

THE DATE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

A Paper

Presented to

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Dallas Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course 311

Bible Chronology

by

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June 3, 1988

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Table of Contents

Chapter

I. Introduction	3
Importance of this Study.....	3
Purpose of this Study.....	3
Scope of this Study.....	4
Procedure of this Study.....	4
II. The Year of Christ's Birth	5
Extreme Views.....	6
Latest Possible Year: 4 B.C.....	7
Herod's Death.....	7
Herod's Reign.....	7
Earliest Possible Year: 5 B.C.....	8
Dating from the Bethlehem Massacre.....	8
Use of the Term βρέφος	10
The Date of the Magi Visit.....	12
Christ's Age at the Beginning of His Ministry.....	14
Summary.....	15
III. The Day of Christ's Birth	16
Non-Winter Dates.....	16
April 19 or 20.....	17
May 20.....	17
May 21/June 20.....	18
November 18.....	19
Objections to a Mid-Winter Date.....	20
The Problem of Sheep Grazing in Winter.....	20
Winter Travel for Joseph and Mary.....	22
Dating From the Commencement of John's Ministry.....	23
Summary.....	24
Mid-Winter Dates.....	24
January 6.....	25
December 25.....	27
Summary.....	30
Conclusion	32
Bibliography	34

Chapter I

Introduction

Importance of this Study

Most of the world sets aside each twenty-fifth day of December as special day of remembrance of the birth of Jesus Christ. Businesses close, families gather together, and churches celebrate what appears to the uninitiated as an overcelebrated recognition of the birth of a poor Boy in an insignificant village of a far away land.

Why does the Church of Jesus Christ around the globe consider the day of Christ's birth such an important day? An angel of the Lord answered this question the night of Christ's birth, announcing to shepherds, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy *that will be for all people*. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born *to you*; he is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11; *italics mine*). The birth of Christ occurred for all people because the death of Christ as Savior equally applied to all.

Purpose of this Study

This study aims to evaluate the various theories concerning the time of the birth of Jesus Christ. Both the year and the day will be examined.

Scope of this Study

The majority of treatises on the birth of Jesus concern the year of His birth without serious discussion of the day. In an effort to fill in the lack of scholarly research on the time of Christ's coming, this study will emphasize the day of his birth.

Procedure of this Study

Chapter II will provide a short discussion of extra-biblical and Scriptural data concerning the year of the birth of Jesus Christ. The major portion of the paper will be chapter III which presents several options for the exact day of His birth, emphasizing the option the present writer considers most likely. Finally, conclusions will be drawn.

Chapter II

The Year of Christ's Birth

Although the Church has recognized the birth of Christ since the early centuries, prior to the sixth century various churches used different and often conflicting calendars. Many churches followed the system designed by Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria (d. A.D. 403), which was based upon calculations made during the reign and persecution of the church under Diocletian (who became king in A.D. 284).¹

In A.D. 525 Pope John I commissioned the prominent scholar and Roman monk, Dionysius Exiguus, to modify the Alexandrian system to prepare a standard calendar for the Western Church. Dionysius agreed with the pope's unwillingness to reckon the calendar from the reign of the imperial enemy of Christianity and suggested that it be based upon the incarnation of Christ instead.² He considered the foundation of the city of Rome as accurately dated so used this basis to date the beginning of the Christian era at January 1, 754 A.U.C. (*anno urbis conditae* = "from the foundation of the city [of Rome]).³ Therefore, 754 A.U.C. became denoted A.D. 1 (*anno Domini* = "in the year of the Lord") and the years before this date

¹Martin Anstey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology* (New York: Marshall Brothers, 1913), 33.

²Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 132.

³Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), 11.

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became B.C. (before Christ). However, later study revealed that Jesus must have been born at least four years before A.D. 1.⁴ The actual number of years before A.D. 1 that Jesus was born has been variously computed.

Extreme Views

Several statements in both the New Testament and extra-biblical literature provide information which fairly pinpoints the year of Christ's birth. Nevertheless, a range of opinions exist. Olmstead argues that Jesus' birth occurred in 20 B.C. which made Him approximately fifty years old at His death.⁵ Ogg dates the birth of Christ between 11 and 9 B.C.,⁶ and Filmer claims it happened as early as 3-1 B.C.⁷ A separate analysis of each of these views is beyond the scope of this paper, but their tenuity will be demonstrated in the following discussions of the latest and earliest possible datings for the birth of Christ.

⁴Research indicated that Herod's death occurred not in 754 A.U.C., as believed in Dionysius' day, but actually in 750 A.U.C. (4 B.C.). Since in actuality Christ's birth preceded Herod's death, Jesus was really born "before Christ" (B.C.)!

⁵A. T. Olmstead, "Chronology of Jesus' Life," *Anglican Theological Review* 24 (January, 1942):23-26. His two major reasons for this are: (1) Jesus would have had to be about fifty before He could legitimately claim authority as a teacher in Judaism, and (2) The Jews described Jesus as "not yet fifty years old" (Jn. 8:57). Olmstead's dating cannot be given serious consideration. The first argument fails to recognize that Christ's authority came from His person, not His age. In regard to the second contention, the Jews were not emphasizing Jesus' age but His claim to have seen Abraham. See F. David Farnell, "A Historical Review of the Herodian Dynasty: With Special Attention to the Chronology of the Birth and Death of Christ" (Unpublished doctoral seminar paper for the course 382 Bible Research—New Testament, Dallas Theological Seminary, April, 1988), 7-8.

⁶G. Ogg, "Chronology of the New Testament," *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. by Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), 728; cf. G. Ogg, "Chronology of the New Testament," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. by J. D. Douglas (1962), 223 (this second reference cited from Hoehner, 12). Nevertheless, Ogg dates the crucifixion in A.D. 33 (George Ogg, *The Chronology of the Public Ministry of Jesus* [Cambridge: University Press, 1940], 289).

⁷W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (October, 1966), 283-98.

Latest Possible Year: 4 B.C.

Since both gospel accounts of the birth of Christ associate the Savior's birth with the reign of Herod the Great (Mat. 2:2; Lk. 1:5), Christ must have been born prior to Herod's death. The most crucial question, then, in dating the year of the birth of Christ is: When did Herod reign and die?

