

## Was Jesus born on December 25th?

Mark A. Dumdei, Plano, TX 75024 mdplans@msn.com 972-979-6503

Jesus was born during the reign of king Herod of Judea. *Matthew* 2:1 and *Luke* 1:5. The king ordered his men to kill every young boy under the age of 2 who was living around Bethlehem. *Matthew* 2:16. When was Herod king?

- The battle of Actium was fought during the 7th year of his reign. Josephus, *Wars*.1.19.3 (Book 1, chapter 19). According to the Roman historian Dio (Book 51), this battle was fought on September 1-2, 31 B.C. Therefore, Herod began his rule in 37 B.C.
- Herod had ruled for 34 years when he died. = 3 B.C. *Wars*.1.38.8.
- Archelaus succeeded Herod as the Ethnarch of Judea and Samaria. In his 9th year, he was deposed by Caesar and banished to Gaul. *Wars*.2.7.3.
- Judea was annexed to the Roman province of Syria after Archelaus was dethroned. Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.13.5.
- The Romans levied a tax on Judea after it was annexed. It was collected while Quirinius was the president of Syria. The taxing ended in the 37th year of Actium = 6 A.D. *Antiquities*.18.2.1.
- In Book 55.27.6 of his *Roman History*, Dio wrote that "Herod of Palestine" was banished to Vienna in 6 A.D., the eighth year before the death of Augustus (August 19, 14 A.D.).
- Therefore, Archelaus began his reign over Judea in 3 B.C. and he was in his 9th year in 6 A.D. -- confirmation that king Herod, his father, died in 3 B.C.
- The "approach of the Feast of Unleavened Bread" (Passover) followed shortly after seven days of mourning for king Herod. *Wars*.2.1.1-3. The Passover of 3 B.C. fell on April 1st. Therefore, Herod died in March.

Jesus was born between April of 5 B.C. and March of 3 B.C. since He was less than 2 years old when king Herod died. Why do some history books state that Herod died in 4 B.C.?

- Josephus contradicted himself when he wrote in the *Antiquities* 17.13.2 that Archelaus was deposed in his 10th year. This book was written in 93 A.D., 18 years after the *Wars of the Jews*.
- A partial lunar eclipse occurred on March 13, 4 B.C. during the Feast of Purim. But a full lunar eclipse happened over Jerusalem on March 23, 5 B.C. Josephus wrote that an eclipse happened on the night that king Herod ordered



Matthias and Judas to be burnt alive. Some scholars believe that the events which followed were compressed into just 12 days (*Antiquities* 17.6.4-7.1). There was not enough time for all of the principal men of the Jews to be summoned (after Herod had spent several days traveling to Calirrhoe and back to Jericho) and for them to arrive in Jerusalem where they were confined in the hippodrome. Josephus rarely informed his readers how much time passed between events.

**John** (the Baptist) **was born about six months before Jesus**. Elizabeth was in the **6th** month of her pregnancy when the angel Gabriel appeared to the virgin Mary (*Luke* 1:36) which was also the **6th** month of the year (*Luke* 1:26). Mary was pregnant when she visited Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea (*Luke* 1:42).

- The Jewish "New Year" is called Rosh Hoshannah and it begins around the fall equinox. The 10th day of that month is Yom Kippur, and the Feast of Tabernacles follows on the 15th. Therefore the 6th month (Adar) happens in late winter.
- The Jews use a lunar calendar which alternates between 29 and 30 days. A lunar year is 354.37 days long. To reconcile the lunar and solar years, the Jews repeat the 6th month (Veadar) 7 times in every cycle of 19 years.
- In 5 B.C., the 6th month was repeated and it began on March 9th.

**Is there any theological significance as to when the angel appeared to Zechariah (*Luke* 1:8-11) while he was on duty in the Temple?**

- Zechariah was of the priestly order of Abijah -- *Luke* 1:5.
- Abijah was the 8th of 24 orders of the priests. -- 1 *Chronicles* 24:7-10. Each order served for one week.
- The first order, Jehoiarib, was serving when the Romans burned down the Temple on August 5, 70 A.D. -- *Wars* 6.4.1 and Tractate *Taanith* 29a.
- Calculating the periods of service backwards from 70 A.D., the order of Abijah began its service between **September 26th** and **October 2nd, 6 B.C.** which co-incided with the *Feast of Tabernacles* in the **first** month of the year. **Note:** the order of Abijah was again on duty 168 and 336 days later, neither of which is the first month of the year.
- After Zechariah returned home, Elizabeth conceived (early October).

**Since Mary conceived in March, Jesus would have been born in December. Is there any theological significance to being born on December 25th?**

- The *Feast of Dedication* (*John* 10:22) which is also known as *Hanukkah* begins on the 25th day of Chislev and continues for eight days. In 5 B.C., this festival began on December **24th**.
- *Hanukkah* celebrates the "purification of His own holy place" (2 *Maccabees* 10:2-8) with

hymns and songs of thanksgiving to worship and bless Heaven. (1 *Maccabees* 4:54-58).

- According to the Talmudic Tractate *Shabbath*.21b, there was only enough pure oil for the lamps of the Temple to burn for a single day. **God provided the light for the lamps from the 2nd through the 8th day.**
- Therefore, December **25th** commemorated the first day of the **Divine Light**.

