

When Was Jesus Really Born? by Stephen L. Ware. St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2013. 281 pp, hc, \$ 49.99.

This book is not light reading for the faint-hearted. It is an in-depth, comprehensive study of the chronological issues surrounding the life of Jesus' life, from his birth to his death and resurrection. It makes use of both scientific principles of astronomical dating and ancient chronological data to reach its conclusions. It is challenging reading, but it will be informative and thought-provoking for those with the determination and interest to plow through all its data. Lest the prospective reader be scared off, it should be noted that though the subject matter is challenging, Ware's manner of presentation is clear and readable.

Although scholars can construct a chronology of the New Testament by using the synchronisms¹ and elapsed time references which the New Testament provides, every such chronology remains inexact and is subject to error. There are three main reasons for this inability to provide an exact chronology for the New Testament. First, the New Testament does not provide enough synchronisms and elapsed time references to provide firm dates for all New Testament events. For example, if a chronologist has absolute dates for two events of Paul's life which happened ten years apart and he knows of five other events of Paul's life which occurred sometime between those two datable events, he can estimate dates for the other five events, but he cannot give exact dates for them. Secondly, many of the New Testament synchronisms are only approximate. For example, the New Testament tells us that Jesus died during the governorship of Pilate but it does not tell us in which year of Pilate's term. Therefore, if we know the years in which Pilate was governor, we can estimate the year of Christ's death, but we cannot determine it with certainty on the basis of this synchronism alone. Finally, because the ancient Jewish calendar was based on observation, not on mathematical formulas, the use of astronomical formulas to determine what day of the week was the fourteenth of Nisan in 30 AD are not entirely reliable because the first observance of the new moon would not always match the date given by astronomical calculations. Many computer calculators for ancient dates import additional errors because they do not account for errors which the Romans made in their first attempts to implement leap year and for other calendar adjustments.

Ware is very forthright in stating this *caveat* right up front. Even before he begins, he acknowledges that he cannot give final answers to the key issues and that the dates he comes up with are those which in his opinion are the most likely. That being said, Ware nevertheless is determined to give it his best try, and he produces a very worthy effort.

Ware's interest in the topic began when, as a boy, he came across the table for the dates of Easter in *The Lutheran Hymnal*. This led to years of study of the topic which culminated in this book.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the issues involved in determining the date of Jesus birth: most importantly, the date of Herod's death (4 BC or 1 BC?), the conflicting dates for the birth as proposed by various church fathers, the role of the Roman Saturnalia in the choice of December 25 as the birthday, and the role of the World Week² in the development of Christian chronology.

¹ Two simultaneous events, one of which can be dated, enable us to date the other event as well.

² The belief that the history of this world will be accomplished in 6000 years, followed by another period of 1000 years.

Ware's first example of calendar complexity alerts the reader to the nature of the problems that lie ahead. Though we honor February 22, 1732 as George Washington's birthday, according to the calendar in force at the time it was still 1731 when Washington was born, since the new year would not begin until March 25. Furthermore, during Washington's lifetime, in 1752 eleven days were dropped from the month of September. Wednesday, September 2, 1752, was followed by Thursday, September 14, 1752. So, even apart from the arbitrary creation of Presidents Day, how well does our celebration match the real anniversary of Washington's birth?

Dionysius Exiguus, who is charged with misdating the Christian era, never gives a date for Christ's birth, but a study of his writings suggests that December 25, 1 BC, seven days before the beginning of 1 AD, would be his date of choice. Other church fathers point to other years and to other months and days of the year. After wrestling with all the data, Ware settles on 3 BC as the most likely date of Christ's birth.