Herod's Reign

According to Josephus, Herod was proclaimed king of the Jews for Roman advantage in the Parthian war in late 40 B.C.⁸ and gained possession of Jerusalem by force in 37 B.C.⁹ His reign lasted until his death in the thirty-seventh year from his appointment or thirty-fourth year after conquering Jerusalem,¹⁰ which places it in the year 4 B.C.¹¹

Herod's Death

Shortly before Herod's death an eclipse of the moon appeared.¹² This was the only eclipse ever recorded by Josephus,¹³ so it cannot be confused with any other eclipse and occurred on March 12/13, 4 B.C.¹⁴ Shortly

⁸Jos. *Ant.* xiv. 14.4 § 308; *Wars* i. 14.4 § 444; Hoehner (p. 13) also cites Strabo xvi. 2. 46; Appian *Bella Civilia* v. 75; Tacitus *Historiae* v. 9.

⁹Jos. *Ant.* xiv. 16.2 §§ 312-13. etc

¹⁰Jos. *Ant.* xvii. 8.1 § 366.

¹¹It may at first appear that the year should be 3 B.C. (40 B.C. - 37 years or 37 B.C. - 34 years), but Josephus reckoned partial years as entire years (e.g., 31 B.C. is reckoned as Herod's *seventh* year, not *sixth* year; cf. *Ant.* xv. 5.2 § 320)

¹²Jos. *Ant.* xvii. 6.4 § 365.

¹³Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, new English version revised and edited by Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark LTD, 1973), I, 326-28, n. 45.

¹⁴F. K. Günzel calculated only two other eclipses visible in Palestine during this period, occurring on September 15, 5 B.C. and January 9, 1 B.C. Both of these dates do not fit into the other chronological indicators regarding Herod's reign and death. See F. K. Günzel, *Spezieller Kanon der Sonnen- und Mondfinsternisse für das Landergebiet der klassischen Altertumswissenschaften und den Zeitraum von 900 vor Chr. bis 600 nach Chr.* (1899), 195-96; cited by Schurer, 327.

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following Herod's death Passover occurred,¹⁵ beginning on April 11, 4 B.C.¹⁶ Since Herod died in the thirty-fourth year of his reign¹⁷ (beginning Nisan 1, or March 29, 4 B.C.)¹⁸ and before the Passover, his death must have been between March 29 and April 11, 4 B.C. Therefore, Christ could not have been born later than March 30–April 10, 4 B.C.

Earliest Possible Year: 5 B.C.

Now that the *latest* possible date is determined, how may one determine the *earliest* time of the birth of Christ? This is the more difficult matter.

Dating from the Bethlehem Massacre

Some have proposed that one may count back as much as two years from the time of Herod's death to determine the day of Christ's birth. The reasoning for this is that Herod slew all males up to two years old (Mat. 2:16). Both Origen¹⁹ and Eusebius²⁰ advocated this view. Considering the March/April death of Herod in 4 B.C., with this reasoning Christ could have been born as early as March/April, 6 B.C.

This reckoning has several problems. First, one must consider the bloody and jealous nature of Herod, who slew his own wife and sons.²¹ Certainly he would extend the limit of the possible age of the newborn Babe as a precautionary measure, just to make sure Christ was included among

¹⁵Jos. *Ant.* xvii. 9.3 § 368.

¹⁶Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* (2nd ed. Providence, 1956), 45.

¹⁷Jos. *Ant.* xvii. 8.1 § 366.

¹⁸Parker and Dubberstein, 45; Kings' reigns were always reckoned from the first of Nisan (*Mishnah* Shabbat 1. 1).

¹⁹Origen *Commentary on Matthew*, Frag. 23; cited by Finegan, 233.

²⁰Eusebius *Quaestiones ad Stephanum*, xvi. 2. MPG 22, col. 934; cited by Finegan, 233.

²¹Jos. *Ant.* xvi. 11. 2–7 § 354–56.

the slain. This would mean that if he supposed the newborn king to be even a few months old, he had no scruples against murdering all babies well beyond that time.

Secondly, "a child just entering the second year would be called 'two years' old by Jewish custom."²² Therefore, using Jewish reckoning, Jesus could have been nearly twelve months old actually but also considered almost two years old at the same time! This is significant evidence for the baby Jesus being less than one year old at the time of the Bethlehem massacre, for if Herod intended to kill only those babies nearing thirteen months old, then Christ must have been significantly younger than this.²³

There exists a third problem with seeing Christ's birth stretching into 6 B.C. The census associated with Quirinius has been much debated and is beyond the scope of the present study,²⁴ but the best estimate is that it occurred during Herod's final months when he changed his will three times, the last of which occurred five days before his death when he named Archeleus the heir.²⁵ Hoehner explains:

With such instability and such a bad state of health, it would have been an opportune time for Augustus to have had a census taken in order to assess the situation before Herod's

²²A. T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels for Students of the Life of Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1922. Copyright also by the Citizens Fidelity Bank and Trust Co., 1950), 263. (Unfortunately, Robertson does not cite his source.)

²³Robertson notes regarding the slaughter of the innocents, "No more definite time comes from this circumstance, save that the massacre *probably took place some months before Herod's death*, which fact would bring the Savior's birth back some time into the year 749 [5 B.C.]" (Robertson, 263; *italics* mine). In response to the portion of the quote emphasized above, Robertson cites no reason why the slaughter could not have happened in Herod's *final days*, so this must be viewed as conjecture.

²⁴An excellent discussion of the issues involved and proposed solutions can be found in Hoehner, 13-23. The problem here is that, according to Luke 2:2, the census took place "while Quirinius was governor of Syria" but his governorship did not begin until after Herod's death. The present writer agrees with Hoehner that the best explanation for this apparent inaccuracy is that the translation "while" for *ἔπος* would be better rendered "before" (cf. Jn. 15:18), thus rendering the verse, "This was the first census that took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria."

²⁵Jos. *Ant* xviii. 8. 1 § 366.

death . . . [This indicates that the census] was probably taken between 6 and 4 B.C., preferably the latter part of this span of time.²⁶

The latter part of this time places the birth of Jesus as late as the winter of 5/4 B.C.

