Dating the Birth of Christ

By

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The birth of Christ is, perhaps, the single most important event in history; it marks the time when the reign of sin and death began to be annulled and the way opened for man's reconciliation to his Maker. The years of our calendar are thus numbered from the Savior's birth, as well they should. If temporal kingdoms mark the passage of time from the ascension of earth's illustrious monarchs, how much more ought the sons of Adam to mark time from the birth of the King of kings and Lord of lords? Dating the birth of Christ is also important for apologetic purposes, for making a defense of faith and the verity of the gospel record and message. In terms of eschatology, precise dating of Christ's birth, and the beginning and length of his ministry, become important in demonstrating fulfillment of Daniel's seventy weeks; it also bears upon the time of events depicted in Rev. 12. For these and other reasons, in this article we want to give an account of the date and time of Christ's birth.

The Biblical Account

Dating Christ's birth from the scriptures is a relatively straight forward matter. We know that Jesus was baptized in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, when he was not yet thirty years of age. (Lk. 3:1) The actual phrase used by Luke is that Jesus "began to be about thirty." (Lk. 3:23) Similar usage occurs in Matthew's gospel concerning resurrection morning, when

he says it "began to dawn toward the first day of the week." (Matt. 28:1) "Began to dawn" means it was not dawn as yet, but very soon would be. Likewise, "began to be about thirty," means that Jesus was not as yet thirty, although he would be soon. Hence, it would appear that Jesus' baptism occurred at the threshold of his thirtieth birthday while as yet he was still twenty nine. So Irenaeus: *"For when he came to be baptized, he had not yet completed his thirtieth year, but was beginning to be about thirty years of age."* [1] Tiberius ascended the throne of the empire upon Augustus' death in August, A.D. 14. The fifteenth calendar year of Tiberius' would have commenced Jan. 1st, A.D. 29.[2] If this is correct, Jesus would then have been born in 2 B.C.

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[1] *Against Heresies*, II, xxii, 5.

[2] Ussher counts Tiberius' reign from his appointment as "coregent" with Augustus, in A.D. 12. However, Finegan says "As far as is known, ancient sources do not count Tiberius's own reign from what was only his joint rule with Augustus, so this manner of reckoning may be left out of further consideration in relation to Luke 3:1." Citing: Hohner, *Chronological Aspects*, 31-32; Meier, *Marginal Jew* 1:384. §578 , p.337. Luke's gospel was written to ancient people of the Roman world; we must therefore assume he used methods of dating familiar to them, otherwise there could be no purpose is recording dates. If the ancients did not number Tiberius' reign from his association in the kingdom with Augustus, then we can be certain that Luke did not either.

Table No. 1, Christ's birth based upon his baptism in the 15th of Tiberius

Year	Regnal Year	Year	Regnal Year
2 B.C. Christ Born	42d of Augustus	15	1st of Tiberius
1 B.C. 1st birthday	43d	16	2d
1 A.D.	44th	17	3d
2	45th	18	4th
3	46th	19	5th
4	47th	20	6th
5	48th	21	7th
6	49th	22	8th
7	50th	23	9th
8	51st	24	10th
9	52d	25	11th
10	53d	26	12th
11	54th	27	13th
12	55th	28	14th
13	56th	29 A.D. 30th birthday	15th Baptism
14	57th Death of Augustus		

The chart above shows Jesus would have been born in 2 B.C. according to the time of his baptism given by Luke. It also shows that his thirtieth birthday would have occurred sometime before the close of the year A.D. 29. But, we can get slightly more specific. By reckoning backward from Jesus' death, we can determine the probable month of his baptism, and from there, the range of months in which we may expect his birth. Received tradition has it that Jesus' ministry spanned four Passovers, in a period of about three and a half years, his death occurring at Passover A.D. 33. The length of Jesus' ministry is shown by Daniel's seventy prophetic weeks, in which it is said that Messiah would "confirm the covenant with many for a week" (seven years) and in the "midst of the week" (3 ½ yrs.) would cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease. (Dan. 9:27) This latter clause is almost universally taken in reference to Jesus' death upon the cross, three and a half years after his baptism. *"On the ordinary Christian interpretation, this applies to the crucifixion of our Lord, which took place, according to the received calculation, during the fourth year after his baptism by John, and the consequent opening of his ministry."* [3] That Jesus' ministry spanned four Passovers is also established in scripture.

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[3] J.E.H. Thomson, *Daniel – The Pulpit Commentary* (Hendrickson, Peabody, MA), p. 275.

After his first Passover (John 2:13) and before his third Passover (John 6:4), Jesus said, "There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest." (Jno. 4:35) Passover precedes the harvest, which occurred at the time of Pentecost, fifty days later. (Lev. 23:5, 15) The Lord must therefore have made this statement in January or February A.D. 31. Following this, but before Jesus' third Passover, was an unnamed feast (Jno. 5:1), which, if it was not Passover itself, but a later feast, nevertheless shows that another year transpired. This is further substantiated by Lk. 6:1, which tells the story of the disciples plucking and eating ripened heads of grain. This harvest season was too long after Jesus' baptism of A.D. 29 to belong to the Passover of A.D. 30. At the same time, it also preceded the Passover A.D. 32 recorded in Jno. 6:4. We know this because the disciples plucking ears of grain occurred well before the feeding of the five thousand (Lk. 9:10-17), which immediately preceded Passover of A.D. 32. (Jno. 6:4 *et seq.*) Since the harvest of Luke 6:1 belongs neither to the Passover of A.D. 30 nor A.D. 32, it must belong to that of A.D. 31. The fourth Passover is that in which Jesus died, A.D. 33. (Jno. 13:1; 19:28) Most often, Passover would occur in the fourth month, though it can occur in the last half of March. Assuming a three and a half year ministry, if Jesus died in mid April of A.D. 33, his baptism and, therefore, the beginning of his ministry, would likely have occurred about the middle of October.

