

Was Jesus Born on Christmas Day?

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Introduction

The traditional date of Jesus Birth by the Roman Catholic Church was Friday, December 25th, 1 AD. However, modern teachers and others have argued that Jesus was born during a different season and that the traditional date merely reflects an old pagan winter solstice holiday, which was replaced by Christmas. However careful research of the information found in the Bible, the Talmud and historical records indicates that Jesus was born on or about December 25th, and close to 1 B.C.

It is important to note that there is no such thing as year Zero. Thus 1 BC is immediately followed by 1 AD. This paper proposes that Jesus was born December 25th, 2 BC, he would have been circumcised and given his name on January 1st 1 BC and the following year (1 AD) he would have been 1 year old.

As to the year, modern scholars now argue that Herod died in 4 B.C. or earlier and therefore Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 6 B.C. since we know from the biblical account that Jesus was born shortly before Herod's death. However, it can be shown that there is strong evidence that Herod died in winter, 1 B.C. and that Jesus was born less than 40 days before Herod's death.

The Year of Jesus Birth:

Matthew 2:16-20 indicates that Jesus was born within two years of the death of Herod. So determining the year and season of Herod's death will point to the year of the Savior's birth.

The first century historian Josephus mentions that an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before Herod died (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 6, 4, 167). Josephus also says that Herod died 37 years after being declared king by the Romans (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 8, 1, 191) and that he died in Jericho just before Passover (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 8, 1 – compare 17, 9, 3). Even though Herod was not in Jerusalem for the final days of his life, he was still a threat to the child. Herod spent his final days executing people and giving orders for the execution of Jewish leaders upon his death.

The Jewish Passover always occurs on a full moon around Spring Equinox in Either March or April. Lunar Eclipses also happen on a full moon. But when did a lunar eclipse happen that was visible in Judea? Using modern Astronomical software programs, two lunar eclipses are shown to be likely candidates:

There was a partial lunar eclipse on the morning of March 13, 4 B.C. Passover that year would be the following month. We must consider however that Josephus only records one lunar eclipse in all his writings and no solar eclipses. It is not likely; therefore that such a unique reference is to this partial eclipse. Additionally the events he records for the final days of Herod's life would seem to require more than one month's time (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 6, 4ff).

The other lunar eclipse was on January 9, 1 B.C. and was a full lunar eclipse starting at 10:38 pm with the shadow being fully eclipsed at 11:34 pm and the moon

being fully eclipsed at 12:24, the end of the eclipse happened at 2:15 am and the shadow was un-eclipsed at 3:07. Passover this year would be three months later, in Early April. This would allow enough time for the final events of Herod's life. [We know that Herod was at Jericho for the lunar eclipse. He then traveled across the Jordan seeking relief from his terminal illness and then back to Jericho before his death (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 6, 5)].

Unfortunately, computer programs cannot tell us if either of these eclipses happened on an overcast night. However the longer lasting eclipse in 1 B.C. is obviously more significant since it was a full eclipse, happened at a time when several people would be awake to view it and it lasted longer, thus garnering more attention.

From this information we have a likely date of between January 9th 1 B.C. and late March or early April of the same year for the death of Herod. Having ascertained the time (season) of Herod's death, it is now important to determine how long before Herod's death that Jesus was born.

The Day of Jesus Birth

We know that Herod was in Jerusalem before the lunar eclipse and in Jericho during the lunar eclipse and apparently did not return to Jerusalem (Josephus, Antiquities, 17, 6, 3). Thus the arrival of the Magi to Herod in Jerusalem, and therefore the birth of Jesus, must have been before the lunar eclipse on January 9th.

From the scriptures, we know that Jewish women were required to have 40 days of purification after giving birth to a male child after which they would present their son in the temple (Lev. 12:26). After Mary's 40 days of purification they brought Jesus to the temple, and offered the sacrifices required in the Scriptures (Luke 2:22ff). After this they relocated back to Nazareth (Luke 2:39). It may be possible that the flight to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-23) did not commence until after the presentation in the temple, thus leaving a time gap between verse 38 and verse 39. However, due to the big attention Jesus got at his dedication (Luke 2:25-38), it seems obvious that Herod was already dead otherwise he might have caught wind of it. This places the flight to Egypt and back (Matt 2:16) in the first 40 days of Jesus' life. Some would argue that the distance to Egypt and back was too far to travel in just 40 days with a newborn, but we must keep in mind that at the time (as also today), the Sinai Peninsula may have been considered to be part of Egypt or at least out of Herod's reach. Regardless, the coastal route to Egypt is short enough to make a round trip to the Nile region in this short time.

