

When was Jesus Born?

Best Guess: September 29, 5 B.C.

Want the details? Read more below.

Biblical scholars readily tell us that it was most likely NOT on December 25th, A.D. 0. Why?

When were shepherds in the fields?

Israeli meteorologists tracked December weather patterns for many years and concluded that the climate in Israel has been essentially constant for at least the last 2,000 years. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states that, "broadly speaking, weather phenomena and climatic conditions as pictured in the Bible correspond with conditions as observed today" (R.B.Y. Scott, Vol. 3, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, p. 625).

The temperature in the area of Bethlehem in December averages around 44 degrees Fahrenheit (7 degrees Celsius) but can drop to well below freezing, especially at night. Describing the weather there, Sara Ruhin, chief of the Israeli weather service, noted in a 1990 press release that the area has three months of frost: December with 29 F. [minus 1.6 C.]; January with 30 F. [minus 1.1 C.] and February with 32 F. [0 C.].

Snow is common for two or three days in Jerusalem and nearby Bethlehem in December and January. These were the winter months of increased precipitation in Christ's time, when the roads became practically unusable and people stayed mostly indoors.

This is important evidence to disprove a December date for Christ's birth. Note that, at the time of Christ's birth, the shepherds tended their flocks in the fields at night. "**Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields,**" wrote one Gospel writer, "**keeping watch over their flock by night**" (Luke 2:8). A common practice of shepherds was keeping their flocks in the field from April to October, but in the cold and rainy winter months they took their flocks back home and sheltered them.

One commentary admits that, "as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could He have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact, which casts considerable light upon this disputed point" (Adam Clarke's *Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, note on Luke 2:8).

Another study source agrees: "These humble pastoral folk are out in the field at night with their flock—a feature of the story which would argue against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted it" (*The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1971, note on Luke 2:4-7).

The Companion Bible, Appendix 179 says:

Shepherds and their flocks would not be found "abiding" (Gr. *agrauleo*) in the open fields at night in December (Tebeth), for the paramount reason that there would be no pasturage at that time. It was the custom then (as now) to withdraw the flocks during the month *Marchesven* (Oct.-Nov.) from the open districts and house them for the winter.

The census described by Luke

Other evidence arguing against a December birth of Jesus is the Roman census recorded by Luke. *"And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered... So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem..., to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son..."*(Luke 2:1-7).

The Roman and Judean rulers knew that taking a census in winter would have been impractical and unpopular. Generally a census would take place after the harvest season, around September or October, when it would not seriously affect the economy, the weather was good and the roads were still dry enough to allow easy travel. According to the normal dates for the census, this would probably be the season of Christ's birth.

One author states that this census "could hardly have been at that season [December 25], however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrollment, which necessitated the population's traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years" ("Christmas at Bethlehem," *Holy-Days and Holidays*, Cunningham Geikie).

Luke's account of the census argues strongly against a December date for Christ's birth. For such an agrarian society, an autumn post-harvest census was much more likely.

The year of Christ's birth

Jesus wasn't born in A.D. 0 either. In 525 Pope John I commissioned the scholar Dionysius Exiguus to establish a feast calendar for the Church.. Dionysius also estimated the year of Christ's birth based upon the founding of the city of Rome. Unfortunately because of insufficient historical data he arrived at a date at least a few years later than the actual event.

The Gospels record Jesus' birth as occurring during the reign of Herod the Great. Herod's death is recorded by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus, Book 17, Chpt. 8) and occurred in the spring of 4 B.C. (*New Testament History* F.F. Bruce, Anchor Books, p.23). Therefore, Christ's birth had to take place at least four years before the traditional date!

Jesus was not born on December 25, A.D. 0. [Actually there is no such year as A.D. 0. Our calendar jumps from 1 B.C. to A.D. 1 with no intervening year of zero.]

The celebration of Christ's birth in the the early church

In the first 200 years of Christian history, no mention is made of the calendar date of Jesus' birth. Not until the year 336 do we find the first mention of a celebration of His birth.

Why this omission? In the case of the Church fathers, the reason is that, during the three centuries after Christ's life on earth, the event considered most worthy of commemoration was the date of His death. In comparison, the date of His birth was considered insignificant. As the *Encyclopedia Americana* explains, "Christmas... was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth..." (1944 edition, "Christmas").

Speculation on the proper date began in the 3rd and 4th centuries, when the idea of fixing Christ's birthday started. Quite a controversy arose among Church leaders. Some were opposed to such a celebration. Origen (185-254) strongly recommended against such an innovation. "In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners who make great rejoicings over the day in which they were born into this world" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1908 edition, Vol. 3, p. 724, "Natal Day").