Table No. 2, the Ministry of Christ

Mid Oct. A.D. 29 – Passover A.D. 30 (six months)
Yr. 1 – Passover A.D. 30-31
Yr. 2 – Passover A.D. 31-32
Yr. 3 – Passover A.D. 32-33
Total – 3 ½ yrs.

Since Luke said that Jesus was not yet thirty when baptized, his birthday must have occurred sometime *after* October, perhaps during his temptation in the wilderness in November or December of A.D. 29.

Determining the year of Jesus' birth this way is comparatively simple and straightforward because Luke has tied Jesus' age to a well known event in history; *viz.*, the accession of Tiberius. Other events recorded in scripture relevant to this discussion are more problematic. Because of their obscurity, the census of Quirinius and the death of Herod, which occurred at or near the

time of Jesus' birth, are more difficult to identify in history and therefore present greater challenge. Nevertheless, using Luke's account as a baseline to judge the accuracy of our work, it can be shown from other sources that Jesus in fact was born in 2 B.C.

Church Fathers

Received tradition among the church fathers holds that Jesus was born 3/2 B.C. It is not until recent times that this has been challenged, mostly upon the basis of the asserted date of Herod's death (below). The testimony of these early fathers should, therefore, be received in evidence of what the church has believed down through the centuries.

Irenaeus (A.D. 180) – *"Our Lord was born about the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus."* (*Against Heresies,* III, xxi, 3) This translates into 3/2 B.C.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 194) – *"And our Lord was born in the twenty-eighth year...in the reign of Augustus."* (*Stomata,* I, xxi, 145) The twenty-eighth year of Augustus' defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, from which Clement here numbers his reign, was Aug. 29, 3 B.C. to Aug. 28, 2 B.C. Hence, Clement places Jesus' birth in 3/2 B.C.

Tertullian (A.D. 198) – *"In the forty-first year of the empire of Augustus, when he has been reigning twenty-eight years after the death of Cleopatra, the Christ is born."* (*Answer to the Jews,* chpt VIII) Tertullian places the birth of Christ at 3/2 B.C.

Julius Africanus (A.D. 170-240) – Julius Africanus wrote a series of "chronographies," most of which have been lost, but of which we possess extensive extracts and quotes, including Eusebius. Africanus gives the number of from years from Adam to the first year of Cyrus as 4943 years. He further states that Cyrus ascended the throne in the first year of the fifty-fifth Olympiad (Ol. 55, 1), which was 560/559 B.C. Thus, 4943 *anno Adami* = Ol. 55, 1 = 560/550 B.C. Africanus then goes on to say there were 5500 years from Adam unto the appearance (*Gk. epiphanian*) of Christ. Based upon the above formula where 4943 *anno Adami* = Ol. 55,

1 = 556/559 B.C., this would mean 5500 *anno Adami* = Ol. 194, 2 = 3/2 B.C.[4]

Hippolytus of Rome (A.D. 170-236) – Hippolytus brought his chronologies to the thirteenth year of Severus Alexander (A.D. 234), giving the number of years from Adam as 5738. He assigns the whole number of years from Adam to Christ as 5502. Thus, 5738 yrs. (the thirteenth of Severus) – 5502 yrs. (the birth of Christ) = 236 yrs. The difference between A.D. 234 (the thirteenth year of Severus) and 236 is two years, placing the birth of Christ in 2 B.C.[5]

Origen (A.D. 185-253) – In a fragment of Origen's homilies on Luke, he states that Jesus was born in the forty-first year of Augustus, that Augustus ruled in all fifty-six years, and that there remained to his rule from and after Christ's birth fifteen years. (Frag. 82 on Luke 3:1) This translates to 3/2 B.C.

Eusebius (A.D. 260-340) – "It was, then, the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, and the twenty-eighth year after the submission of Egypt and the death of Antony and Cleopatra…when our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ…was born." (*Ecclesiastical History,* I, v, 2) The forty-second year of Augustus was 2 B.C.

Epiphanius (A.D. 315-403) – Bishop of Salamis on the island Cyprus, Epiphanius states that Augustus reigned fifty-six years, and that Jesus was born in the forty-second year of his reign. (*Panarion,* XX, ii) He names as counsuls Octavius for the thirteenth time and Silvanus (*Augusto XIII et Silvano*). (*Panarion,* LI, xxii, 3) This equates to 2 B.C.[6]

Paulus Orosius (385–420) – In his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, Orosius says that Christ was born in the seven hundred and fifty-second year from the founding of Rome (A.U.C.)[7] 752 A.U.C. = 2 B.C.

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[4]Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Hendrickson, 1998 ed.) §§ 284-290, pp. 154-157.

[5] Ibid, § 293, pp. 158-160.

[6] Ibid, § 493, p. 289.

[7] Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (trans. Roy J. Defarri; FC 50; Washington D.C. Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1964) pp. 280-281). Ibid, § 497, p. 290

Cassiodorus (A.D. 490-585) – Cassiodorus placed the birth of Christ in the consulship of Lentulus and M. Messala (*Lentulo et Messalino*), stating "When these were consuls, our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God was born in Bethlehem in the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus" This translates into 3 B.C.[8]

Table No. 3, Patristic Writers Concerning Christ's Birth

Irenaeus	3/2 B.C.
Clement of Alexandria	3/2 B.C.
Tertullian	3/2 B.C.
Julius Africanus	3/2 B.C.
Hippolytus of Rome	2 B.C.
Origen	3/2 B.C.
Eusebius	2 B.C.
Epiphanius	2 B.C.
Paulus Orosius	2 B.C.
Cassiodorus	3 B.C.