**The birth of Jesus Christ represented the appearance of God's Light to the world:**

- "He was the true Light coming into the world which enlightens every man" -- *John* 1:9.
- "I have come as the Light into the world." -- *John* 12:46.
- The "glory of the Lord **shone**" around the angel who said to the shepherds, "I bring you news of a great joy that will be for all people, because today a Savior who is the Christ the Lord was born to you in the city of David." -- *Luke* 2:9-11. And "there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, **praising God**" (2:13-14) like those who **blessed Heaven** during Hanukkah.
- The "star" of Bethlehem was also a Divine Light. It **appeared** to the Magians, but not to Herod and his priests -- *Matthew* 2:7. This also means that it was **new** light in the sky, but ancient astronomers recorded no nova during these years (the Chinese reported two comets: one in spring of 5 B.C. and the other in April of 4 B.C., but comets are never mistaken for stars). When the Magians left Jerusalem, the "star" **re-appeared** to them on the road going **south** to Bethlehem (2:9). Stars and planets appear to move from east to west, but never from north to south. And the "star **stood** in the place where the Lad was" -- stars never stop "moving" in the night sky, but this one did. It was not the "grand conjunction" of the planets Jupiter and Venus, since the latter, being closer to the sun, **never appears directly overhead**.

**If Jesus was born on December 25th of 5 B.C, then He would have been 15 months old when king Herod died in March of 3 B.C. Didn't the Magians arrive in Bethlehem when He was born?**

- The Magians had seen His star when Jesus was born. It took about **4 to 5 months** to travel overland from Mesopotamia to Jerusalem.
- It would have been appropriate for them to bring the newly born "King of the Jews" gifts during the Festival of **Purim** (*Esther* 9:20-21), which preceded the Passover by one month.
- The word for a newborn infant is **brephos** (*Luke* 2:12) whereas a little boy or lad is known as a **paidion** (*Matthew* 2:8-21). Jesus was born in a **manger** (*Luke* 2:7), but when the Magians arrived He was in a **house**. (*Matthew* 2:11)
- According to the time the Magians said to him, (*Matthew* 2:16) Herod thought that Jesus might be as much as **2 years** old.

- In his fourth century *Hymn on the Nativity*, Ephrem wrote that the Magians came to see the Messiah in His **second** year.

### **Isn't Luke wrong as to when Jesus was born since Quirinius wasn't the president of Syria until 6 A.D?**

- Based upon both the Roman historians and the writings of Josephus, the whereabouts of Quirinius were unknown from 6 B.C. to 3 B.C. For most of his career from 13 B.C. through 6 A.D., he was in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire.
- Although Quintillius Varus was president of Syria when king Herod died, Josephus does not identify who, if anyone, was serving under him as the procurator. Sabinus, a former consul, arrived **after** Herod died to take charge of affairs in Judea. Prior to Herod's death, Caesar had sent Varus to Syria to assess Herod's kingdom, which would explain why a census (not a taxing) was taken in 5 B.C. *Luke* 2:1-2 is very specific since it states that a registration (**apographe**) of homes was conducted. The emperor's per capita tax was referred to as a **phoron** (*Luke* 20:22) and this was collected in 6 A.D. and every 14 years thereafter.

### **Wasn't it too cold for shepherds to be grazing their flocks in the fields on December 25th?**

- Bethlehem is at the same latitude as Savannah, Georgia and El Paso, Texas. It is not at all unusual to have periods of warmer weather in these areas in late December. Furthermore, the Judean highlands are not far from the warm westerly winds of the Mediterranean Sea.

### **Wasn't Christmas originally the pagan festival of *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* - the "Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun"?**

- This Roman feast celebrated the winter solstice (the lengthening of the daylight hours), and it was ordained by the one of the great *persecutors* of the church, Emperor Aurelian (269-275). Can you imagine the Jews adopting "30 Januar" (a Nazi holiday to commemorate the day Hitler rose to power in Germany) as their own festal day? Furthermore, the lengthening of days begins no later than December **22nd**, not the 25th.
- The first mention of the Christmas by the Church appeared in three manuscripts which date from the early part of the 4th century: (1) *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, Book V, which many theologians believe originated in Syria during the latter half of the **3rd** century. Section 3 declared a Feast on the 25th day of the 9th month to celebrate the nativity. (2) *The Divine Institutes*, which was written by Lucius Lactantius, contradicted the proposition that Christmas celebrated the victory of *sunlight*. In chapter 19, he wrote, "Then in the middle of the heaven shall be laid open in the *dead and darkness of night*, so that the light of the descending God may be manifest in all the world as lightning . . . This is the *night* which is celebrated by us in

watchfulness on account of the coming of our King and God.” Notice how Lactantius identifies this mass as a **nocturnal** celebration and vigil. (3) Ephrem the Syrian also stated in his *Hymn on the Nativity* that the birth of Jesus was commemorated in December.

**Are Christmas trees, lights, decorations and wreaths borrowed from the pagan traditions of northern Europe?**

- No. Quite to the contrary, during Hanukkah the Jews celebrated with lights and decorated “the front of the Temple with golden crowns and small shields” (1 *Maccabees* 4:57) and they “carried ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm as they offered hymns of thanksgiving to Him who had given success in purifying His own holy place.” (2 *Maccabees* 10:7).