Matthew's account states that Herod killed all the male children from 2 years and under and thus many believe that Jesus may have been born as much as 2 years before the death of Herod. However, this is probably not the case as shown by the argument about the purification law above. It is also unlikely that Joseph would spend two years in Bethlehem for a census or that the testimony of the shepherds and of those of Anna and Simeon (Luke 2:25ff) would go unnoticed by Herod's administration.

In other words the Magi didn't arrive when Jesus was almost two years old, but rather arrived right at the time of his birth. Apparently the star had appeared long before Jesus birth. The star probably appeared in time for the Magi to travel the great distance and yet arrive right at Jesus' birth. The fact that Jesus was in a house when the Magi arrived is not significant, since the family probably didn't stay in the manger for very many nights!

Herod, who was paranoid and known for killing off his own family members, was simply being extra careful in his attempt to wipe out a perceived competitor to his throne – Jesus, born King of the Jews. In fact Herod had his own son killed only 5 days before his own death. Actually Herod's attempt to kill Jesus may have had more to do with Herod's attempt to make sure that the person he appointed would get the throne upon his death. Herod was facing sure death due to severe intestinal disease.

Luke 2:41 shows that the family went to the Passover every year in Jerusalem. If Herod lived till Jesus was almost two, he would have had at least 4 and perhaps as many 7 opportunities to kill Jesus because all the males were required by the Lord to appear in Jerusalem 3 times a year, in addition to Jesus' 40 day old dedication. Thus, Jesus was still a newborn when Herod died

Since Herod died after a lunar eclipse but before Passover and not more than 38 days after Jesus was born (40 days minus the time to return from Egypt and the actual 40th day of dedication, hence probably more like 20 days), we should be able to make a reasonable guess as to the date of the Savior's birth. A total lunar eclipse happened in Jan 9, 1BC. Thus the earliest Jesus could have been born was December 2nd, 2 BC. The latest he could have been born was several days before January 9th, 1 BC, because Herod was not in Jerusalem after this date. In Matthew 1:25, Joseph names Jesus, which normally happens on the day of circumcision – on the eighth day. If the next verses of the text happen after the circumcision, then the earliest Jesus could have been born was December 9th, 2 BC.

{However if Herod died in 4 BC, then his death occurred between the partial lunar eclipse on March 13th and the Passover which occurred a month later on about April 11, 4BC - This would place Jesus birth between about February 5 and March 12th, 4 BC.}

Here is a hypothetical timeline:

- Jesus was born Dec 25, 2BC
- He was circumcised according to the scriptures on Jan 1, 1BC
- The family fled to Egypt
- The total lunar eclipse happened on Jan 9th
- Herod died around Jan 24th, 30 days after Jesus birth.
- Jesus and family returned from Egypt and dedicated him in Jerusalem on Feb 2, 40 days after he was born.
- The family then returned to celebrate the Passover about 2 months later when Jesus was about 3-4 months old and every year there after.

At any rate the extremes of Jesus birth date are from December 2nd to March 12th whether Harod died in 4 BC or 1 BC.

The Shepherds and the Pasturing of the Sheep

The argument that the shepherds would not be watching their flocks at night near Bethlehem during winter is simply not valid. First of all, these were not automatically Bedouin shepherds who migrated with the seasons and secondly, it can still be warm enough on Dec 25th to have grass in the area, especially due to the late fall/ early winter rains. (However this argument does get much stronger as we move later into winter, thus helping to rule out the 4 BC theory). I personally have witnessed enough grass in the area of Jerusalem (which is next to Bethlehem and at the same elevation) during

Christmas time for pasturing sheep.

Additionally the family's seeking shelter in the manger indicates that the weather was cold – at least at night, and thus a wintertime birth.

Luke 1:5 “course of Abijah”

In Josephus (Wars 6, 4, 5) and in the Talmud (M. Arakhin 11b) it can be calculated that the 5th of August 70 AD was the time of the destruction of the temple. The Mishna also shows that the 1st course of the Levites was just entering their service on the date the first temple was destroyed (the second temple was destroyed on the same day): "R. Jose said, 'Good things are brought about on a good day, and evil ones on a bad one. It is said, the day on which the first Temple was destroyed was the ninth of Ab, and it was at the going out of the Sabbath, and at the end of the seventh year. The [priestly] guard was that of Jehoiarib... The same happened the second time...'" (M. Arakhin 11b). It is, however, unclear from this text if the same course was serving at the destruction of the second temple, even though the destruction was on the same day (the ninth of AV).