As the above table demonstrates, there is near unanimity among early Christian writers concerning the date of the Lord's birth, placing it at precisely the time we would expect based upon Luke's statement that Jesus was not yet thirty when baptized in the fifteenth year of Tiberius.

Methods of Dating Regnal Years

The regnal years of kings are counted various ways among different peoples at different times. As we enter into a discussion about the death of Herod and the birth of Christ, the following methods of numbering are relevant:

Actual years – This system simply counts the number of years from actual accession to the throne. A king who acceded in March would complete his first regnal year the following March and every March thereafter.

Accession – In this system, the regnal year corresponds with the calendar year; any portion of a calendar year remaining when the new king acceded is termed his *accession year*, and not counted as a regnal year, but, for chronological purposes, belongs to his predecessor. For example, where a king dies and is acceded by his successor August 1st, the period from August to the new year is counted as his "accession year." The first year of the new king's reign would begin with the next full calendar year on new year's day, and follow the calendar every year thereafter. Assuming this new king died March 31st of his twenty-first regnal (calendar) year, his total reign would be expressed in whole numbers as twenty-one years; the remaining portion of his final year (April 1st – Dec. 31st) being credited to his reign. This system thus awards the portion of a calendar year remaining when a king dies, but takes away the portion remaining to the calendar year when he ascended the throne. Where an historian wished to express the actual years of the king's reign, he would say that he died in the twenty-first (calendar) year of his reign, having reined twenty years and eight months – the eight months representing the months of his accession year (August 1st - Jan. 1st) and the completed portion of his last regnal year (Jan. 1st – March 31st).

Non-accession – This system is the opposite of that above. In this system, the months fulfilled in a calendar year when a king died were awarded to his successor. For example, a king who acceded in November would be awarded the *whole* calendar year and to have completed his first year of rule when the new year came about, even though he had actually ruled little more than a month. Thereafter, his regnal years are numbered by the calendar. This system thus awards the whole calendar year coming in, but takes it away going out.

Based upon non-biblical writings, some conclude that the Jews used the non-accession system. The Jewish Mishna in the tractate *Rosh Hashanah* gives four new years:

> There are four new years: On the first of Nisan is the new year for kings and festivals. On the first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of cattle…On the first of Tishri is the new year for release and jubilee years, for plantation and tithe of vegetables. On the first of Shebat is the new year for trees.[9]

In the discussion following it is further explained:

> If a king ascends the throne upon the twenty-ninth of Adar, as soon as the first of Nisan arrives, he is reckoned to have reigned a year. This teaches us that Nisan is the new year for kings, and that one day in a year is reckoned as a year. But if he ascended the throne on the first of Nisan, he is not reckoned to have reigned a year till the next first of Nisan comes

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[8] Finegan, § 498, p. 290

[9] *Rosh Hashanah* 1:1

around.[10]

Whether this expresses the biblical method of counting a king's reign is an open question. It is clear that the sacred calendar began with the first of Nisan upon the new moon at the vernal equinox (March/April). (Ex. 12:2 *et seq*.) Also, it seems that the first of Tishri, the seventh month (Sept./Oct.), was the new year for purposes of the courses of priests (I Kng. 8:2; Neh. 3:1, 7), the year of release (Deut. 15:1-6), sabbatical years (Lev. 25:1-7), and the Jubilee. (Lev. 25:8-10) Hence, this much is correct. But this is not proof that the stated method of numbering a king's reign is correct. The times of sacred feasts was set in law; there is no similar pronouncement recorded regarding the reign of kings. The passage relied upon as proof that a king's reign was counted from the first of Nisan is I Kng. 6:1, where the number of years since the children of Israel came out of Egypt and the regnal years of Solomon are both counted from Nisan. Apparently, this is thought to prove that both were counted on the basis of *official,* rather than actual, years. However, the children of Israel actually departed Egypt in the month of Nisan after the first Passover and entered Canaan in Nisan as well. (Ex. 12:1 *et seq*.; Josh. 4:19; 5:11) Hence, unless it can be positively demonstrated that Solomon did not accede the throne in Nisan, there is no basis for concluding this verse is an instance of counting official, calendar years as opposed to actual years. Moreover, even if the first of Nisan marked the new year for purposes of enumerating the regnal year of a sitting king, this would not prove that non-accession reckoning was used, for the accession method also changes the regnal years new year's day. Thus, the Bible cannot guide us here or shed light on what Josephus may have done. In the end, there is no proof Josephus used inclusive, non-accession reckoning.

Consular dates – The Romans designated years by those elected consul. The position was held by two men who entered office January 1st of each year. Reference to a year by the two consuls (*Augusto et Silvano*) would therefore designate the twelve month period they held office.

Olympiads – The Greeks used the Olympiad system to specify years. Each Olympiad spanned four years; each year of an Olympiad began on July 1st and ended June 30st of the following year, and are expressed Ol. 185, 1 (the first year of the 185th Olympiad) Ol. 185, 2 (the second year of the 185th Olympiad), and so forth.

Josephus did not use Consular and Olympiad dates in his history of the Jewish war, but added them when dating the same events when he published his *Antiquities*. The Jewish calendar began in Nisan (Mar./April) and for certain purposes in Tishri (Sept./Oct.) The Roman calendar began on January, the Greek Olympiad in July. In translating events of Jewish history into Roman and Greek equivalents would present a great challenge. As Josephus' Consular and Olympiad dates are often hopelessly at odds with scripture and contradict his own chronology in places, it would appear that he applied them very imperfectly. Unfortunately, they represent the chief basis for the early date for Herod's death.