Use of the Term βρέφος

One argument against a 5 B.C. birth for Christ concerns Luke's use of two different words referring to the baby Jesus. Madison maintains that at the night of Christ's birth the word βρέφος is used to describe the *newborn* baby Jesus (Lk. 2:12), but when the Magi arrive sometime later Christ is described as a παιδίον (Mat. 2:8, 9, 11, 13 *bis* 14, 20 *bis* 21) or παῖς (Mat. 2:16), both referring to a *child* at least one year old.²⁷ The distinction between βρέφος as "unborn child, embryo, baby, infant" and παιδίον as "child" is even found in more modern lexicons.²⁸ This distinction affects the date of the Savior's birth because it requires at least one year's time between His birth and the arrival of the Magi, who arrived while Herod still lived (March/April, 4 B.C.). Madison also argues for a length of time between Matthew 1 (birth) and Matthew 2 (Magi visit) based upon the fact that Christ

²⁶Hoehner, 22, 23.

²⁷Leslie P. Madison, "Problems of Chronology in the Life of Christ" (Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 25-27; Madison obtains lexical support from G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 85, and Hermann Cremer, *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1954), 811.

²⁸Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (5th ed., 1957 translated by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 147, 604; cf. W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 93, 187-88.

was in a stable in the first case and in a home when the Magi visited Him.²⁹ This view obviously makes a winter birth in 5/4 B.C. impossible.³⁰

As convincing as it may seem, this argument makes distinctions between the two words which are not warranted in the Greek. Timothy is said to have known the Scriptures since he was a βρέφος (2 Tim. 3:15), which can hardly mean since he was a newborn baby or infant. Furthermore, παιδίον is used of both John (Lk. 1:59, 66, 76) and Jesus (Lk. 2:17, 27) at their respective circumcisions when they were but eight days old. In light of these uses one cannot make certain distinctions between the two words in respect to time.

Also, Madison's intimation that Jesus was no longer an infant because the Magi visited Christ in a house rather than at the stable assumes too much.³¹ Obviously, even within a matter of days after the birth, Joseph and Mary would have sought more permanent accommodations in a home rather than at a stable (especially since Bethlehem was their ancestral home and they may have had relatives there). *(good point)*

Therefore, a date earlier than 5 B.C. for the birth of Jesus cannot be sustained on the basis of a distinction between βρέφος and παιδίον. This does not in itself *prove* a date of 5 B.C., but it does allow for the passing of

²⁹Madison, 26; cf. Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), 48.

³⁰Madison concludes that the supposed word distinctions lead to a date no later than the fall of 6 B.C. for the birth of Christ (p. 27). Thomas agrees that 7/6 B.C. is the most acceptable date (cf. Robert L. Thomas, *A Harmony of the Gospels* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1978], 324-28).

³¹Madison, 26.

a very short time (e.g., days, weeks or a few months) between the birth and the arrival of the Magi.³²

The Date of the Magi Visit

Although the New Testament does not specify the length of time between the birth and the Magi appearance, Matthew 2:1 may prove helpful. It indicates that the Magi appeared "... *when* Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea" (*italics mine*), using the transitional particle δὲ³³ which implies that the Magi came not long after the birth.³⁴

Given that Herod spent most of the last few months of his life outside of Jerusalem seeking refreshment from his ailments,³⁵ it is likely that the Magi appeared to him only weeks before his death after he had returned to Jerusalem. His nearness to death may provide additional insight into his

³²It should also be noted that Madison does not adhere to a 5 B.C. birth because Herod was away from Jerusalem extensively prior to his death in Jerusalem in March/April, 4 B.C., seeking respite from his ills, mostly in Jericho (Madison, 21-24). Nevertheless, Madison admits that Herod did die in Jerusalem, so nothing is proved by his point. It could have been that Christ was born in the winter of 5/4 B.C., Herod returned to Jerusalem in January-March, the Magi visited Herod, then Herod died between March 30 and April 10, 4 B.C.

³³BAGD 2 (p. 171); "Now when," RSV, Amplified, KJV, NKJV, Williams; "Now after," NASB; "After," NIV, Phillips; "... then," Beck.

³⁴Finegan, 248. The Greek has Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ γεννηθέντος, which combines the conjunction δὲ with the aorist passive participle γεννηθέντος. This is evidently a circumstantial participle of time which gives to δὲ the sense of "after, when" or "having been born" since aorist participles generally refer to an action antecedent to that of the main verb, in this case, "arrive" (Eugene Van Ness Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965], 188-89; cf. Toussaint, 48).

³⁵Jos. *Ant* xvii. 6. 5.

irrational behavior shown in slaughtering the babes in Bethlehem, although this brutality was not out of character for Herod even before his sickness.³⁶

Specifically, how soon after Christ's birth could the Magi have appeared? Given a mid-winter birth, they could not have come prior to February using the following logic. According to Leviticus 12:2-4, a woman who gave birth to a son was ceremonially unclean for a seven day period before the boy's circumcision on the eighth day, followed by thirty-three days for her purification. Luke 2:24 records that Joseph and Mary offered up the poor people's sacrifice (doves or young pigeons) after these forty-one days of purification (cf. Lev. 12:8). If the Magi had visited the couple prior to this six week period, leaving their costly gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh, this righteous couple would surely have offered up the more appropriate lamb after the days of purification (cf. Lev. 12:). However, Joseph and Mary evidently could not afford this expensive of a gift to the temple because the Magi had not yet come.³⁷ Therefore, if Christ was actually born on December 25, the purification and Magi visit could not have occurred until after February 3, 4 B.C., forty-one days later.³⁸ Justin Martyr

³⁶However, Herod's sickness just before he died was of an especially tormentuous nature. Josephus records it in graphic detail: "But Herod's illness became more and more acute, for God was inflicting just punishment upon him for lawless deeds. The fever that he had was a light one and did not so much indicate symptoms of inflammation to the touch as it produced internal damage. He also had a terrible desire to scratch himself because of this, for it was impossible not to seek relief. There was also an ulceration of the bowels and intestinal pains that were particularly terrible and a most transparent suppuration of the feet. And he suffered similarly from an abdominal ailment, as well as from a gangrene of his privy parts that produced worms. His breathing was marked by extreme tension, and it was very unpleasant because of the disagreeable exaltation of his breath and his constant gasping. He also had convulsions in every limb that took on unendurable severity. Accordingly, it was said by the men of God and by those whose special wisdom led them to proclaim their opinions on such matters that all this was the penalty that God was exacting on the king for his great impiety" (*Ant* xvii. 6. 5).