Ware demonstrates that despite the accusations of novelist Dan Brown that the pagan Saturnalia was the origin of Christmas, the Saturnalia cannot have been the inspiration for the date of Christmas because: 1) the dates of the Saturnalia did not include December 25; 2) December 25 had been suggested as a date of Christ's birth before Aurelian's promotion of the Saturnalia; 3) the church fathers were not especially interested in the date of Christ's birth but in the date of the incarnation. The incarnation was believed to be on the spring equinox, the anniversary of the creation of the world. This fell on March 25 in the calendar of the time. This pointed to December 25 as the birthday.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the scientific and cultural issues of time-keeping and calendars, earth science and astronomy. These chapters contain a lot of interesting information for calendar and astronomy buffs. The main lessons to be taken home are the extreme complexity of calendrical issues and giving due credit to the ancient people who figured them out.

Chapter 4 discusses the role and importance of chronology in Christianity.

Chapter 5 brings us to a detailed discussion and analysis of the work of Dionysius Exiguus, the alleged creator of the Christian era. Early Christian interests in calendar issues did not focus on the date of Christmas but on the need to determine the date of Easter. Several church fathers date Jesus' death and resurrection to 29 or 30 AD. Dionysius opted for 31 AD. Most modern chronologists debate between 30 and 33 AD. After wrestling with all the factors Ware opts for 33 AD. Here is where I would have the most doubts about his conclusions, not because of his handling of the elements pertaining to the dating of Christ's ministry but due to the factors involved in dating the ministry of Paul.

A key to deciding between the early and late dating of Jesus' ministry is the interpretation of the statement in Luke 3:1 that John the Baptist's ministry began in the 15th year of Tiberius. Since Tiberius became sole emperor after Augustus' death in 14 AD, the most natural date for the 15th year of Tiberius would place Jesus' baptism and the start of his ministry in about 29 AD and his death in 33.³ However, Luke may be dating Tiberius' reign from the time Tiberius became co-ruler with Augustus in 11 or 12 A.D. This would place John's ministry and the beginning of Jesus' ministry in

³ A secondary argument for the late date is that Pilate's fear of the Jews is more plausible after the execution of Tiberius' anti-semitic advisor Sejanus in 31 AD, but the factors that led Pilate to fear the Jews may have been operating already before Sejanus' death.

25/26 A.D. This co-regency method was not the normal Roman way of counting emperors' reigns, but it was common in Jewish regnal dating, and the early dating of Christ's ministry appears to fit best with other requirements of New Testament chronology.

Although a strong argument can be made for the late dating of Jesus' ministry and it is defended by such capable advocates as Harold Hoehner, Paul Maier, and Ware, I lean to the early dating which places the death in 30 AD for the following reasons. 1) The early dating fits best with the chronology of Paul's ministry (see below). 2) If Jesus was born in 6 BC or even 3 BC the statement of Luke 3:23 that Jesus was about 30 when he began his ministry fits best with the early dating. 3) Since Herod began the rebuilding of the temple in about 20 BC, the statement of John 2:20 that early in Jesus' ministry the rebuilding of the temple had already been going on for 46 years fits best with the early dating. 4) This view receives additional support from the statement of Eusebius that the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD occurred 40 years after Jesus' death (Bk 7).

The earliest possible date for Paul's conversion is 31 AD. If commentators follow the late chronology of Christ's life, 34 AD is the earliest possible date. But such a late date creates considerable difficulty in reconciling the accounts of Paul's visits to Jerusalem as they are recorded in Galatians and Acts with the chronology of his mission journeys that must begin in about 47/48 AD.

After his conversion Paul spent about three years or parts of three years in Arabia. The term Arabia probably refers to the area east of the Jordan controlled by the Nabataeans, ruled by King Aretas. In 33 or 34 AD Paul returned to Damascus, but was forced to flee because of the threats of Aretas' governor (Gal 1:17, 2 Cor. 11:32). Some have suggested that this return to Damascus must have occurred later than 34 AD because Aretas' influence in Damascus must have occurred after Tiberius' death in 37 AD, but there is no strong evidence for this assertion. Perhaps the reason for Aretas' displeasure and his attempt to capture Paul in Damascus was animosity which Paul had aroused by preaching too boldly while he had been staying in Aretas' territory. After his escape from Damascus Paul visited Jerusalem and met briefly with Peter and James (Acts 9:26-30, 22:17-18, Ga 1:17-20). Paul then returned to his home town of Tarsus, which is located on the southeast coast of modern Turkey. He remained there for about ten years, until about 43 AD when Barnabas came and asked him to join in the ministry in Antioch.