4 B.C. – The Pseudo Date of Herod's Death

We know that Jesus was born while Herod the Great was king over Judea and that Herod died while Jesus was still a young child. (Matt. 2:1, 20; Lk. 1:5) Therefore, the date of Herod's death becomes important in identifying the time of Jesus' birth. The date usually given today for Herod's death is 4 B.C. As we have seen, this has not always been the case. Arguments favoring the 4 B.C. date may be summarized as follows: 1) Statements by Josephus concerning the Olympiad and Consular dates of Herod's accession; 2) statements by Josephus regarding the length of Herod's rule from his appointment by Rome and death of Antigonus; 3) the supposed date of a lunar eclipse that occurred shortly before Herod's death; and 4) the visit of the wise men.

Olympiad & Consular Dates of Herod's Reign – Josephus says that Herod was made king by the Roman senate at the instance of Marc Antony and Octavian Caesar "in the hundred and eighty-fourth Olympiad, the consuls being Caius Domitius Calvinus, for the second time, and Caius Asinius Pollio."[11] This answers to 40 B.C. However, this is universally acknowledge to be wrong. The hundred and eighty-fourth Olympiad ended June 30th; it is very clear that Herod did not arrive in Rome until late fall, which, if the Consular date is correct, would be the first year of the hundred and eighty-fifth

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[10] *Ibid*.

[11] *Ant.,* XIV, xiv, 5; Whiston ed.

Olympiad. Josephus next states that Herod, with the help of the Roman general, Sosius, besieged Jerusalem and took it after a five or six month siege, "when Marchus Agrippa and Caninius Gallus were consuls at Rome, on the hundred and eighty-fifth Olympiad."[12] The Consular date of *Agrippa et Gallo* translates to 37 B.C.

Length of Herod's Reign at Death – Josephus then states that Herod died "having reigned thirty-four years, since he procured Antigonus to be slain, and obtained his kingdom; but thirty-seven since he had been made king by the Romans."[13] If the reign of Herod is numbered so that the remaining months from his appointment as king at Rome are counted as his first year (non-accession reckoning), 39-38 B.C. as his second year, and so forth, we arrive at 4 B.C. for Herod's death.

Table No. 4, Olympiad & Consular Years of Herod's Reign According to Josephus

BC	Reign from Appointment by Rome	Reign from Taking Jerusalem	BC	Reign from Appointment by Rome	Reign from Taking Jerusalem
40	1		21	20	17
39	2		20	21	18
38	3		19	22	19
37	4	1	18	23	20
36	5	2	17	24	21
35	6	3	16	25	22
34	7	4	15	26	23
33	8	5	14	27	24
32	9	6	13	28	25
31	10	7	12	29	26
30	11	8	11	30	27
29	12	9	10	31	28
28	13	10	9	32	29
27	14	11	8	33	30
26	15	12	7	34	31
25	16	13	6	35	32
24	17	14	5	36	33
23	18	15	4	37	34
22	19	16			

This is the established way of numbering Herod's reign among scholarship today.

[12] *Ant.,* XIV, xvi, 4; Whiston ed.
[13] *Wars,* I, xxxii, 8; Whiston ed; *cf. Antiquities* XVII, viii, 1.

However, it is plainly wrong. There is no reason to believe Josephus numbered Herod's reign inclusively. As we have seen, there is no evidence he used non-accession reckoning. Hence, the date of Herod's death must be adjusted to 3 B.C. (40 B.C.- 37 yrs. = 3 B.C. and 37 B.C. - 34 yrs = 3 B.C.). But the question remains, Why, if normal reckoning would suggest a date of 3 B.C. for Herod's death, have men sought to stretch Herod's death to 4 B.C.? The answer has to do with a lunar eclipse near the time of Herod's death.

The Eclipse at Herod's Death - Although the dates provided by Josephus would normally suggest Herod died in 3 B.C., some have sought by inclusive reckoning to put his death in 4 B.C. This is because an eclipse reported by Josephus shortly before Herod's death is believed to have occurred at that time. Following a sedition raised by one Matthias, in which the golden eagle adorning Herod's temple was torn down, Herod punished Matthias and his followers by burning them alive. Josephus then states "And that very night there was an eclipse of the moon."[14] It is not known who first proposed that this eclipse occurred in 4 B.C., but this belief has been current since at least 1650, when Archbishop Ussher published his *Annals of the World*, placing Herod's death at 4 B.C.: "He burned alive the other Matthias, who was a partner in this sedition, along with his companions. That night the moon was eclipsed on March 13, three hours after midnight, according to the astronomical tables. This was the only eclipse mentioned by Josephus in all his writings."[15] This was repeated in 1737, by Whiston, the translator of Josephus, who appended the following note to the above account of the eclipse seen near Herod's death. "This eclipse of the moon (which is the only eclipse mentioned by Josephus) is of the greatest consequence for the determination of the time for the death of Herod and Anitpater, and for the birth and entire chronology of Jesus Christ. It happened March 13th, in the year of the Julian period 4710, and the 4th year before the Christian aera."

This conclusion is repeated even today. Although the Olympiad and Consular dates of Herod's accession given by Josephus would

[14] *Ant.,* XVII, vi, 4; Whiston ed.
[15] James Ussher, *Annals of the World* (Larry and Marion Pierce ed, 2003), § 6074, p. 780.

suggest a 3 B.C. date for his death, because there was no eclipse visible in the horizon that year, or even the following year, scholars argue Josephus used inclusive reckoning, adding a nonexistent year to Herod's reign. This has led professors Vermes and Miller, editors of the new version of Emil Schürer's *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (1897-1898), to say *"Josephus reckons one year too many."* Martin thus comments:

> All scholars recognize this discrepancy in trying to resolve Josephus' chronological statements. To mend the disparity, it is assumed that Josephus has adopted a scheme of reckoning parts of one year (only the first few days of a year) as answering in a legal sense to a whole year. If two or three days can be accepted as representing a whole year in Josephus' account of the number of years for Herod's reign, then these few days could allow Herod's last year to be extended back to the first of Nisan on the Jewish calendar (March 29) in 4 B.C.E. and then a whole year can be awarded to him in a *de jure* sense.[16]

In other words, by subtracting one year from Herod's reign based upon the assumption that Josephus awarded an extra year based upon inclusive reckoning, Herod's death can be moved back in time from 3 to 4 B.C.

