

[B-7] The Magi and The Date of Jesus' Birth

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Luke 1:26-36 And **in the sixth month** the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, (27) To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name *was* Mary.

... (36) And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: **and this is the sixth month with her**, who was called barren.

Lev 12:3-4 KJV "(3) And **in the eighth day** the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. (4) And she {the child's mother} shall then **continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days**; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, **until the days of her purifying be fulfilled.**"

Luke 2:22 "And when the days of **her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished**, they brought Him to Jerusalem, to present Him to the Lord;"

Luke 2:39 "And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city **Nazareth.**"

After the **40 days of Mary's purification, Mary and Joseph went to the temple and performed the sacrifice required in Leviticus chapter 12, then returned to their home in **Nazareth**. If the magi came when Jesus was two years old as some speculate, they would not have found Him in Bethlehem but in Nazareth. To say otherwise is to accuse Luke of falsehood.

Luke himself was a Jew from Antioch according to the early church fathers. Luke's gospel is written to gentiles as is evidenced by his explaining many of the Jewish traditions.

I. How the Magi knew about the coming King

A. There are three passages in the Old Testament which were written in Aramaic {Chaldee} [The language of the Babylonians.] rather than Hebrew: Ezra 4:7-6:18, Ezra 7:12-26, and Daniel 2:4b-7:28.

- 1) In the first part of Daniel chapter 2 which is in Aramaic King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and demanded that the astrologers and other "wisemen" first tell him the dream he had then interpret its meaning. If they did not, he would have them executed. The astrologers of course couldn't do what he was asking. Daniel prayed to the Lord and the Lord revealed both the dream and its interpretation. The dream tells about the coming world empires {including the coming of God's Kingdom}. Chapter 7 of Daniel ends with another vision of the coming kingdoms and the coming of the everlasting kingdom of God.
 - 2) Daniel 9:24-9:27 {which is written in Hebrew}-- tells about the seventy sevens of years decreed upon the nation of Israel. These seventy 7's of years begin with the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, continue with the messiah being executed in the sixty-ninth seven of years, and ends with the seventieth seven when a new messianic kingdom over all the earth.
 - 3) Ezra 6:3 which is in Aramaic tells us that it was Cyrus in his first year of kingship who issued the first decree {This was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 44:28 written over two hundred years earlier.}
 - 4) Ezra 7:12-26 records a letter of King Artaxerxes giving Ezra and the people of Israel permission to return to Jerusalem and permission to request items for sacrifice to be offered at the newly completed Temple.
- B. Matthew's gospel tells us the Magi saw the "star" while they were in the East. The "East" is generally believed and according to tradition is the area in and around Babylon. {Matt. 2:2}
- C. This means the magi had the prophecies about the coming King in their own language as prophesied by Daniel. By translating Daniel 9:24-27, the magi knew the exact year of the coming King's death and therefore the general time of His birth.

II. The chronology of the coming of the shepherds and magi

- A. Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem {See Luke 2} because of a decree by Caesar Augustus that that all Jews return to the city of their ancestry for census purposes. {The census itself was for determining taxes.} [Interestingly, the census did not direct people to register in the town they were currently living in. -- It was necessary that Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem in