³⁷Toussaint, 48.

³⁸William Ramsay agrees, although his year is different: "Now the visit of the Magi obviously did not occur until more than forty days after the birth of Jesus, and may probably be placed during the winter of 6-5 B.C." (Sir William Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem? A Study on the Credibility of St. Luke* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898; Reprint ed., Minneapolis: James Family Publishing Co., 1978], 217).

supports this reckoning generally when he speaks of "the Magi from Arabia, who as soon as the Child was born came to worship Him,"³⁹ thus indicating a short duration between the birth and Magi visit.

The proposed chronology can now be reconstructed for clarification. According to the evidence presented thus far, Christ was born in the winter of 5/4 B.C. (probably while Herod was away from Jerusalem), then Herod returned to Jerusalem, the Magi visit occurred in February or March, Herod slew the infants, then died shortly afterwards between March 29 and April 11, 4 B.C.

Christ's Age at the Beginning of His Ministry

Another significant chronological indicator consistent with a 5 B.C. date for Jesus' birth is Luke 3:23. The verse states, "Now Jesus was about thirty years old when He began His ministry. . ." ⁴⁰ Luke's use of the word "about" (ὡσεὶ) probably cannot be stretched beyond three years on either side of the age thirty so that Jesus must have been between twenty-seven and thirty-three years old at the commencement of His ministry (a seven year span). This commencement of Christ's ministry followed soon after that of John the Baptist in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1), or A.D. 29.⁴¹ When one counts twenty-seven and thirty-three years before A.D. 29

³⁹Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypha* 88; cited by Finegan, 232.

⁴⁰This quotation and all Scriptural quotations in this paper are from the *New International Version*

⁴¹Tiberius began his reign as emperor following Augustus' death on August 19, A.D. 14 (Apian *Bella Civilia* ii. 149; Plutarch *Caesar* lxii-lxvii; etc. cited by Hoehner, 12), which makes the fifteenth year of his reign in A.D. 29. Also, Josephus records that at Tiberius' death on March 16, A.D. 37 he had reigned twenty-two years and five or six months (Jos. *Ant.* xviii. 6. 10 § 387; *Wars* ii. 9. 5 § 479), which again produces A.D. 14 as the first year of his reign (cf. Hoehner, 32). For a full discussion of this date see Hoehner, Chapter II, "The Commencement of Christ's Ministry" (pp. 29-44).

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one arrives at a span of years from A.D. 2 to 5 B.C.⁴² for the birth of Jesus. Since of all these dates except 5/4 B.C. have already been shown to be unacceptable in that Herod died in March/April, 4 B.C., it must be concluded that Christ was born in 5/4 B.C.

Summary

This chapter has evaluated evidence for the latest and earliest years for the birth of Christ.

The latest possible date for the birth of Christ was determined to be before the death of Herod, since he met the Magi personally and ordered the execution of the Bethlehem baby boys under two years old. Herod's death occurred between March 29 and April 11, 4 B.C., so 4 B.C. must be the latest year of Jesus' birth. Edersheim has convincingly argued for a *terminus ad quem* a few months before the death of Herod,

Again, the Gospel-history necessitates an interval of, at the least, seven or eight weeks before that date for the birth of Christ (we have to insert the purification of the Virgin—at the earliest, six weeks after the Birth—The Visit of the Magi, and the murder of the children at Bethlehem, and at any rate, some days before the death of Herod).⁴³

The earliest possible year for the birth was shown to be 5 B.C. This was substantiated in the improbability of the Bethlehem massacre occurring beyond just a few months after Christ's birth, the lack of distinction between the two words describing the baby Jesus, and the chronology of His birth stemming from the time of the commencement of Christ's ministry in A.D. 29.

⁴²This reckoning is inclusive and recognizes only one year between 1 B.C. and 1 A.D. since no year "0" existed.

⁴³Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1883. Printed in one volume ed., 1971. Reprinted, 1984), ii. 704.

Chapter III

The Day of Christ's Birth

Having determined that the general time of Christ's birth was in the year 5/4 B.C., the task remains to discover the actual day of His birth. Several different days have been postulated throughout the centuries, even during the early centuries of church history. In fact, advocates exist for certain days in almost every month of the year.⁴⁴ It remains without question that the *day* of Jesus' birth has received significantly more attention than the *year*.⁴⁵ These dates will now be discussed in three sections: (1) Non-Winter Dates, (2) Objections to a Mid-Winter Date, and (3) Mid-Winter Dates.

Non-Winter Dates

The present author has discovered at least seven days advocated for the birth of Christ. In order of their appearance on the calendar, the days are January 6, April 19, April 20, May 20, May 21, November 18, and December 25. Those dates outside of the winter months (all except January 6 and December 25) will be discussed in this section.

⁴⁴Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (4th Ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), 55.

⁴⁵Madison, 45.

April 19 or 20

Before discussing his own date for the birth of Christ, Clement of Alexandria (^{ca.} A.D. 194) speaks disapprovingly of some undesignated individuals during his day who place the time at April 19/20 (the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi).⁴⁶

As to the likelihood of Christ being born on one of these days, Clement did not even feel it significant enough to mention the *names* of those who held to this day. This may be considered indicative of the unlikelihood of this time. Furthermore, strong arguments for a winter birth (to be presented later) make this early spring time improbable.

May 20

Clement also mentioned the followers of Basilides who held to a day one month later, May 20 (the twenty-fifth day of Pachon) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus (i.e., 3/2 B.C.).⁴⁷

Previous discussion of the death of Herod has affirmed that since he died in 4 B.C. this 3/2 B.C. date cannot be substantiated. As to the specific day May 20, it must be noted that Basilides was a famous Gnostic popular in Alexandria from about A.D. 117-138.⁴⁸ This date is the earliest extant recording of the actual day of Christ's birth, giving it weight for consideration. However, even this early ^{date} must be rejected since Basilides was a Gnostic heretic (not a believer) whose views had no large

⁴⁶Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* I. xxi. 145; cited by Finegan, 249.