Arrival of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents – Sometime before Herod's death, the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, seeking him that had been born king of the Jews. (Matt. 2:1, 2) Word of their arrival and the birth of a new king found its way to Herod. Herod thus assembled the chief priests and scribes and demanded where Christ should be born, and was thus informed in Bethlehem. (*vv.*3-5) He then privily called the wise men, and diligently inquired what time the star had appeared (*v.* 7); then sent them to Bethlehem, in search of the Christ-child. Meanwhile, the holy family had returned to their native Nazareth (Lk. 2:39), and it may be here that the Magi found them, directed there by the inhabitants of Bethlehem, who doubtless remembered the Savior's birth and pointed the Magi accordingly. When the Magi found the Christ-child, he was no longer an infant, but as much as two years old. When the magi failed to return to Herod with news of the child's whereabouts, Herod was wroth and "sent forth, and killed all the children that were Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old

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[16] Ernest L. Martin, *The Star That Astonished the World* (2d ed, Portland, ASK Publications: 1996) p.

and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men." (*v.* 16) Based upon the age of the children Herod ordered slain, and the assumption that he died in 4 B.C. shortly after the aforementioned eclipse, the conclusion has become accepted that Jesus was born in 6 B.C. However, this cannot be reconciled with Luke's statement that Jesus was in his twenty-ninth year when he was baptized in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, for if he was born in 6 B.C., Jesus would then have been *thirty-five*. Since this cannot be, we must reject the above arguments for dating Herod's death.

1 B.C. - The True Date of Herod's Death

Herod's Capture of Jerusalem and the Death of Antigonus – In the third year after his appointment as king by Rome, Herod laid siege to Jerusalem in the spring,[17] prosecuted the war through the summer,[18] and after a five[19] or six[20] month's siege, took the city twenty-seven years to the day after Pompey had captured Jerusalem.

> This destruction befell the city of Jerusalem when Marcus Agrippa and Caninius Gallus were consuls at Rome, on the hundred and eighty-fifth Olympiad, on the third month, on the solemnity of the fast, as if a periodical revolution of calamites had returned since that which befell the Jews under Pompey; for the Jews were taken by him on the same day, and this was after twenty-seven years' time. [21]

Olympiads began July 1 of the year; the "third month" of a given Olympiad would therefore answer to September. The "fast" refers to the Day of Atonement in the seventh month of the sacred calendar (the only fast enjoined by the law – Lev. 16:29). The first month of the sacred calendar (Nisan) was determined by the new moon of the vernal equinox (Passover was on the full moon after the vernal equinox fifteen days later). (Ex. 12:1-10) The earliest this can occur is about March 7th.[22] In saying that it was the

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[17] *Ant.,* XIV, xv, 14; *War,* I, xvii, 8.
[18] *Ant.*, Xiv, xvi, 2.
[19] *War,* I, xviii, 2
[20] *War,* V, ix, 4
[21] *Ant.,* XIV, xvi, 4; Whiston ed.
[22] The Counsel of Nicea, which, decreed that Easter should be observed on the first Sunday following the full moon of the vernal equinox (without regard to the day of the week the full moon occurred), set March 22d as the earliest date for Easter. This is relatively rare; the full moon falls on March 21, less than every one

third month of the Olympiad, Josephus would thus seem to indicate that the fast of the seventh month fell in September that year. Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Hence, the date given by Josephus for the capture of Jerusalem by Herod is September, 36 B.C. (63 B.C. – 27 = 36). This date is confirmed by Josephus' catalogue of high priests, where he says Hyrcanus served twenty-four years, followed by Antigonus, who served three years and three months. Hyrcanus was appointed by Pompey. Hence, the space from Pompey to capture of the city and death of Antigonus is twenty-seven years.

> He also restored the high priesthood to Hyrcanus, and made him governor of the nation, but forbade him to wear the diadem. This Hyrcanus rule, besides his first nine years, twenty-four years more, when Barzapharnes and Pacorus, the general of The Parthians, passed over Euphrates, and fought with Hyrcanus, and took him alive, and made Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus, king; and when he had reigned three years and three months, Sosius and Herod besieged him, and took him, when Antony had him brought to Antioch, and had him slain there.[23]

Josephus says that Antigonus reigned three years and three months from appointment as king by the Parthians until his execution by Antony. The account of Antigonus' death suggests that he was executed within a month or so of his capture. He had first to be carried to Antioch by Sosius after the capture of the city and a short space of time to settle affairs there; he was then kept against Antony's triumph in Rome, who was persuaded at length to put him to death instead, because the people would not be still under the government of Herod as long as Antigonus was alive.[24] If we allow thirty to forty-five days for this, it would place Antigonus' death toward the latter half of October, 36 B.C.

This becomes important in helping determine the time frame between Herod's flight to Rome where he was made king and the beginning of his reign upon the capture of Jerusalem. If Antigonus was put do death in mid October, this would mean he was made king by the Parthians in July, 39 B.C. (July., 39 B.C. – 39 months (3 yrs, 3 mnths) = Oct., 36 B.C.). This is a good approximation, for Antigonus was made king

sometime shortly after Pentecost.[25] This then is about the time that Herod fled to Alexandria, where he took ship to Rome to seek Antony's help. Josephus indicates the stormy season was then come, and that Herod sailed to Pamphylia through a violent storm in which he was nearly shipwrecked. A similar series of events beset St. Paul in Acts, where we learn that he was shipwrecked, when the captain ventured to put to sea after the fast of the seventh month (Sept./Oct.). (Acts 27:9 *et seq*.) Herod remained at Pamphylia long enough to have a three decked ship constructed and help rebuild the city, which had been much damaged by Antony's and Caesar's war with Cassius.[26] The sum of which is that we may assume it was fully November or December, 39 B.C., when Herod arrived in Rome.[27] Josephus says Herod remained in Rome only seven days, and then returned to Palestine, landing at Ptolemais. It was about April of 36, during his third year from being made king at Rome, that Herod besieged Jerusalem.