- order that the prophecy concerning Bethlehem could be fulfilled. Mic. 5:2]
- B. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in a stable {Luke 2}
 - C. The shepherds came the same night of Jesus' birth to the stable where he was born {See Luke 2:8f}
 - D. Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day according to the law of Moses. {Lev. 12:1-4} Luke 2:21
 - E. The magi arrived in Jerusalem searching for the Christ Child some days later. {See Matt. 2:1f}
 - F. When the magi arrived in Bethlehem to worship Jesus, his family was then staying in a house [not the stable] in Bethlehem. {See Mat. 2:11}
 - G. The same night the magi left, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus. {Matt. 2:13} [The Egyptian border was about 100 miles southwest of Bethlehem during the lifetime of Jesus, according to maps contained in the backs of most Bibles.] The journey would normally take about 10 days on foot but remember -- Joseph was in a hurry!
 - H. Some time after arriving in Egypt Joseph was told in a dream that Herod was dead and he should return to Israel. {Matt. 2:15, 19-20} [Note that Joseph did not have to wait for word of Herod's death to reach him by word of mouth.]
 - I. Mary and Joseph were in Jerusalem at the required time of purification (Jesus was 40 days old {7 + 33}) {Lev. 12:1-4}. Luke 2:22-24
 - J. Jesus and his family returned to Nazareth [not Bethlehem] following the time of purification. {Luke 2:39}
 - K. Based on the above analysis, Herod had to have died after Jesus was eleven days old, and before Jesus was 30 days old, in order for Mary and Joseph to be back in Jerusalem by the day Jesus was 40 days old as required by the Law of Moses.

III. Facts

- A. Both Matthew and Luke received their information from eye witness accounts. {Luke specifically states this in chapter 1.} It is obvious from both accounts that much of the information contained in Jesus' birth narratives had to have come from Jesus' mother, Mary. [She is the only one who would have known much of the information.] She was alive throughout Jesus' ministry so Matthew and probably Luke would have known

her personally.

- B. According to tradition, the Magi arrived in Bethlehem on the 12th day. {Hence our tradition of the **12 days of Christmas. [Also known as Epiphany]**}
- C. Based on the above Biblical facts {sections I - II} we can determine the following:
- 1) The Magi had to have arrived after the 8th day following Jesus' birth.
Reason: That same night Joseph and family fled to Egypt and Jesus probably would not have been circumcised as Luke states if they came before the 8th day and were fleeing for their lives.
 - 2) The third day following a surgery [and circumcision is a surgery] is usually one of a patient's worst days of recovery. This would imply that the magi probably came after the eleventh day.
 - 3) It would have taken about 10 days each way to travel by foot from Bethlehem to Egypt and back. If the Magi came after the 8th day [and probably after the eleventh day] and before the 40 days were up, then **they had to have come before the 20th day** and Jesus' family would have spent at the most a couple of weeks {40 days minus 8 days minus 20 days leaves 12 days maximum} in Egypt.
 - 4) When Jesus was 40 days old his family took Him to the temple in Jerusalem according to Luke's account, to fulfill the law of Moses (Lev. 12:1-4) then they returned to Nazareth -- not Bethlehem [Luke 2:39]} This means that if the Magi came after the 40 days, Jesus' family had to move from Nazareth back to Bethlehem long enough for the Magi to find them in a house in Bethlehem and then move back to Nazareth before Jesus' first birthday because according to Luke's account Mary and Joseph made the trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem every year at the passover {Luke 2:41}.
 - 5) **If the Magi came when Jesus was almost two years old as many theologians claim, Jesus' family would have had to move to Bethlehem after Jesus' first birthday and then back to Nazareth before His second birthday in order to fulfill Luke's account.**
 - 6) The possibility that Mary and Joseph moved back and forth

between Bethlehem and Nazareth possibly multiple times during Jesus' first couple of years of life, seems to me to be rather far fetched and there isn't anything in Scripture to support it. To my knowledge there is no historical or traditional evidence to it either.

IV. The appearance of the "star"

- A. Many theologians erroneously assume that because Herod asked the Magi the exact time of the first appearance of the star and then had all children under two killed that this implied the magi told Herod the star appeared two years earlier and thus Jesus must be two years old. What they neglect is that historical accounts indicate Herod was not in his right mind before the time of his death. If Herod thought the child was two years old, he probably would have killed all children under four years old to be sure he got the right child!
- B. As for the appearance of the star we are not told when it first appeared. If it first appeared at the time of Jesus' conception {which I am inclined to believe}-- the Magi would have had 9 months to make their journey. Even at a camel's pace the journey from Babylon [the supposed origin of the magi] should have been easily accomplished in less than 9 months time. After all, these men probably didn't want to waste any time in coming to see this **Child** and would have traveled as quickly as possible. In any event, **if the magi followed the star, it is apparent that the star had to appear before Jesus' birth.**
- C. If the star appeared at His conception, and the magi told Herod the time, He probably reasoned to himself that the star appeared at His birth and further reasoned that the Child was almost a year old. This is why he ordered all children under two to be killed.