⁴⁷*Ibid*

⁴⁸Finegan, 249.

following beyond Gnosticism.⁴⁹ Second, and probably more significant, Clement's ambiguity about this day was explained by Epiphanius, who declared that this day is more properly the day of Christ's *conception* rather than birth.⁵⁰

May 21/June 20

Clement mentioned still others, the Alogi, who held to either May 21 or June 20 as the actual day.⁵¹ The date for this group is also early, for they were a group in Asia Minor who opposed the Montanists around A.D. 180, especially because they supported their doctrine of the Spirit from the books of John.⁵²

Although this witness is also early, some factors render these days as improbable. First, the Alogi believed the year of Christ's birth was A.D. 9 under the consuls Sulpicius Camerinus and Poppaeus Sabinus.⁵³ This year is totally incompatible with the ^{de}Scriptural (e.g., Lk. 3:23) and extra-biblical (Herod's death) facts which limit the birth of Christ to before the spring of 4 B.C. Such ignorance of the facts surrounding the year of His birth arouses suspicion concerning the accuracy of the day as well. Second, the Alogi were a heretical group who rejected the Johannine writings (thus the name

⁴⁹An example of the heretical teachings of Basilides can be found in Hippolytus *The Refutation of All Heresies* x. 10., "But Basilides also himself affirms that there is a non-existent God, who, being non-existent, has made the non-existent world, that has been formed out of things that are not, by casting down a certain seed, as it were a grain of mustard seed, having in itself stem, leaves, branches, and fruit. . . . There was . . . in the seed itself a threefold Sonship, in all respects of the same substance with the non-existent God, which has been begotten from the things which are not" (Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. V. [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957], 144).

⁵⁰Cited by Finegan, 250, without referent.

⁵¹*Ibid*

⁵²Finegan, 228.

⁵³Finegan, 250.

"Alogi," a "against," and *logos*, "Word," as used in John 1:1, 14).⁵⁴ One must question the legitimacy of a claim by non-Christians to determine such an important day. Third, Epiphanius also included the above dates among those which were meant to specify the conception of Christ, not His birth.⁵⁵

November 18

November 18 is the third day proposed outside of the winter months. Clement of Alexandria remains the only advocate of this day, stating in his *Stromata*⁵⁶ (A.D. c. 194) that from the birth of Christ to the death of Commodus (ἀφ' οὗ ὁ κύριος ἐγεννήθη ἕως Κομμοδου τελευτῆς) existed one hundred ninety-four years, one month, and thirteen days, which results in the date November 18, 3 B.C. as Clement's day for the birth of Christ.

Clement's year (3 B.C.) has already been demonstrated to be too ~~early~~ ^{late} for the birth of Christ, but could he have recorded the correct day as November 18? His witness for this day stands alone in the extant writings of the ante-Nicene and post-Nicene church fathers, so it must be considered suspect. One must wonder why his pinpointing such a specific date finds no comment from other patristic writers. Either his date was not known to them, or they believed it and saw no reason to support it, or they disbelieved it and simply ignored it, seeing no reason to respond. Arguments for any of these options can be given, but the modern scholar must admit that such argumentation would arise mostly from speculation since the facts remain hidden at the present.

⁵⁴Epiphanius coined the term "Alogi" for this group, declaring, "They reject the books of John. Accordingly since they do not receive the Logos proclaimed by John they shall be called Alogi (ἁλογοί)" (*Panarion haer.* 51. 3. 2; cited by Finegan, 228).

⁵⁵Cited by Finegan, 250, without referent.

⁵⁶Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I. xxi. 145.; cited by Finegan, 249.

Therefore, the preceding four early witnesses for a day for Christ's birth are all suspect for various reasons. These four were Clement's anonymous referents (c. A.D. 194) advocating April 19/20, the followers of Basilides (c. A.D. 125) who affirmed May 20 during Clement's day (c. A.D. 194), the Alogi (c. A.D. 180) who considered the proper day May 21/June 20, and Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 194) who specified it as November 18.⁵⁷

Objections to a Mid-Winter Date

Most of the discussion regarding the day of Christ's birth centers not around the non-winter days, but around proving or disproving the possibility of a winter birth for the Savior. It has often been taught that a winter date for the birth of Jesus Christ is impossible for various reasons.⁵⁸

The Problem of Sheep Grazing in Winter

The most often heard objection to a mid-winter birth for Christ is that sheep were not in the fields at this time of the year.⁵⁹ Robertson summarizes the viewpoint:

⁵⁷Another date which was proposed in A.D. 243 was March 28, often wrongly attributed to Cyprian *De Pascha computas*. The calculation is explained by Cullmann, 22: "The writer starts from the passage in Genesis in which God at the creation separates the light from the darkness. He explains this as meaning that light and darkness formed two equal parts. Consequently, the creation of the world must have taken place on a day when day and night were of the same length. Now in the Roman calendar, the vernal equinox, when day and night have the same length, was on March 25th, and so this was the first day of creation. Further, in the creation story God made the sun on the fourth day, that is, March 28th. And since for Christians, according to Malachi 4:2, the Messiah is the 'sun of righteousness', it follows that Jesus must have come into the world on March 28th."

⁵⁸It is generally agreed that the star of Bethlehem, being a supernatural phenomenon which specified to the Magi the exact home where Jesus was staying (Mat. 2:9), is of no chronological significance (e.g., Robertson, 263). Therefore, any discussion of the star, planetary configurations (which have been largely discarded), etc. is not found in the present treatise.

⁵⁹Madison, 53-54; A. T. Robertson, 267; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982. S.v. "Chronology of the New Testament" by W. P. Armstrong), 1:646; Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, ed. by A. J. B. Higgins (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 21.

... December 25 is not the time, since the shepherds would hardly be in the fields at night with the flocks, which were usually taken into the folds in November and kept in till March. The nights of December would scarcely allow watching in the mountain fields even as far south as Bethlehem.⁶⁰

A closer look reveals several problems with this theory.

First, it still remains to be proven that sheep were actually brought under cover at night during the winter in New Testament times.⁶¹

Second, even if this were the normal practice, the season of Christ's birth may have been a mild one.⁶² Certainly if God could arrange a virgin birth He could control the weather in order to make an angelic announcement to shepherds! Besides this, in contrast to the regularity of summer, the rainy season in Israel is so unpredictable that "not only is the weather changeable, but the total amount of rain which may fall is very variable and so is the time of its beginning and ending and its distribution throughout the year."⁶³ Thus one cannot say with any degree of certainty that rain or the cold would prevent shepherds from grazing their sheep in winter.⁶⁴

Third, the supposition that flocks were taken out in March and brought home in November⁶⁵ applies not to *local* grazing, but *wilderness* grazing, far away from towns and villages. That the shepherds grazed the sheep just

⁶⁰Robertson, 267.