Table No. 5, Regnal Years of Antigonus and Herod till Capture of Jerusalem

Antigonus	Regnal year	Herod	Regnal year
July 39 B.C.	Parthians make king	Nov. 39 B.C.	Made king at Rome
July 39- July 38 B.C.	1st year	Nov. 39 - Nov. 38 B.C.	1st year
July 38- July 37B.C.	2d year	Nov. 38 - Nov. 37 B.C.	2d yr.
July 37- Aug. 36 B.C.	3d Year	Nov. 37- April 36 B.C.	Begins siege (spring 36)
July 36- Oct. 36 B.C.	3 yrs. 3 months	Sept. 36 B.C.	Captures Jerusalem

The Unreliability of Josephus' Consular and Olympiad Dates – The dates reflected in the table and discussion above represent *actual* regnal years, based upon the capture of Jerusalem in 36 B.C., twenty-seven years after Pompey took the city, but they do not otherwise accord with the Olympiad and Consular dates provided by Josephus. If one accepts Josephus' Olympiad and Consular dates for the beginning

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hundred years (there was no occurrence in the whole 20th century). The new moon would occur fourteen days prior to this.
[23] *Ant.,* XX, x, 1; Whiston ed.
[24] *Ant*., XV, i, 1, 2

[25] *Ant*., XIV, xiii, 4, 10.
[26] *An*t. XIV, xiv, 2, 3.
[27] Ussher indicates it was not yet winter, citing Salianus, *Against Forniellus*, 4014 AM, num. 26, 27; *Annals*, § 5422, p. 704.

of Herod's reign, Herod's death will occur in 3 or 4 B.C., depending upon whether accession or non-accession reckoning is employed. But as there was no eclipse in 3 B.C., that leaves only 4 B.C. This, in turn, would place Jesus' birth in 5 or 6 B.C., creating a contradiction with Luke's gospel. Thus it is a question of either Josephus' Consular and Olympiad dates or the Bible. One or the other must give way, for they cannot be reconciled. The disparity of Josephus' chronology has been noted by scholars for centuries. Whiston appended a dissertation to his translation of Josephus, in which he deals with issues of dates and numbers in Josephus, and states "It is but too evident, that not a few of Josephus's numbers, both in his present Greek copies, and those of the old Latin version…have been *grossly corrupted* since the days of Josephus."[28] Finegan, the leader in the area of Biblical chronology, cites a study in which forty-six manuscripts in the British Museum published before 1700, among which twenty-seven texts, all but three published before 1544, read that Philip died in the "twenty-second year of Tiberius," while not a single edition published before 1544 read "twentieth of Tiberius" as our current copies read. In the Library of Congress, five more editions read "the twenty-second year," while none prior to 1544 records the "twentieth year." It was also found that the oldest versions of the text give variant lengths of reign for Philip of thirty-two and thirty-six years.[29] The difference in both cases bears upon the date of Herod's death, whether 3 B.C. or 1 B.C. The sum of which is that dates given in Josephus must be critically assessed and freely rejected where they cannot be reconciled with scripture.

Assuming Herod's capture of Jerusalem occurred in 36 B.C., twenty-seven years from Pompey's capture of the city, Herod's death would then be 1 B.C. This result obtains because Josephus states Herod reigned a *full* 34 years from Antigonus' death, which means he died *after* his thirty-fourth year, while filling up his thirty-fifth. Similarly, when Josephus states that Herod reigned thirty-seven years from appointment by Rome, this means that he reigned fully thirty-seven years, and died while filling up his thirty-eighth. (Table No. 6, below)

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[28] Whiston, *Upon the Chronology of Josephus*, Dissertation V, 1; *emphasis added*.
[29] Finegan, p. 301.

The same result would be obtained if accession reckoning were used, so that the remaining months of 39 and 36 B.C. were disregarded, and the first full year of Herod's reign was numbered from the following calendar year. (Table No. 7, below)

This evidence can be strengthened. Josephus indicates that the battle of Actium (Sept. 2, 31 B.C.) occurred in the seventh year of Herod's reign. If the calendar years of Herod's reign were numbered from 1 Tishri (late Sept./Oct.), as Filmer suggests,[30] then the battle would have occurred in Herod's seventh year.

Table No. 8, Battle of Actium

B.C.	Regnal Year
Nov. 39-1 Tishri 38	Accession
1 Tishri 38-37	1
1 Tishri 37-36	2
1 Tishri 36-35	3
1 Tishri 35-34	4
1 Tishri 34-33	5
1 Tishri 33-32	6
1 Tishri 32-31	Battle of Actium

Flavius Josephus

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[30] Filmer, p. 293.

