” They are offended to hear “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas” in stores. They see commercialism, pagan traditions, Christmas trees and decorations, Santa Claus, elves, and reindeer.



One college professor gives an annual “anti-Claus” lecture because he feels Santa hides the real meaning of Christmas. He says, “Santa Claus has become the central figure in the commercialization of Christmas,” parents lie

when they say Santa is real, and “the letters of Santa can be rearranged to spell Satan” (Speckman).

Other people see Christmas traditions as pagan practices. Early Christians began celebrating Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> when the pagan sun god was worshipped. During that pagan festival, people decked the halls with holly and evergreen wreaths, exchanged gifts, and had lavish feasts. Some early Americans were disturbed by these pagan traditions. “To the New England Puritans, Christmas was sacred. The pilgrims’ second governor, William Bradford, wrote that he tried hard to stamp out ‘pagan mockery’ of the observance, penalizing any frivolity. The influential Oliver Cromwell preached against ‘the heathen traditions’ of Christmas carols, decorated trees, and any joyful expression that desecrated ‘that sacred event’ ” (<http://www.history.com>; search for *Cromwell Christmas tree*).



*Stone pillars at Gezer* © Todd Bolen

Long before Moses, pagans set up stone pillars to honor their gods or remember important events. However, God told Joshua to set up twelve stones to help future Israelites remember that God cut off the waters of the river Jordan so Joshua and their fathers could cross on dry ground into the promised land (Josh. 4). Likewise,

Jacob set up a stone after his dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:18–28), Moses set up twelve stone pillars after receiving the Ten Commandments (Ex. 24:2–4), and Joshua set up a stone after renewing the covenant at Shechem (Josh. 24:27). Ironically, the Lord and his prophets used this pagan practice to help future generations remember what God did. However, the Lord hated stone pillars used for idol worship (Deut. 16:22; 12:3).



*Moses and the Brass Serpent* by Judith Mehr © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

When the Israelites were bitten by poisonous serpents, the Lord commanded Moses to lift up a brass serpent on a pole to heal people who looked at it. This was a type or prophecy of the Messiah, who would be lifted up that all who looked on him with faith might have eternal life (Hel. 8:13–15). Centuries later, “the brasen serpent that Moses had made” was destroyed because the people worshipped it instead of God (2 Kgs. 18:4).

Some people are disturbed by the pagan origins of Christmas and Easter. “But it seems that the critical thing is not what their origins are, but whether we are worshipping the one true God. ... [Do] these holidays glorify God like the standing stones by the Jordan did ... [by being] a continual reminder of the wonderful thing God has done by sending the promised Messiah” (Tverberg 2004a)?

Clearly it is possible to look at Christmas traditions without seeing Christ and be disturbed. However, it is also possible to change our focus so we can see Christ in *Christmas* traditions even if others do not.

Parables and temple teachings use obvious words and symbols both to reveal and to conceal messages. Parables are short stories that *link* an ordinary object (e.g., a mustard seed) or event (e.g., the lost sheep) with a spiritual truth. Often the disciples had to ask Jesus for the meaning of a parable. From then on, the familiar story or object reminded disciples of the new meaning now linked to it. If we *link* Christ-related meanings to familiar Christmas traditions, they will help us “always remember” Christ (D&C 20:79). Humor, Exaggeration, and Action strengthen the Links and HEAL our memory. Thus, even fantasy can become a mnemonic to help us remember what we link to it.

On the following pages are some memory links that can help us remember or see Christ in Christmas traditions.

## **Xmas**

The Greek word for Christ is *Χριστος*, or *christos*. The first letter is “chi.” In an ancient Greek New Testament manuscript<sup>2</sup> written in all capital letters, Christ (*ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ*) was abbreviated as *ΧΣ*, *ΧΝ*, *ΧΥ*, *ΧΕ*, or *ΧΩ*. The first letter, “chi,” represented Christ, and the second letter was the last letter of the word, which indicated how the word *Christ* was used in the sentence (e.g., subject, object, indirect object). About AD 315, Constantine used the first two letters, *ΧΡ* (chi-rho), as a symbol on his flag.



In the 1500s, typesetting was done by hand. To save costs, the church used *X* (chi) for “Christ.” *Xmas*, *Xian* and *Xianity* became common abbreviations. Similarly, in our time, using a phone to type a text message is tedious and has resulted in many abbreviations like *BRB* (be right back) and *BTW* (by the way). Pronouncing *Xmas* as “chi-mas” or *Christmas* will help us see Christ in *Xmas*.

## **Santa Claus**

Santa reminds some people of Satan and others of the Christlike Saint Nicholas who loved children and used his inheritance to help the needy. Others focus on interesting similarities between Santa and Christ. The following is a list of some of these similarities.



<sup>2</sup> See Matt. 26:68; Eph. 1:1; 3:17, and 4:15 in Vercellone, *Biblionum Sacrorum Graecus Codex Vaticanus*. Note: Each abbreviation has a line over the two letters. In the old script *ΧΣ* and *ΧΩ* were written as *XC* and *XΩ* respectively. Other similar abbreviations were used for Jesus (*IY*), Lord (*KY*), and God (*ΘY*) as seen in Eph.1:1–2.