During this time eight specific dates during six different months were proposed by various groups. December 25, although one of the last dates to be proposed, was the one finally accepted by the leadership of the Western church.

A summary of the debate on the dates of Christ's birth appears in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: "Though speculation as to the time of year of Christ's birth dates from the early 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria suggesting the 20th of May, the celebration of the anniversary does not appear to have been general till the later 4th century. The earliest mention of the observance on Dec. 25th is in the Philocalian Calendar, representing Roman practice of the year 336. This date was probably chosen to oppose the feast of the Natalis Solis Invicti [nativity of the unconquerable sun] by the celebration of the birth of the 'Sun of Righteousness' and its observance in the West, seems to have spread from Rome" (1983 edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 280, "Christmas").

Around 200, when Clement of Alexandria mentioned the speculations about Christ's birthday, he said nothing about a celebration on that day. He casually reported the various ideas extant at that time: "And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day..., the 25th day of Pachon... Furthermore, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi" ("The Stromata, or Miscellanies," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986, p. 333).

Later, in 243, the official feast calendar of the time, *De Pascha Computus*, places the date of Christ's birth as March 28. Other dates suggested were April 2 and November 18. Meanwhile, in the East, January 6 was chosen, a date the Greeks had celebrated as the birth of the god Dionysus and the Egyptians as the birth of the god Osiris. Although pagans commonly celebrated the birthdays of their gods, in the Bible a birthday is never celebrated to the true God (who, of course, had no birth or day of origin).

December 25 popularized

In Rome December 25 was made popular by Pope Liberius in 354 and became the rule in the West in 435 when the first "Christ mass" was officiated by Pope Sixtus III. This coincided with the date of a celebration by the Romans to their primary god, the Sun, and to Mithras, a popular Persian sun god supposedly born on the same day. The Roman Catholic writer Mario Righetti candidly admits that, "to facilitate the acceptance of the faith by the pagan masses, the Church of Rome found it convenient to institute the 25th of December as the feast of the birth of Christ to divert them from the pagan feast, celebrated on the same day in honor of the 'Invincible Sun' Mithras, the conqueror of darkness" (Manual of Liturgical History, 1955, Vol. 2, p. 67).

Protestant historian Henry Chadwick sums up the controversy: "Moreover, early in the fourth century there begins in the West (where first and by whom is not known) the celebration of December 25th, the birthday of the Sun-god at the winter solstice, as the date for the nativity of Christ. How easy it was for Christianity and solar religion to become entangled at the popular level is strikingly illustrated by a mid-fifth century sermon of Pope Leo the Great, rebuking his over-cautious flock for paying reverence to the Sun on the steps of St. Peter's before turning their back on it to worship inside the westward-facing basilica" (*The Early Church*, Penguin Books, London, 1967, p. 126).

The *Encyclopedia Americana* makes this clear: "In the fifth century, the Western Church ordered it [Christ's birth] to be observed forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol [the sun god], as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed" (1944 edition, "Christmas").

Is there any evidence from the Bible that will help us fix the date and year of Christ's birth?

Actually from the Bible, we can at least determine the probable season and year of His birth. The most convincing proof of when Jesus was born comes in understanding the evidence that is presented in the book of Luke concerning the birth of John the Baptist.

Luke 1:5-17 says:

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah was of the division of Abijah (Luke 1:5,8). Back in King David's day, the priests had been separated into 24 turns or divisions. These turns began in the first month of the Jewish calendar (1 Chronicles 27:2), March or April of our modern calendar. According to Talmudic and Qumran sources, the turns rotated every week until they reached the end of the sixth month, when the cycle was repeated again until the end of the year. This would mean that Zechariah's division served at the temple twice a year.

We find in 1 Chronicles 24:10 that Abijah was the eighth division of the priesthood. Thus, Zechariah's service would be in the tenth week of the Jewish year. Why the tenth week? Because all divisions served during primary feast weeks of the Jewish year. So all of the divisions of the priesthood would serve during *Passover* and the *Days of Unleavened Bread* (the third week of the year). Likewise, all of the divisions of the priesthood would serve during the *Feast of Weeks* or Pentecost (the ninth week). Thus, the eighth course of the priesthood would end up serving on the tenth week of the year.

Now we must make an assumption here. Remember we said that Zechariah's division served at the temple twice a year. The Bible does not specify which of the two shifts of service it was. Regardless, nine months after one of the two dates John the Baptist was born. This would place his birth in March or September.

We will assume that Luke is recording Zechariah's first shift of service for the year. We will find that assumption tends to prove true as we discover the dates of John the Baptist's

and Jesus' birth. Therefore, the date of Zechariah's service would be the Jewish date of Sivan 12-18 (See the Companion Bible, Appendix 179, Section III).