V. What date was Jesus born?

- A. The date of Gabriel's message to Mary and the time of Jesus' conception.
 - 1) According to Luke 1:26, Gabriel appeared to Mary in "**the 6th month.**" {Luke 1:26 makes no reference to Elizabeth in that verse and "**the 6th month**" of Luke 1:26 is not worded the same as "**her 6th month**" [referring to Elizabeth's 6th month] of Luke 1:36}
 - 2) There were primarily **three** calendars in use in Israel during the time of Jesus; the Roman calendar {which begins in January}, the "old" Jewish calendar {which begins in September to

October} and the "modern" or "Mosaic" Jewish calendar {which begins in March to April}. The "Mosaic" calendar is the same as the old Jewish calendar except the first month was changed from September-October to March-April at the Lord's command in Exodus 12:2. Modern Jews, however, still celebrate Rosh Hashanah {New Year} in September-October and number their calendar years {but not their months} from that date. A rabbi explained to me {while I was at chaplain school in New York} that they celebrate their new year during the seventh month rather than the first month.

- 3) When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary {in the sixth month}, Elizabeth her cousin, was 6 months pregnant with John the Baptist. {Luke 1:36}
- B. Luke records that when Mary learned of Elizabeth's pregnancy she went quickly to Elizabeth's home. {See Luke 1:39-40}}
- C. When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's home she had already conceived Jesus. [Which is why John leaped in Elizabeth's womb.] {See Luke 1:41-45}
- D. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months {see Luke 1:56} [This means Mary stayed with Elizabeth until or about the time John was born. It also means that Mary was about three months pregnant herself when she returned to her home and to Joseph. {Probably the reason Joseph considered divorcing Mary.}]
- E. According to historical records Herod died at the end of March or first part of April very soon after issuing the decree to kill the babies in Bethlehem. [However, early historical records are often full of errors.]

VI. Which calendar?

- A. If Luke used the Roman calendar there is no question about when John and Jesus were born. John the Baptist was born sometime in September {around Rosh Hoshanna -- which is in keeping with one tradition that John was born on Rosh Hoshanna} and Jesus would be born sometime in March {around the Passover} six months later. Which is also in keeping with the supposed historical time of Herod's death.
- B. If Luke used the "old" Jewish calendar which Mary probably would have used, John would have been born sometime in the middle of May to the middle of June {around Pentecost} and Jesus was

born sometime in middle of December to the middle of January. Which the early church fathers determined.

- C. If Luke used the "Mosaic" calendar, John was born in the middle of December to the middle of January, and Jesus was born in the middle of May to the middle of June {around Pentecost}
- D. According to most protestant churches the Roman Catholic church sometime during the third century arbitrarily set aside December 25 as the time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, supposedly to counter the pagan celebrations of the time.
To say that the date was chosen arbitrarily is simply wrong and is based partly upon an ignorance of the calendars, and partly upon an anti- Roman Catholic bias.
The church officials probably assumed Luke was using the "old" Jewish calendar that Mary would have used or had information that we do not have available to us today.
- E. Luke was writing to gentiles rather than Jews. We can determine that he was writing to gentiles because he often explains Jewish customs which he would not have to do for the Jews. Since he was writing to gentiles, the fact that he doesn't explain which calendar he is referring to tends to support the idea that he used the Roman calendar.
- F. From a purely logical approach by the Romans -- it was well known that the Jews were required to journey to Jerusalem on one of the three high holy feast times -- Feast of Tabernacles {15 days after Rosh Hoshanna - around the end of September}, Passover {around the end of March}, and the Feast of Weeks {Pentecost -- around the end of May}. Therefore the best time to take a census of the Jews would be during one of these three times. However, the Romans would not necessarily be concerned about the Jews convenience.