⁶¹Plummer, 55; William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 80-81.

⁶²Arndt, 81; Plummer, 55.

⁶³Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), 47.

⁶⁴In reply to "the sixteenth-century European woodcuts of Joseph and Mary all bundled-up, braving the blizzards of a north German winter on the way to Bethlehem," one author says, "This is highly improbable, certainly, but by no means as impossible as many insist. Snow does fall in the Jerusalem area about three or four days each winter, and sometimes in considerable quantity: in January, 1950, twenty inches fell; in February, 1920, twenty-nine inches. The meteorology, then would allow a very remote possibility of snow at Bethlehem on that day which would shift history" (Paul L. Maier, *First Christmas. The True and Unfamiliar Story in Words and Pictures* [New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971], 27-28).

⁶⁵Madison, 54, quotes William M. Page, *New Light From Old Eclipses* (St. Luis: C. R. Barns Publishing Co., 1890), 93, who is supposedly quoting from the Talmud.

outside Bethlehem (rather than in the wilderness) argues strongly *for* a date between November and March, not *against* such a time.⁶⁶

The final affirmation of the existence of shepherds and sheep outside in winter can be found in the Mishnah. It states,

If cattle be found between Jerusalem and Migdal Eder [a small town near Bethlehem on the Hebron road]—and to an equal distance in every direction—males are to be considered as *burnt-offerings* and females as *peace-offerings*. R. Judah says, If valid for *Passover-offerings* they must be considered as *Passover-offerings* if within thirty days before the Festival [emphasis in Mishnah].⁶⁸

Hoehner observes that this statement "implies that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside all year, and those that were worthy were in the fields thirty days before the feast—which would be as early as February—one of the coldest and rainiest months of the year."⁶⁹ The above quote from the *Mishnah* is naturally interpreted to refer to animals which strayed out of Jerusalem, where they were normally kept during the months preceding the Passover. In fact, the Gemara for the word "cattle" reads, "It is assumed that these have strayed away from Jerusalem . . ." ⁷⁰ That sheep were in Jerusalem at this time argues for a winter birth for the Savior. It would be surprising indeed *not* to find sheep for offerings in Jerusalem during the time preceding Passover, which occurs in spring.

Winter Travel for Joseph and Mary

A second objection to a winter birth for Christ also relates to the supposedly inclement weather; however, this argument looks at the weather

⁶⁶Plummer, 55.

⁶⁷Robertson, 267.

⁶⁸*Mishnah* Moed. Shekalim 7. 4. (Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth*, Vol. II: Order Moed [New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1963], 260).

⁶⁹Hoehner, 26; cf. Baly, *The Geography of the Bible*, 55.

⁷⁰*Mishnah* Moed. Shekalim 7. 4. Gemara 1 (Philip Blackman, *Mishnayoth* [vol. II: Order Moed; New York: The Judaica Press, Inc., 1963], 260).

issue relating to Joseph and Mary. Robertson argues emphatically, "And besides, the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem would hardly be made by Joseph and Mary in winter, the rainy season."⁷¹

This argument also has its problems. Its basic error is that it sees the travels of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem as one of their own volition. Luke notes that Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem in obedience to Caesar Augustus' decree, not because the weather was fair (cf. Lk. 3:1-5). Had the couple the option of postponing the trip until a better time, they obviously would have done so since Mary needed to travel during her ninth month of pregnancy. Second, the rainy season in the Jerusalem area (of which Bethlehem is a part) does not reach its peak until February (19 inches) and therefore is not as severe in December (8 inches).⁷²

Dating From the Commencement of John's Ministry

A final objection to a mid-winter date is reckoned from the beginning of John's ministry. Robertson believes that John the Baptist began his ministry exactly at age thirty because priests entered their work at this age. Counting exactly thirty years from Tiberius' fifteenth year which began August 29, 781 A.U.C. (A.D. 28), he concludes, "So if John was born in the early part of the spring, Jesus would have been born in the summer or fall of 749 [5 B.C.]".⁷³

Two problems shed doubt on this chronology. First, this dating is entirely dependent upon John entering his ministry at age thirty, of which the Scripture says nothing. If one responds that John's birthdate can be ascertained by counting six months previous to Christ's (cf. Lk. 1:26), the

⁷¹Robertson, 267.

⁷²Baly, 55.

⁷³Robertson, 264.

reckoning of the birthdate of Jesus cannot be determined with accuracy from Luke 3:23 since this verse declares that Jesus was " *about* thirty years old" at the commencement of His own ministry.

Second, the date of A.D. 28 for Tiberius' fifteenth year assumes a co-regency between Augustus and Tiberius, which cannot be substantiated at the two year period claimed by Robertson to make the chronology fit.⁷⁴

Summary

Therefore, the three objections to a mid-winter birth for Christ can not convincingly argue against it. First, the "unlikelihood" of shepherds tending flocks outdoors in winter finds no biblical or extra-biblical support; however, their presence near Bethlehem (rather than out in the wilderness) argues for a birth between November and March. Second, the "improbability" of Joseph and Mary traveling in winter is erased when one acknowledges that the timing of the trip was not their decision. Finally, the dating of John's supposed spring birth based upon the commencement of his ministry at age thirty is an argument from silence and an inaccurate chronology of the reign of Tiberius. Since the death of Herod the Great occurred in the spring of 4 B.C. (discussed previously), yet he was absent from Jerusalem until shortly before he expired, the winter of 5/4 B.C. remains a very possible time for Christ's birth.

Mid-Winter Dates

Having dismissed the major arguments against a mid-winter date and having provided evidence supporting this time, attention may now be drawn to the two dates most often proposed, both advocating a winter birth. These dates are January 6 and December 25, the former initially upheld by the

⁷⁴Hoehner, 29-30.

Eastern Church and the latter sustained by the Western Church to the present day.

