

What Year Was Jesus Born?

When we are children in school, history would have been -- (could have been) -- a most dramatic and exciting story -- *except* for the dates we had to memorize. I never could remember the date events took place very well. But, sometimes it is extremely important to know *when* something occurred; it may make all the difference in the world. Though there is no way to prove it, I have the conviction that most of the great turning points of history could have happened *at no other time* than that in which they took place. There always seemed to be a converging of forces, of peoples, of ideas, even of climate changes that made the great important things happen when they did.

In the case of our story of the birth of Christ it turns out that it is of utmost importance to know exactly *when* it happened. Both of the chroniclers of the events -- Matthew and Luke - dated their documents according to the practice of the times, by the reigning kings and governors. More importantly, Paul, writing by inspiration, says, "*That in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman...*" The idiom "*fullness of time*" means at the exact predestined moment. In God's foreordained scheme of things the birth took place precisely on schedule.

The Record Made

At the time of the birth of Jesus there was a record made in Bethlehem, because that was the custom. There was also a record made in Jerusalem when the Baby was forty days old. On that day the Child had to be presented in the Temple, and the offerings made for the cleansing of the mother, and for the Child, because He as a first-born male (See Luke 2:23-24 & Leviticus 12:2-8). At that time the genealogies of both Mary and Joseph were found in the library of the Temple, and the new name was added to the scroll. Matthew records Joseph's line from David, and Luke records Mary's line from David. In Matthew, because the author is writing the story of the Great King, the line is traced back to King David and to Abraham. There is a specific difference made in the record of this birth. Of all Joseph's progenitors it says, "*begat,*" but of the Lord Jesus it is very exact in noting that Joseph was not the "*begetter,*" but was only "*the husband of Mary of whom was born Jesus*" (Matthew 1:16).

Luke's beautiful account of the birth of Jesus makes the same distinction. Because Luke writes the story of the Perfect "Man," the genealogy is traced all the way back to Adam, the first man. But when Luke comes to this birth, he says, "*Jesus...who was 'legally reckoned' the son of Joseph*" (Luke 3:23). That is what the words "*as was supposed*" mean in the context.

The Records Destroyed

Just 70 years after the Birth, the armies of Rome under Titus Vespasianus destroyed Jerusalem, and the Temple was burned with all its records. The only genealogies saved were these that have been preserved in the Gospels.

Jerusalem became a non-Jewish city following this holocaust and was destroyed again in 132 A.D. to end another rebellion. To Rome, both Jew and Christian were problems to be severely dealt with. No one was concerned with determining the date of

birth of the Jewish Messiah that had been rejected by His own people, and executed by the Romans.

Dionysius Exiguus

It was 543 A.D. by our calendar that the most famous of all the emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire, Flavius Anicus Justinus, surnamed "*The Great*," commissioned the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus to fix the date of the Great Event on the Roman calendar. Five and one-half centuries is half a millennium and a long time on any calendar. For us, it would be a period back to before the time of Columbus. To make the calculation, Exiguus had to work with some of the worst calendars of western civilization. The old Roman calendars were far from being synchronized with solar year and had to be continually altered and adjusted. Whole months, called "*intercalary months*," were added at times. Occasionally days and weeks were omitted. The names of the months were changed, and, moreover, the emperors liked to have everything dated from their own ascendancy to the throne.

Exiguus labored long and well, apparently alone. After innumerable and painstaking calculations he concluded that Christ's birth, the date from which all future dates would be computed in the now-Christianized West, occurred 753 years before the founding of Rome by Romulus. To the Jews this was 3,760 years after the creation of Adam. To the Greeks this corresponded to the year of the 194th Olympiad. We think of it as the Year-Zero, but there is no such year. 1 B.C. stands the same as 1 A.D. with no room to turn around in. This accounts for one year of Exiguus' error. Christ could not have been born in year One *before* Christ or year One *after* Christ; there must be a year between as the year of the birth. Apparently Exiguus overlooked this small detail. Also, history tells us that he also omitted a period of about 4 ½ years during which one of the emperors ruled as a regent during his father's lifetime.

In spite of the poor records with which he was forced to work, we now know that Exiguus came within six years of the actual year, and that is astonishingly close. The immediate result of this error was to obscure, for another 15 centuries the facts about the astronomical event that sent the Magi to Palestine. Nevertheless, mankind owes a great debt to Dionysius Exiguus, accomplished, mathematical and astronomer, for if he had not give an approximate date, it would have been a much harder task to determine an accurate date later.