Table No. 6, Regnal Years of Herod (Actual)

Year B.C	Year from Appointment by Rome	Year from Death of Antigonus	Year B.C.	Year from Appointment by Rome	Year from Death of Antigonus
Nov. 39-38	1		Nov. 20-19	20	17
Nov. 38-37	2		Nov. 19-18	21	18
Nov. 37–36	3		Nov. 18-17	22	19
Nov. 36–35	4	1	Nov. 17-16	23	20
Nov. 35-34	5	2	Nov. 16-15	24	21
Nov. 34-33	6	3	Nov. 15-14	25	22
Nov. 33-32	7	4	Nov. 14-13	26	23
Nov. 32-31	8	5	Nov. 13-12	27	24
Nov. 31- 30	9	6	Nov. 12-11	28	25
Nov. 30-29	10	7	Nov. 11-10	29	26
Nov. 29-28	11	8	Nov. 10-9	30	27
Nov. 28-27	12	9	Nov. 9-8	31	28
Nov. 27-26	13	10	Nov. 8-7	32	29
Nov. 26-25	14	11	Nov. 7-6	33	30
Nov. 25-24	15	12	Nov. 6-5	34	31
Nov. 24-23	16	13	Nov. 5-4	35	32
Nov. 23-22	17	14	Nov. 4-3	36	33
Nov. 22-21	18	15	Nov. 3-2	37	34
Nov. 21–20	19	16	Nov. 2–Dec. 1	Herod dies	Herod dies

Table No. 7, Regnal years of Herod (Accession)

Year B.C	Year from Appointment by Rome	Year from Capture of Jerusalem	Year B.C.	Year from Appointment by Rome	Year from Capture of Jerusalem
Nov. 39	Accession		19-18	20	17
38-37	1		18-17	21	18
37-36	2		17-16	22	19
36-35	3	Accession	16-15	23	20
35-34	4	1	15-14	24	21
34-33	5	2	14-13	25	22
33-32	6	3	13-12	26	23
32-31	7	4	12-11	27	24
31-30	8	5	11-10	28	25
30-29	9	6	10-9	29	26
29-28	10	7	9-8	30	27
28-27	11	8	8-7	31	28
27-26	12	9	7-6	32	29
26-25	13	10	6-5	33	30
25-24	14	11	5-4	34	31
24-23	15	12	4-3	35	32
23-22	16	3	3-2	36	33
22-21	17	14	2-1	37	34
21-20	18	15	1B.C.	Herod dies	Herod dies
20-19	19	16			

January 10, 1 B.C. Eclipse - As we have seen, although the Consular and Olympiad dates provided by Josephus place Herod's death in 3 B.C., scholars stretch the facts in order to place his death in 4 B.C. This is because no lunar eclipse was visible in the night horizon in 3 or 2 B.C. The following table, based upon *Liu and Fiala's Canon of Lunar Eclipses 1500-3000,*[31] shows the eclipses visible in the relevant years.

Table No. 7, Lunar Eclipses near Herod's Death

Year B.C.	Eclipse	Time till Passover
6	None	
5	3/23	29 days
5	9/15	7 months
4	3/13	29 days
3	None	
2	None	
1	Jan. 10	Twelve weeks
1	Dec. 29	Fourteen weeks

There is no evidence that would recommend adopting the eclipses of 5 B.C., and these may therefore be rejected out of hand. There were twenty-nine days from the eclipse in 4 B.C. until Passover. In that time, the following events occurred:

1. The illness of which Herod died increased; his body putrefied and bred worms.
2. Herod traveled beyond Jordan to mineral baths and returned to Jericho when these failed to provide a cure.
3. The important men were compelled to come from across the nation to be shut up in the Hippodrome against Herod's death; Herod's orders were that they be killed in order that there be mourning in the land when he died.
4. Herod's son, Antipater, was executed; Herod changed his will, and himself died five days later.
5. A sumptuous funeral procession was held in which Herod's body, atop a golden bier, was carried over twenty miles to Herodium, followed by the whole army and above five hundred domestics carrying spices for his burial.
6. Archelaus continued mourning seven days, followed by a funeral feast.
7. Archelaus granted many petitions of the people to gain the nation's good will and released men his father had imprisoned.
8. A sedition was raised by the people, who decried the death of those that had been executed for pulling down the golden eagle upon the temple.

When one considers the time involved in the increase of Herod's illness, traveling to mineral baths, undergoing treatment, returning to Jericho, and the gathering of the nation's important men to the Hippodrome, it is clear these alone would easily cover the whole period of twenty-nine days, leaving virtually no time in which to accomplish the remaining events before Passover. This led Riess[32] and others to opine that the eclipse of 4 B.C. be rejected, as well it should. The better view, therefore, is that an eclipse of 1 B.C. is in view. There were two: one in the beginning of the year, another at its end. Filmer and Martin suggest the former, Pratt, the latter. Pratt suggests that the reason Josephus mentions this eclipse alone in all of his histories is that it was widely witnessed and popularly associated with the death of the rabbis Herod put to death. Pratt urges that the January 10th eclipse, which occurred at approximately 1 a.m., would have been viewed by too few people to qualify for the sort of popular association he feels prompted Josephus to record it. The December 29th eclipse, on the other hand, would have been visible shortly after sunrise, causing it to be widely witnessed.[33]

This argument deserves consideration. Certainly, an eclipse at early evening the day of the executions would more readily have impressed itself upon the nation's mind and consciousness more than one occurring in the middle of the night, when it would have been witnessed by comparatively few. On the other hand, eclipses are often viewed as heavenly

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[31] Bao-Lin Liu and Alan D. Fiala, *Canon of Lunar Eclipses 1500 B.C.-A.D. 3000* (Richmond, VA: Willmann-Bell, Inc, 1992).

[32] F. Riess, *Das Geburlrjckr Christi* (1880).

[33] John P. Pratt, *Yet Another Eclipse for Herod*, The Planetarian, Vol. 19, No. 4, Dec. 1990, pp. 8-14. The argument was first put forth by Filmer.

portents of divine displeasure and impending wrath. Doubtless it was this that caused Josephus to record the eclipse, and not because it was widely witnessed, as Pratt suggests. Furthermore, the Dec. 29th eclipse would require the addition of a year to Herod's life and reign. Herod's death shortly after January 10[th,] 1 B.C., was close enough to the anniversary of his accession that Josephus could simply disregard the few additional months in reporting the number of years associated with his reign. But the December 29th eclipse, followed by his death in early January, 1 A.D. – the difference of almost a whole year - would be too long for Josephus to chronologically ignore. Hence, we reject Pratt's suggestion, and adopt the Jan. 10th eclipse as the one referred to by Josephus. Jesus would therefore have been born less than two year prior to this.