January 6

Actually, the Eastern Church not only considered January 6 as the day of Christ's birth, but also the day of the visit of the Magi one year later, the day for Christ's baptism, and the day of His first miracle at Cana.⁷⁵ The great founder of the monastery at Aletheropolis, Epiphanius (A.D. 315-403),⁷⁶ represents this view of the Eastern Church most forcefully. His witness must be given appropriate weight due to his Nicean, anti-Origenian (thus anti-allegorical) teachings.⁷⁷ He argued very clearly for January 6, 2 B.C.:

When these were consuls, Octavian for the thirteenth time and Silvanus, Christ was born on the eighth day before the Ides of January, thirteen days after the winter solstice and the beginning of the increase of the light and the day.⁷⁸

The eighth day before the Ides (thirteenth of January), counting inclusively, is January 6, which is thirteen days inclusively after the winter solstice, dated then at December 25.⁷⁹ In another passage Epiphanius is even more specific, dating according to Roman reckoning, as between the evening of January 5 and the morning of January 6.⁸⁰ He also dated both the conception and death of Christ on March 20.⁸¹

⁷⁵Finegan, 253; Cullman, 17-36.

⁷⁶Finegan, 227.

⁷⁷For a brief discussion of Epiphanius' life and writings see Frank Williams, trans. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Book I (New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), xi.-xvi.

⁷⁸Epiphanius *Panarion haer.* 51. 29. 2; cited by Finegan, 250.

⁷⁹Finegan, 250.

⁸⁰Epiphanius *Panarion haer.* 51. 24. 1; cited by Finegan, 250.

⁸¹Epiphanius *Panarion haer.* 51. 29. 7; cited by Finegan, 250.

A closer observation at the above support reveals the unlikelihood of January 6 as the day of Christ's birth. First, the view becomes suspect because it places so many events of Christ's life (birth, Magi visit, baptism, and first miracle) on the same day. This points more to a seeming manipulation of dates for the sake of memory than to divine arrangement. Second, it has been claimed that Epiphanius placed the birth of Christ thirteen days after the solstice to make it coincide with the Koreion at Alexandria, the celebration of the birth of Aeon from Kore.⁸² The followers of Basilides believed Christ was conceived on May 20 (previously noted) and born the following January 6. Clement of Alexandria cites that this festival of Basilides which celebrated the baptism of Christ was indeed patterned after this Egyptian pagan festival of the birth of Aeon out of the Nile.⁸³ On the night of January 5 the waters of the Nile were believed to possess special miraculous power; likewise the Basilidian followers believed that Christ became truly divine in the Jordan at His baptism.⁸⁴ That the divine Christ first *appeared* on the earth at the baptism of Jesus explains why the celebration was named the "Feast of Epiphany," since *epipaneia* means "appearing." Finally, this celebration of the baptism of Jesus incorporated His birth as well due to the incorrect interpretation of Luke 3:23 which immediately follows the account of His baptism: "And Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age. . ."⁸⁵ Obviously, if Jesus was baptised on His thirtieth birthday, Luke would not have used the word "about." This tendency

⁸²E. O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1961), 230-31.

⁸³January 5 was also probably observed as the day of the Egyptian god Osiris (Cullmann, 24-25).

⁸⁴Cullmann, 24-25; cf. Finegan, 255, for Epiphanius' description of the ceremony as evidence that there was an attempt to replace this pagan ceremony with a Christian one.

⁸⁵J. Lamar Jackson, "Christmas," *Review and Expositor* 41 (October, 1944):390.

on the part of Epiphanius to have precision for validity is also overdone when he declares that Christ was in Mary's womb nine months, fifteen days and four hours.⁸⁶ For these reasons January 6 is suspect as the day for the birth of Christ.

December 25

The traditional date for the birth of Jesus Christ has long been December 25. However, how long has this day been accepted by the Church as the actual day for Christ's birth? Plummer states that "December 25 cannot be traced higher than the fourth century, and it seems to have been first adopted in the West. We must be content to remain in ignorance as to the date of the birth of Christ."⁸⁷

However, there exists reason to question Plummer's doubts. Hippolytus (c. A.D. 165-235), Bishop of Rome, provides the earliest support for December 25 as the correct day.⁸⁸ His comments indicate that the Western Church celebrated December 25 as the official day even as early as the second century.

Even if this is not correct, no scholars debate that the greatest number of authors in the fourth century support December 25 as the actual

⁸⁶Epiphanius *Panarion haer.* 51. 29. 3-4; cited by Finegan, 399-400.

⁸⁷Plummer, 55. Others who state that December 25 was not acknowledged until the fourth century include James, 229; Cullmann, 21.

⁸⁸Hippolytus *Comentarii in Daniele* iv. 23. 3; cited by Hoehner, 25; and Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (5 vols., Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1975, 1976. S.v. "Chronology of the New Testament," by W. R. Thompson, 1:818). Armstrong (*ISBE*, 646) writes, "December 25 was celebrated by the Church in the West as early as the 2nd cent.—if the date in Hippolytus on Dan., IV, 23 be genuine (cf. Ehrhardt, *Altchr. Lit.*, 1880-1900, 383)." This author's attempts to find these two sources (Hippolytus and Ehrhardt) mentioned by Armstrong were unfruitful.

day of Christ's birth.⁸⁹ Several of these fourth century writers will now be discussed.

Constantine (A. D. 288-337) has often been accused of approving December 25 as the celebration of Christ's birth because the day was already a pagan holiday.⁹⁰ In an effort to grasp "the opportunity to convert purely pagan observances into a day of adoration of the Lord Jesus,"⁹¹ it is said that the Church adopted the day of the Roman Mithraic feast of the sun god⁹² (which also was the winter solstice) as the official Christmas day. In response Jackson observes,

There are some who are confident of an unhappy alliance from the beginning between the bishops of Rome, who took the lead in setting December 25th as the new Christmas, and pagan festivals. I have not observed that any churchman of the early time admitted such an alliance, and we cannot presume to know the inner workings of their minds on the point.⁹³

Jackson brings up a good point. The existence of another feast on the same day does not necessarily indicate dependence. The common supposition that adopting December 25 as an "evangelistic" endeavor is totally without patristic support. Eusebius (c. A.D. 260-339) declares with great joy the many freedoms the Christians enjoyed under Constantine,⁹⁴ but never indicates that December 25 was selected to mingle Christianity

⁸⁹This is in contrast to the early dates of the non-winter days already discussed. In determining the correct day it seems that one has to choose between early, unreliable witnesses, and later, more reliable witnesses.

⁹⁰e.g., Cullmann, 29.