Between Matthew and Luke

That the actual date is important is apparent from the records of Public Accountant Levi and Doctor Luke; both dated their accounts. The Public Accountant Levi was Matthew who gave up the tax service of Rome to become an Apostle. He dated his account with reference to the reigning king as did all historians.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the DAYS OF HEROD THE KING . . ." (Matthew 2:1).

We now know that Herod died in the year we call 4 B.C., so Jesus' birth had to be before 4 B.C., while Herod was still alive. Dr. Luke, in his account, also gives us a date.

"This enrolling was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria" (Luke 2:2).

This was in 8 B.C., so the Birth had to be after 8 B.C. and before 4 B.C. Approximately dates and a reasonably close estimate of the precise time.

I realize that the date of December 25th was chosen because that was the date on which the pagans celebrated what was called, "*Dies Invictus Natalis*" -- meaning, "*Birthday of the Unconquered*," because on that date it became apparent that the sun that had been retreating ever southward had reversed its course. It was reborn; there would be another spring, another year! It seemed to the emperor that the title "*Dies Invictus Natalis*" was a fine title for the Lord Jesus. He was right! The problem was that a pagan festival date and Christianity became merged in this celebration.

There are those who argue long and hard that Luke mentions that "*The shepherds were abiding in the fields...*" -- and that sheep were not out on the fields during winter months. The argument is that it would have been too rainy and cold for them to be "*out in the fields by night.*" Perhaps they are right!

However, I am told that the climate in Israel is very much like that of Southern California. And, as I grew up in Southern California (San Diego), I am familiar with the climate there. I can remember some Christmas' when mother would set up a long table out on our front lawn and our family, and sometimes relatives, would have our Christmas dinner.

I know we celebrate the fact of Christ's birth and that the exact day may not be that important, however, there is a prophecy in Haggai that I can't help but wonder if it doesn't give us the date of Jesus' birthday. Can't God use the actions, even customs, of the pagan, to fulfill His promises?

Haggai 2 gives a promise of God of a "*surpassing blessing*," the date of its commencement being stress 3 times - "*the 24th day of the ninth month.*" The promise was unfulfilled by the time of Judas Maccabeus, so to ensure that the prophecy would not go by default, he chose this date to rededicate the Temple, after it had been defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes.

History records that this occasion was "*celebrated with great rejoicing and festivity, lamps being lit and singing and dancing taking place in the streets.*" This is the *Feast of the Dedication* referred to in John 10:22, that Jesus attended and which is stated to have been "*in the winter.*" The ninth month is also shown to be "*in winter*" in Jeremiah 36:22.

The occasion is still celebrated by the Jews of our time with an 8-day festival beginning on the 24th of Kislev. It is called Hanukkah, or "*The Festival of Lights.*"

After the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Jews were scrupulous to avoid any suggestion of paganism. Judas Maccabeus was the champion of Jehovah against Grecian paganism. Any festival inaugurated under his auspices was beyond suspicion.

Since Jesus Himself celebrated this festival, it must have had divine approval.

Judas Maccabeus ruled from about 166 to 160 B.C. The promise of the "*great blessing*" had not been fulfilled by then; and, in view of the tragic history of the Jews since that date, it is evident the Dedication was not the *true* fulfillment of the prophecy. We have to look elsewhere for the fulfillment - or accept that the promise was not honored.

The 9th month in the Jewish calendar is Kislev, corresponding roughly with December. The Jewish calendar varies with the moon. As a result, Kislev varies from a week or two earlier to a week or two later than December, the average occurrence of “*the 24th day of the ninth month, Kislev,*” corresponding with the 24th of December – *Christmas Eve!*

That the date corresponds with Christmas Eve, that it was in the winter, and that Jesus honored this time of festivity by attending the celebration at Jerusalem, this Promise to Haggai must have been the promise of Native

The Morning Star

Not that it is terribly important but I believe that the Christ-child was born in the early morning, just before daybreak while the double morning star was shining, the same star that the Wise Men were watching from their tower 500 miles eastward in Sippar. The shepherds’ cave had to be on the east side of the hill where Bethlehem sits – the shepherds’ fields are east of town. In that case the cave opened toward the east and looked out toward the Judean wilderness and the morning sky. I think Mary also was watching that star through the hour of travail, because Zacharias had called her Baby-to-be, “*The Day Star.*”

Later, the Scriptures, three more times, refer to the Lord as the “*Bright and Morning Star.*” Christ’s first coming was as silent and beautiful as the morning star. Only those who were watching for Him knew He had arrived.

‘How silently, how silently, the Wondrous Gift is given.’

The rest of the world slept on undisturbed.

When Christ returns to earth again, it will be as the “*Sun of Righteousness,*” as visible and inescapable as sunrise.