VII. Conclusion

With the evidence we have at the present time we may not be able to accurately determine the exact date of Jesus' birth. It is clear that if Jesus was born in December or May that the historical accounts of Herod dying at the end of March or first of April are flat wrong. However, historical accounts cannot be considered as accurate as Biblical accounts which are based on the inspiration of God. Based on Matthew and Luke's accounts there are only 3 possible times for Jesus' birth: the middle of December to the middle of January, March {around the Passover}, or the middle of May to the middle of June {around Pentecost}.

Based on the fact that Luke was writing to gentiles and does not explain the calendar as he does other Jewish customs, the logic of having the census in

the spring rather than the cold of winter, along with historical accounts of Herod's death; I have been inclined to believe and still am more inclined to believe that Jesus was actually born in March near the time of the Passover.

However, as time goes by, I am more and more inclined to believe that the church officials of the 3rd century may have had information which we do not have today, and possibly knew much more than we give them credit for. It is also interesting to note that the Jewish "Feast of Lights" {Hannukah} occurs near the time of Christmas [Some years more closely than others because of the construction of the Jewish calendar. This Jewish celebration is not a "holy" day listed in Leviticus 23 but is based on a time when God miraculously provided oil for the lamps which gave light in the Temple during the time of the Maccabees around 200 B.C.

Should we as Christians not celebrate the birth of Jesus in December? My answer is: At a time when the nights are the longest and pagans seek for light there is nothing wrong with Christians celebrating the birth of the **Light** of the World. **If Luke actually used the "old" Jewish calendar {which Mary probably would have used}, December 25 would have to be within a few of days of the exact correct date!**

We, as Christians, should give thanks every day for the birth of our Saviour.

There are those who say we should not celebrate Jesus' or anyone else's birthday. To that I reply --

"The angels of heaven celebrated His birthday and I believe they know more than ignorant men. I'll follow their lead in celebrating His birth."

However, when we remember the Passover and the cross of calvary we should also remember that this may also be the actual time of our Lord's birth, and it was for the cross that He was born into this world in the first place. {John 12:27}

	Original Roman months	Roman	Old Jewish	Moses' calendar
1		January	Sept.-Oct. {Tishri} [Ethanim - IKi8:2]	Mar.-Apr. {Nisan} [Abib - Deut. 16:1]
2		February	Oct.-Nov. {Heshvan}	Apr.-May {Iyar}
3		March	Nov.-Dec. {Kislev}	May-June {Sivan}
4		April	Dec.-Jan. {Tebeth}	June-July {Tammuz}
5		May	Jan.-Feb. {Shebat}	July-Aug. {Ab}
6		June	Feb.-Mar. {Adar}	Aug.-Sept. {Ellul}
7	September [Note: Sept- 7]	July	Mar.-Apr. {Nisan} [Abib - Deut 16:1]	Sept.-Oct. {Tishri} [Ethanim - IKi8:2]
8	October [Note: Oct- 8]	August	Apr.-May {Iyar}	Oct.-Nov. {Heshvan}
9	November [Note: Nov- 9]	September	May-June {Sivan}	Nov.-Dec. {Kislev}
10	December [Note: deci- 10]	October	June-July {Tammuz}	Dec.-Jan. {Tebeth}
11		November	July-Aug. {Ab}	Jan.-Feb. {Shebat}
12		December	Aug.-Sept. {Ellul}	Feb.-Mar. {Adar}

The original Roman calendar had ten months. Julius Caesar and August Caesar had months inserted for themselves [which of course had to have 31 days each].