It was during his ministry in Antioch that Paul made his second visit to Jerusalem, the visit recorded in Acts 11:30 and Galatians 2:1. The interpretation of this second visit of Paul to Jerusalem is the most difficult (and most disputed) point in establishing the chronology of Paul's ministry. Many commentators agree with my view that the Galatians 2 visit is identical to the Acts 11 visit, but many others identify it with the Acts 15 visit. There is therefore real difficulty in determining the date of the visit. Galatians 2:1 tells us that this visit to Jerusalem occurred "fourteen years later," but it is disputed whether this means fourteen years after Paul's conversion or fourteen years after his previous visit to Jerusalem (that is, seventeen years after his conversion). In Acts this second visit to Jerusalem is recorded before the death of Herod Agrippa, which occurred in 44 AD. If this visit occurred as early as 44 AD, Galatians 2:1 must be understood as meaning that it occurred fourteen years after Paul's conversion (31/32 to 44 AD = 14 years by inclusive Jewish counting in which a part year counts as a whole year). However; it is more likely that this portion of Acts is not in strict chronological order. In the beginning of Acts 11 Luke finishes a section about the history of the church in Jerusalem during Paul's absence in Tarsus. In the latter part of the chapter Luke presents an account of Paul's ministry in Antioch, which concludes with a visit Paul made to Jerusalem in 46 AD, fourteen years (by inclusive counting) after his previous visit in 34 AD. In Acts 12 Luke then updates the story of the Jerusalem church with the account of Herod's death in 44 AD. Then in 12:25

Luke resumes the story of the Antioch church as a lead-in to his account of Paul's first missionary journey.

As mentioned above, many commentators solve the problem of harmonizing Acts with Galatians by identifying the Galatians 2 visit with the visit to the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15. This makes it easier to fit seventeen years between Paul's conversion (32 A.D.) and the Galatians 2 visit (49 A.D.), but the circumstances and description of the Galatians 2 visit agree better with the Acts 11 visit than with the Acts 15 visit, since Galatians 2 seems to describe a private conference, not a public council like the meeting described in Acts 15. The revelation which led Paul to go to Jerusalem (Ga 2:2) may have been the prophecy of Agabus recorded in Acts 11:27. Consult commentaries on Galatians and Acts for a more thorough discussion of this problem and the arguments supporting both viewpoints.⁴

Even with a date of 31 AD for Paul's conversion it takes some crunching to fit in all the events that must occur before his first journey in the late 40's (31+3+14=48). With a conversion in 34 AD it becomes extremely difficult (34+3+14=51). Even overlapping the three years and the fourteen years, it is tight.

Ware provides a fairly detailed account and evaluation of the work of Dionysius which began about 525 AD. Dionysius' assignment from the pope was to fix problems with the formulas for determining the date of Easter and set up a 95-year table for the date of Easter. He used an Easter of March 25, 31 AD as the basis of his calculations. There is no evidence that he planned any other application of his calculations than setting up a table of Easter dates.

Chapter 6 deals with more recent issues of astronomy and calendars in the church such as the trial of Galileo and the role of the pope in calendar reform.

The Epilogue ends with a lighter note, explaining how papal calendar reform created April Fool's Day.

Appendices and an extensive bibliography provide tools for further study.

Although there are occasional dubious comments, due more to Ware's sources than to Ware (e.g., comments on the Septuagint on page 87), the book is a very careful, thorough exploration of the topic for anyone with an interest in the chronology of Christ's life.

John F. Brug

⁴ My article "Recent Debate Concerning the Chronology of the New Testament" available from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file and on the Wartburg Project website discusses the topic in more detail.