The course of Abijah was the 8th course. There were 24 courses and each would serve twice a year for a week (Josephus Antiquities, 7, 14, 7 and 1 Chronicles 24:1-19). IF the first course was serving at the destruction of the second temple (Aug 5, 70AD), then, this could place the course of Abijah at the temple around September/ early October or in April. Elizabeth got pregnant when Zacharias returned home after serving in this course at the temple. In Elizabeth's sixth month Mary conceives and 9 months later Jesus is born. All of the above gives us about 15 months from about September / early October or April. (The exact date would vary by up to 30 days a year due to the use of the lunar calendar. Additionally one must consider the vagueness of the pregnancy “months”.) Since only the September service would fit with the necessity of Jesus being born between December and April, it is likely that this course was serving its September to early October week. Being unsure of the exact times, we can however locate a date for Jesus' birth, based on this evidence, between December 15 and January 15. By this evidence, the year 4 BC seems less likely. A Dec. 25, 2 BC date is very viable. This subject deserves more study, because I believe the actual week of service could be determined with careful calculations. Yet, because Elizabeth's “6th month” is not an exact amount of time, nor do pregnancies always last exactly nine months, the argument from the ‘course of Abijah can only serve to point towards the season and not the exact time of the Savior's birth.

Problem of Luke 2:24

"and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'" (Luke 2:24). This verse refers to Leviticus 12:6-8. The problem is that only the poor were to offer 2 birds, whereas anyone else was to offer a lamb and one bird. Jesus' family was likely poor, but after the Magi had visited, they had treasures of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. They could have easily afforded a lamb. However, if they had fled to Egypt and returned between the visit of the Magi and the temple sacrifices that were to be made on the 40th day, they may have spent much of the treasures paying for their travels and traveling expenses.

Church Traditional Dating:

The earliest mention of December 25th as Jesus' birthday is by Clement of Alexandria (c.155-220) who mentions several dates given by others, but doesn't actually give his view (Clement, Stromata book 1, xxi). The Roman church officially accepted Friday, December 25, 1 AD in 440 AD. This comes from the Calendar of Furius Dionysius Filocalus (or Philocalus, AD 354). (Jones, p 222).

Conclusion

December 25th 2 B.C. is a very likely date of Jesus birth. It very possible that his birth occurred a few days before or after and indeed there are three Christmas dates that conflict by a few days. The Orthodox Church celebrates January 7th and the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates January 6th. Both of these dates are reasonable since Herod was probably in Jerusalem until January 9th.

Coincidentally, Christmas day 2 BC would overlap with the Hanukah festival of that year – the Jewish Feast of Lights (feast of dedication). Also, December 2 BC is in the Jewish Year 3760. Coincidentally the Hebrew numerical value of Jesus name is 376. But of course doctrines and historical research cannot be based on coincidences.

Please see Appendix A below for lists of what we do know and what we don't know as to the historical record.

Links:

More on the date of Jesus' birth - <http://www.ewtn.com/library/scriptur/chrdat.txt>

Bibliography

Jones, Floyd Nolen Chronology of the Old Testament - A Return to the Basics 14th edition 1999.

Josephus *The Antiquities of the Jews*, and *Against Apion* contained in *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition, Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* translated by William Whiston, Hendrickson Publishers 1987

NKJV *The Holy Bible New King James Version*, Thomas Nelson, Inc copyright 1982

Appendix A

What we do know:

- Jesus was born before Herod died. (up to 2 years before).
- Herod died shortly before Passover in 4 BC or 1 BC.
- The Magi arrived when Herod was still in Jerusalem and Jesus was still in Bethlehem.
- Jesus and family fled to Egypt until Herod's death.
- Herod died in Jericho.
- Jesus was in Jerusalem when he was 40 days old.
- The flight to Egypt either happened before his 40 day dedication or after, but not during.

- Jesus started his ministry when he was about 30 years old. Therefore about 26 A.D. or 29 A.D.

What we don't know for sure:

- How long the family stayed in Egypt.
- Whether the Magi came before or after Jesus' 40 day dedication.
- Whether Herod died after the lunar eclipse of 4 BC or 1 BC.
- The exact time Elizabeth got pregnant.
- The exact time Mary conceived.
- If Jesus' really had a three year ministry or just over a year. This is important when trying to figure out which Passover he died at.
- How long before Jesus' ministry did John the Baptist start preaching.
- Jesus' family went up to Jerusalem yearly, but did this include the first two years of his life?