

Christ's Birth 7-2 BC?

Since our calendar is supposed to be dated in years from Christ's birth, we would expect that his birth would have occurred in December of 1 BC. (Since numbering changes at the beginning of each year, 1 AD would be the first full year of his life. There is no year zero between BC and AD.) It therefore comes as a surprise the first time one hears that most historians place Christ's birth in approximately 6 BC. What accounts for this strange discrepancy? Our system of AD dating was developed by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus in about 525 AD. Before his time, events were usually dated by the years of Roman rulers or from the founding of Rome. It is now widely believed that Dionysius made an error in his calculations and that Christ was born several years earlier than Dionysius had supposed.

A major reason for this belief is a reference by the Jewish historian Josephus to an eclipse of the moon which occurred shortly before the death of Herod the Great (*Antiq.* xvii, 6, 4, 167). Astronomers have calculated that this eclipse occurred on March 12/13, 4 BC. Since Christ was born before Herod's death, his birth must have occurred earlier than 4 BC. Herod's command to kill all the babies in Bethlehem under two years of age, which he based on his questioning of the wise men concerning the appearance of the star, suggests that Christ's birth occurred in about 6 BC. A few scholars, such as Ernest Martin and W.E. Filmer, have challenged the accepted interpretation of Josephus' eclipse and returned to the traditional date of Christ's birth, 1 or 2 BC.

The testimony of the church fathers is inconclusive for resolving this dispute. The statement of Tertullian (160-220 AD) placing Christ's birth in the governorship of Saturninus (9-6 BC) is the only support for the very early date for Christ's birth (IV, 19). Most of the church fathers place Christ's birth in 3 or 2 BC. Clement of Alexandria (153-217 AD) and other church fathers place it in the 28th year after Caesar Augustus captured Egypt after the battle of Actium in 31 BC or in the 41st or 42nd year after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC (Bk 1,21). Although some claim that Clement dated Augustus' reign from 34 BC, this belief does not appear to be well founded. Other authors supporting 3 BC or 2 BC are Cassiodorus Senator, Tertullian (second opinion), Africanus, Hippolytus of Rome, Hippolytus of Thebes, Eusebius, and Epiphanius. Ireneus dates the birth to 4/3 BC. A second citation of Hippolytus of Thebes dated the birth to 2/1 BC. The only support for Dionysius Exiguus' date is the anonymous "Chronographer of the year 354." Thus we see that testimony of the church fathers places the birth of Christ earlier than the traditional date, but later than the date determined by astronomical calculation.

Unfortunately, Luke's well-known reference to the census of Quirinius provides no help in solving the problem, since we have no non-biblical information about a census and governorship of Quirinius before 6 AD. Apparently Luke is referring to an earlier census made during a mission of Quirinius to the East. Tertullian's claim (*Against Marcion* 4:7) that the census took place under Saturninus (9-6 BC) combined with Justin Martyr's claim (*Apology* 1:34) that Quirinius was not a governor, but only a procurator (i.e. an assistant to Saturninus) may form the basis to a solution of this problem. Consult commentaries on Luke for a more detailed discussion of this chronological problem.

At present the dispute can be resolved only on the basis of the astronomical evidence and the chronology of the Herodian dynasty. Ernest Martin provides evidence that the lunar eclipse of January 10, 1 BC would serve just as well as the eclipse connected with Herod's death (CKC, p 87-92). However, the chronologies of Herod's heirs, which are derived from written records, agree that they all began their reigns in 4 BC. Martin can only suggest that Herod's sons ruled as coregents with their father before his death, but this does not seem likely in view of Herod's extreme possessiveness of his power.

All attempts to identify the star of Bethlehem are too uncertain to provide decisive help in dating Christ's birth. In recent years most efforts to identify the Christmas star have focused on a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7/6 BC. Konradin Ferrari-D'Occieppo has recently reargued the case for this position (CKC, p. 41-53). The advantage of suggesting a planetary conjunction as the star of Bethlehem is that such an event would be significant to astronomer/astrologers, but it would not be an event spectacular to ordinary people. Ferrari-D'Occieppo argues that some of the terms in Matthew's account can properly be explained as technical terms for planetary movement. The magi did not see the star "in the east," but "in its rising," i.e., its reappearance in the evening sky after a period of absence. It "stood over the house" does not refer to a sudden stop of a rapidly moving star which had led the magi like a lantern, but to the second stationary point which is one phase in the movement of planets. Although the planetary conjunction theory has some appealing features, there are enough unresolved questions to warn us against becoming too attached to it.

The star of Bethlehem has frequently been identified with a comet. Halley's comet made an appearance in 12 BC, the year in which Jerry Vardaman places Christ's birth in his drastically revised chronology of Christ's life (CKC, p.55-82). According to this chronology Jesus was born in 12 BC, conducted his ministry from 15-21 AD, and died in 21 AD. This chronology requires too many speculative changes (the emendation of Luke's reference to the 15th year of Tiberius, the re-dating of Pilate's administration, etc.) to be persuasive.

Although Martin's reassessment of the date of Herod's death has some appealing features and produces a date more in conformity with tradition, it seems to falter in its attempts to account for the chronologies of Herod's heirs. Therefore, unless new evidence is forthcoming, it seems best to remain with the current consensus that Jesus was born between 7 and 5 BC.

Resources for further study representing different views including some regarded as eccentric.

See *Chronos, Kairos, Christos* (CKC), edited by Jerry Vardaman and Edwin Yamauchi, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989, for an overview of debate on the topic.

For further information on the data used in determining New Testament chronology consult *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* by Jack Finegan, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998.

For further study on the principles of determining the chronology of Christ's ministry see Harold Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978. Hoehner adopts the late chronology of Jesus' ministry, rather than the early chronology adopted in this article,

but he provides access to all the data and to additional bibliography. Hoehner has some dispensational motives to his work.

For a general overview of OT and NT chronology see Andrew E. Steinman, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology*, St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2011.

On the complicated issues concerning Christ's birth and resurrection see Steven L. Ware, *When Was Jesus Really Born?*, St Louis, MO: Concordia, 2013.