Picking up the story in Luke 1:23-25:

When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

After his service in the temple, Zechariah went home to his wife. Due to the laws of separation (Leviticus 12:5; 15:19,25), two additional weeks have to be counted. Now I don't know about you, but if an angel had told me that I was going to have a special child, I would get to it just as soon as the law allowed. So we will make a second assumption, that Elizabeth conceived a child two weeks after Zechariah's return.

Allowing for this and going forward a normal pregnancy places the birth of John the Baptist at the time of the ***Passover (Nisan 15)***! The Jews always looked for Elijah to return on the day of ***Passover***. To this very day there is an empty chair and a table setting for Elijah whenever ***Passover*** is celebrated. Little children also go to the door of the home and open it in anticipation of Elijah's coming. The Old Testament prophets had said that God would send Elijah before the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 3:1; 4:5-6). According to these calculations John the Baptist was born at ***Passover***. Remember the angel's words to Zechariah? The angel said that John the Baptist was to come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Elijah came at ***Passover!***

Continuing in Luke 1:26-36:

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in

her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

Luke tells us that Elizabeth was six months pregnant when the angel Gabriel visited Mary. The beginning of Elizabeth's sixth month would have been the celebration of the Jewish feast of **Hanukkah** which occurs in December of our modern calendar. **Hanukkah** (**Chanukkah**) is known as the "Feast of the Dedication" (John 10:22) because it is connected with the dedication of the second Jewish temple and the rededication of the temple after the Maccabean revolt. Mary was being dedicated for a purpose of enormous magnitude: God's presence in an earthly temple, i.e. a human body (John 2:18-21).

If Mary did conceive on **Hanukkah** John the Baptist would have been born three months later at **Passover**. And assuming a normal pregnancy of 285 days, Jesus would have been born on the 15th day of Jewish month of **Tishri** (September 29 by modern reckoning). This is significant because it is the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles (**Sukko**). It is a high day, a special Sabbath, a time of great rejoicing.

The Feast of Tabernacles and Jesus

As you have seen, the birth of our Lord can be reasonably shown to have occurred in the autumn of the year on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles is a joyful feast. Jewish believers would build a tabernacle or booth known as a "**sukkah**" out of green tree branches. They would eat their meals and sleep in this **sukkah** for eight days.

There are some very interesting connections in Scripture with Jesus and aspects of the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 1:14 says:

And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. [literal translation of the Greek]

Look at what Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi has to say concerning this verse:

To introduce the nature and mission of Christ, John in his Gospel employs the metaphor of the "booth" of the Feast of Tabernacles. He explains that Christ, the Word who was with God in the beginning (John 1:1), manifested Himself in this world in a most tangible way, by pitching His tent in our midst: "And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14).

The Greek verb *skenoo* used by John means "to pitch tent, encamp, tabernacle, dwell in a tent." The allusion is clearly to the Feast of Tabernacles when the people dwelt in temporary booths. In his article "The Feast of Tents: Jesus' Self-Revelation," published in *Worship* (1960), David Stanley notes that this passage sets the stage for the later self-revelation of Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7 and 8. Stanley writes: "The most basic clue to the mystery pervading this entire narrative [John 7 and 8] is provided by the symbolic action that gives this feast its name: the ceremonial erection of little bowers, made with branches of trees, in which every Jew was expected to live during the festival.

These shelters were commemorative of the forty years' wandering in the desert when Israel had lived as a nomad in such intimate union with her God. For John this dwelling in tents is a primordial symbol of the Incarnation: 'Thus the Word became a mortal man: he pitched his tent in the midst of us' (John 1:14). It is this insight which presides over the composition of John's narrative which we are considering [John 7-8]. All that happened, all that Jesus said on this occasion has some reference to the Incarnation."

In seeking to describe the Messiah's first coming to His people, John chose the imagery of the Feast of Booths since the feast celebrates the dwelling of God among His people. This raises an interesting question on whether or not John intended to link the birth of Jesus with the Feast of Tabernacles.

[from: *God's Festivals in Scripture and History Part II: The Fall Festivals*, page 241.]

According to the Companion Bible, Appendix 179:

The word *tabernacled* here receives beautiful significance from the knowledge that "the Lord of Glory" was "*found* in fashion as a man", and thus *tabernacling* in human flesh. And in turn it shows in equally beautiful significance that our Lord was born on the first day of the great Jewish Feast of *Tabernacles*, viz. the 15th of Tisri, corresponding to September 29 (modern reckoning).

The Circumcision of our Lord took place therefore on the *eighth* day, the last day of the Feast, the "Great Day of the Feast" of John 7.37 ("Tabernacles" had eight days. The Feast of Unleavened Bread had seven days, and Pentecost one. See Lev. 23).