⁹¹Thompson, *ZPEB*, 1:819.

⁹²Also called *Brumalia*, "feast of the day of the unconquered sun" (Jackson, 388) or *sol invictus*, "feast of the invincible sun" (Finegan, 408). On this day in the third century the Romans conducted splendid festive games in honor of the conquering rising sun and lit huge bonfires to help the sun climb above the horizon (Cullmann, 30).

⁹³Jackson, 388.

⁹⁴G. A. Williamson, *Eusebius. The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965; Reprint. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), 11, 16, 380-414.

with paganism. This *may* have been Constantine's motive since he was a syncretist,⁹⁵ but it still does not prove that December 25 was not the actual day of Christ's birth.

Another early source advocating December 25 was Filocalus. He edited the Roman city calendar for the year A.D. 354,⁹⁶ which includes a list of the burial places of the martyrs (*depositio martyrum*) and the festivals held in their honor.⁹⁷ The first annual festival is listed as the festival for the birth of Christ on December 25.

On December 20, A.D. 386 John Chrysostom preached in Antioch about the upcoming festival of the birth of Christ to be held in five days.⁹⁸ On December 25 he preached again, the sermon later being quoted from by Theodoret (A.D. 398-453) as the "birthday discourse."⁹⁹ Chrysostom indicates that this exact date had been introduced in Antioch only about ten years before the time he spoke (*c.* A.D. 375), but it had been long known in the West.¹⁰⁰ He also reasoned from the New Testament that December 25 was the actual day using the following logic. Zechariah had his vision of John's conception on the Day of Atonement (Lk. 1:9; September 20), and Jesus was conceived during Elizabeth's six month (Lk. 1:26; after March 20). Adding a nine month pregnancy for Mary results in the month of December

⁹⁵Constantine worshiped the sun-god all his life until he received baptism on his death-bed (Cullmann, 31).

⁹⁶The original *depositio episcoporum* was probably compiled in A.D. 336 (Finegan, 255).

⁹⁷Finegan, 255.

⁹⁸Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest*, 245; cited by Finegan, 256, without providing the location of Chrysostom's quote.

⁹⁹Finegan, 256.

¹⁰⁰Finegan, 258.

for Christ's birth.¹⁰¹ Another calculation has been determined by figuring when Zechariah and the course of Abijah (Lk. 1:5) were on duty that year.¹⁰²

Augustine also affirms December 25 as the correct day for the birth of Christ,

For He is believed to have been conceived on the twenty-fifth of March, upon which day also he suffered. . . . But He was born, according to tradition, upon December the twenty-fifth.¹⁰³

Therefore, December 25 finds support as the day of Christ's birth from Hippolytus, Filocalus, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Augustine, and the entire Western Church from the middle of the fourth century onwards.¹⁰⁴

Summary

Chapter III has addressed the day of Christ's birth in a threefold analysis. First, the non-winter dates were shown to be early yet unreliable due to their Gnostic advocates and/or confusion with a supposed day for Christ's conception.¹⁰⁵ Second, the opposition to a winter birth on weather problems (for the sheep or for Joseph and Mary) are not insurmountable and

¹⁰¹Finegan, 257-58, citing Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest*, 230-33, without providing the location of Chrysostom's quote; cf. Jackson, 394, cites J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. III, 606 also without original support.

¹⁰²The course of Abijah was the eighth of the twenty-four divisions of priests who officiated at the Temple two weeks annually. When the Temple was destroyed by Titus on August 5, A.D. 70, the first class had just entered its service. Working backwards to 6 B.C. it has been determined that Zechariah's course was on duty April 17-23 and October 3-9 that year. If the second time is used, then John was born in the middle of 5 B.C. and Jesus at the end of the year. See Handel H. Brown, *When Jesus Came* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 57, and Edersheim, i. 135, ii. 704.

¹⁰³Augustine, *On the Trinity* iv. 5 in Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 2 vols. (New York: Random House Publishers, 1948), 2:736.

¹⁰⁴Jackson states, "Thus we see that the only evidence we have, whether absolutely reliable or not, points to the middle of the fourth century as the origin of December 25th for the celebration of the birth of Christ" (pp. 392-93), demonstrating that he is either unconvinced or unaware of Hippolytus as a second century witness.

¹⁰⁵The debate among the ancients revolved around whether the incarnation began at the conception or birth of Christ.

the evidence in fact *points* to a mid-winter birth. Third, the two winter days (January 6 and December 25) find the most advocates, the latter having the better and more numerous witnesses.

Finegan summarizes the data, "The chief reckonings attested by the oldest sources, then, put the conception of Jesus in the spring, and his birth in mid-winter."¹⁰⁶ In light of the better attestation for December 25, the present author, while not arguing dogmatically, considers it the most likely candidate for the birth of Christ.

¹⁰⁶Finegan, 258.

Conclusion

Chapter II evaluated the year of Christ's birth. It demonstrated that the latest possible date for the birth of Christ is before the death of Herod between March 29 and April 11, 4 B.C. The earliest possible date is the preceding winter of 5/4 B.C. for several reasons. First, the Bethlehem massacre probably included only babies under one year old by our type of reckoning (two years old by Jewish reckoning). Second, this massacre makes the best sense during the events of Herod's last days, and third, the evidence for the soon arrival of the Magi also points to a winter birth.

Although it has been said that "an authoritative decision as to the time of year when the birth of the Savior occurred is impossible,"¹⁰⁷ Chapter III focused more narrowly on the actual day of Christ's birth. The proposed days in the spring and fall were found to have inadequate and unreliable (e.g., heretical) support. The arguments against a winter birth have no real basis, and January 6 as a winter date shows dependency upon the pagan festival of Aeon and less widespread support than the December 25 date. This traditional date for Christmas finds support from Hippolytus (the only second century source), Filocalus, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Augustine, and the entire Western Church from the middle of the fourth century onwards.

¹⁰⁷William F. Arndt, *The Gospel According to Saint Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 81.

Based upon the evidence as it stands and being open to further discussion, it would seem that the Church has not been amiss in celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25. This celebration commemorates the entrance into this world by the Savior on December 25, 5 B.C., which incidently was a Monday night.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸Based upon the chronological system found in *World of Science*, Vol. VIII., 20 (a class handout from Dr. Harold W. Hoehner in the course 311 Bible Chronology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Summer, 1988).

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