Conclusion

The Bible, early church fathers, Josephus' chronology, and nature's ecplise all combine to confirm that Jesus was born in 2 B.C.

Letter of the Emperor Claudius to

the Alexandrians Regarding the Riots of the Jews

"Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, Imperator, Pontifex Maximus, Holder of the Tribunician Power, Consul Designate, to the City of the Alexandrians, greeting.

Tiberius Claudius Barbillus, Apollonius son of Artemidorus, Chaeremon son of Leonidas, Marcus Julius Asklepiades, Gaius Julius Dionysios, Tiberius Claudius Phanias, Pasion son of Potamon, Dionysios son of Sabbion, Tiberius Claudius Archibius, Apollonius son of Ariston, Gaius Julius Apollonius, Hermaiskos son of Apollonius, your ambassadors, having delivered to me the decree, discoursed at length concerning the city, directing my attention to your goodwill towards us, which, from long ago, you may be sure, had been stored up to your advantage in my memory; for you are by nature reverent towards the Augusti, as I know from many proofs, and in particular have taken a warm interest in my house, warmly reciprocated, of which fact (to mention the last instance, passing over the others) the supreme witness is my brother Germanicus addressing you in words more clearly stamped as his own.

Wherefore, I gladly accepted the honors given to me by hou, though I have no weakness for such things. And first I permit you to keep my birthday as a dies Augustus as you have yourselves proposed; and I agree to the erection in their several places of the statues of myself and my family; for I see that you were anxious to establish on every side memorials of your reverence for my house. Of the two golden statues, the one made to represent the Pas Augusta Claudiana, as my most honored Barbillus suggested and entreated when I wished to refuse, for fear of being thought too offensive, shall be erected at Rome; and the other according to your request shall be carried in procession on the eponymous days in your city, and it shall be accompanied by a throne adorned with whatever trappings you choose.

It would perhaps be foolish, while accepting such great honors, to refuse the institution of a Claudian Tribe and the establishment of groves after the manner of Egypt. And so I grant you these requests as well, and if you wish you may also erect the equestrian statues given by Vitrasius Pollio my procurator. As for the erection of those in four-horse chariots which you wish to set up to me at the entrances into the country, I consent to let one be placed at Taposiris, the Libyan town of that name, another at Pharos in Alexandria, and a third at Pelusium in Egypt. But I deprecate the appointment of a high priest to me and the building of temples, for I do not wish to be offensive to my

contemporaries, and my opinion is that temples and such forms of honor have by all ages been granted as a prerogative to the gods alone.

Concerning the requests which you have been anxious to obtain from me, I decide as follows. All those who have become *epheboi* up to the time of my Principate I confirm and maintain in hte possession of the Alexandrian citizenship with all the privileges and indulgences enjoyed by the city, excepting those who have contrived to become *epheboi* by beguiling you, though born of servile mothers. And it is equally my will that all the other favors shall be confirmed wich were granted to you by former princes and kings and prefects, as the Deified Augustus also confirmed them. It is my will that the *neokoroi* of the Temple of the Deified Augustus in Alexandria shall be chosen by lot in the same was as those of the Deified Augustus in Canopus are chosen by lot. With regard to the civic magistracies being made triennial, your proposal seems to me to be very good; for through fear of being called to account for any abuse of power your magistrates will behave with greater circumspection during their term of office. Concerning the *Boule,* what your custom may have been under the ancient kings I have no means of saying, but that you had no senate under the earlier Augusti, you are well aware. As this is the first broaching of a novel project, whose utility to the city and to my government is not evident, I have written to Aemilius Rectus to hold an inquiry and inform me whether in the first place it is right that a *Boule* should be consituted, and , if it should be right to create one, in what matter this is to be done.

As for the question , which party was responsible for the riots and feud (or rather, if the truth be told, the war) with the Jews, although in confrontation with their opponents your ambassadors, and particularly Dionysios the son of Theon, contended with great zeal, nevertheless I was unwilling to make a strict inquiry, though guarding within me a store of immutable indignation against whichever party renews the conflict. And I tell you once and for all that unless you put a stop to this ruinous and obstinate enmity against each other, I shall be driven to show what a benevolent Prince can be when turned to righteous indignation. Wherefore, once again I conjure you that, on the one hand, the Alexandrians show themselves forebearing and kindly towards the Jews who for many years have dwelt in the same city, and dishonor none of the rites observed by them in the worship of their god, but allow them to observe their customs as in the time of the Deified Augustus, which customs I also, after hearing both sides, have sanctioned; and on the other hand, I explicitly order the Jews not to agitate for more privileges than they formerly possessed, and not in the future to send out a separate embassy as though they lived in a separate city (a thing unprecedented), and not to force their way into gymnasiarchic or cosmetic games, while enjoying their own privileges and sharing a great abundance of advantages in a city not their own, and not to bring in or admit Jews who come down the river from Egypt or from Syria, a proceeding which will compel me to conceive serious suspicions. Otherwise I will by all means take vengeance on them as fomenters of which is a general plague infecting the whole world. If, desisting from these courses, you consent to live with mutual forebearance and kindliness, I on my side will exercise a solicitude of very long standing for the city, as one which is bound to us by traditional friendship. I bear witness to my friend Barbillus of the solicitude which he has always shown for you in my presence and of the extreme zeal with which he has now advocated your cause; and likewise to my friend Tiberius Claudius Archibius.

Farewell."