From *The Seven Festivals of the Messiah* by Eddie Chumney we read this:

As we have stated earlier in this chapter, the Feast of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) is called "the season of our joy" and "the feast of the nations." With this in mind, in Luke 2:10 it is written, "And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings [*basar* in Hebrew; otherwise known as the gospel] of great joy [*Sukkot* is called the 'season of our joy'], which shall be to all people [*Sukkot* is called 'the feast of the nations']." So, we can see from this that the terminology the angel used to announce the birth of *Yeshua* (Jesus) were themes and messages associated with the Feast of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles).

As we have seen, the Feast of Tabernacles is called variously "Season of Our Joy" and "Feast of the Nations." It is also called "Feast of Lights".

John 1:6-9 says:

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

In these verses John refers to Jesus as "the light"; and as we have also seen, verse 14 says that he "became flesh and *tabernacled* [literal meaning of the Greek] among us". These

are two apparent references to the Feast of Tabernacles that are associated with the coming of the Messiah.

Magi from the east

The Scriptures tell us that there were wise men (scholars) who came from the east looking for the birth of the Messiah, saying "we have seen his star in the east". Who were these scholars from the east? Why were they looking for a *Jewish* Messiah?

Matthew 2:1-6 says:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage. When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"[cited from Micah 5:2]

Babylon was known as "the land to the east." At the time of the birth of Jesus, the largest Jewish population was actually in Babylon, not in Palestine. Nearly five hundred years earlier, the entire nation of Judah had been carried away captive into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Only a small colony of Jews returned to Palestine after sixty-three years of captivity. The greater number of them remained where they had established homes in the land of Babylon.

The Greek for "wise men" is *magoi*. Daniel was referred to by this same title (Daniel 4:9). The word is equivalent to the Jewish term rabbi. It is very likely that the wise men from the east were Jewish rabbis who had been anticipating the coming of the Messiah because of Daniel's *seventy weeks prophecy* [Daniel 9:24]. They had spotted a new star in the sky and took it to be a sign of the coming of the Messiah.

At the very least, even if the wise men were not Jewish, they would have been influenced by Daniel's writings. At an earlier time, Daniel had been in charge of all of the wise men in Babylon (Daniel 2:48; 4:9; 5:11).

The Star and the Feast of Tabernacles

There is one time of the year when Jews would typically look at the stars. That time was during the Festival of Tabernacles. As we already said, Jewish believers would build a tabernacle or booth known as a "*sukkah*" out of green tree branches. They would eat their meals and sleep in this *sukkah* for eight days. It was customary to leave a hole in the roof of the *sukkah* so that one could look at the stars. Jewish "wise men" celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles would have noticed the appearance of a new star.

The year of Jesus' birth

Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still living (Matthew 2:1). Wise men appeared in Jerusalem asking about "one who has been born king of the Jews?" Of course, this upset Herod, who had been given that title by the Roman Senate. Herod talked to the wise men secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared (Matthew 2:7). The wise men then journeyed to Bethlehem and found Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in a house (Matthew 2:11) and they bowed down and worshiped Jesus.

When the wise men did not return to give Herod a report, "***Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men. He was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the wise men***" (Matthew 2:16).

This tells us that Jesus may have been born two years before the appearance of the wise men and the death of Herod. Herod died the spring of 4 B.C. Let's assume that the star appeared at Jesus' birth. Let's also assume that Herod was already close to death when the wise men appeared. It was the custom in ancient Israel to count the years of one's age from the date of conception. Therefore, Herod actually killed the children one year old and under according to the way that age is calculated today. This would mean that Jesus had to have been born in 6 B.C. (if Jesus was one year old) or 5 B.C. (if Jesus was under one year and Herod was just being extra careful).

This date for Jesus' birth fits with other Biblical data such as Jesus being "about thirty years old" when He began his ministry (Luke 3:23). From evidence given to us in John 2:20 about the construction of the temple, we know Jesus' ministry began in A.D. 26. Counting forward from 6 B.C. to A.D. 26 (one year has to be subtracted because there is no year zero) would make Jesus 31 years old when he began his ministry -- that is, ***about*** thirty years old. Counting forward from 5 B.C. to A.D. 26 would make Jesus 30 years old when he began his ministry. The birth years of 5 or 6 B.C. also fit with the best date for the crucifixion, that is A.D. 30. Personally I opt for the 5 B.C. date, because I assume the wise men would want to come at once and the time for a journey from Babylon to Jerusalem takes only four months.

When was Jesus born? Nothing is absolutely certain, because we are dealing with implications and assumptions, but a best guess from the Scriptures and history is September 29, 5 B.C.

Sources of Information for this Article:

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Available from: Biblical Perspectives
4990 Appian Way
Berrien Springs, MI 49103