



The Sword & The Plow

Newsletter of the Bimillennial Preterist Association

Vol. XIV, No. 12 – December 2011

The Biblical Case of the December 25th Birth of Christ

Kurt Simmons, JD

(Editor's note: once a year we leave off studies in Preterism and eschatology and take up issues of Chronology and the birth of Christ. No other time of the year brings the joy to the world that Christmas does. How wonderful that simple chronology vindicates the traditional date of Jesus' birth).

We often hear it said that Jesus was not “really” born December 25th; that this date is a mere fiction, surreptitiously appropriated by church authorities in an attempt to Christianize the pagan solstice; that, in fact, Jesus was probably born in September, 6 or 7 B.C. However, such charges are relatively recent. For most of church history, December 25th was received as the actual date of Christ’s birth, handed down from earliest times. Questions regarding Christmas were first raised during the Reformation by Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians, who attempted to outlaw its celebration in England, Scotland, the Colonies, and other places

where they came into political power.¹ The objections we hear today to Christmas are echoes of these ghosts from the past.

¹ “By contrary Doctrine, we understand whatsoever men, by Laws, Councils, or Constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as be vows of chastity, foreswearing of marriage, binding of men and women to several and disguised apparels, to the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat for conscience sake, prayer for the dead; and

However, the evidence from scripture and sacred history supporting the December 25th, 2 B.C., birth of Christ is actually very substantial. In fact, as we shall see, not just the *season* but the very *month, week, and day* of Dec. 25th all freely emerge from the record, by straightforward chronological reconstruction from the gospels and other available sources. The evidence from scripture may be summarized as follows:

- 1) The Baptism, Wilderness Temptation, and First Disciples of Christ
- 2) The Priestly Courses and Nativity of John the Baptist
- 3) The Arrival of the Magi and Death of Herod the Great (or the Slaughter of the Innocents and Herod's Execution of Antipater)

Luke's Chronology and the Baptism of Christ

"Began to be about Thirty"

The only explicit reference to Christ's age and hint to his date of birth is in the gospel of Luke. Following Jesus' baptism, Luke tells us "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age" (Lk. 3:23). This phrase is problematic. Does Luke mean Jesus had just recently turned thirty, or that he shortly would turn thirty? Much depends upon our answer, so let us take a moment to decide. There are about 136 instances where the scriptures provide someone's age (a word search produces 127 returns for "years old", and 9 for "years of age"). Surveying these, we find that the overwhelming majority of cases simply state the subject's age, typically in the past tense, though sometimes in the historic present. Another group of cases adds a descriptive phrase to the subject's age: "And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren" (Acts 7:23). "For the man

keeping of holy days of certain Saints commanded by men, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the Feasts (as they term them) of Apostles, Martyrs, Virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our Lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil Magistrate." Knox's History, Vol. 2, p. 281. Cf. John Knox, Works (David Laing, ed.; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Vol. ii, p. 190.

was above forty years old, on whom this miracle of healing was shewed" (Acts 4:22). I find these cases particularly insightful when compared with Luke.

- "He was **full forty** years old"
- "The man was **above forty** years old"
- Jesus "**began to be**" **thirty** years old.

This comparison makes it rather clear that "began to be" is the equivalent of "almost." The like phrase occurs in Matthew where he says Mary Magdalene came to the sepulcher "in the end of the Sabbath, as it *began to dawn* toward the first day of the week" (Matt. 28:1). "Began to dawn" shows that the sun was not yet risen even though it had begun to grow light. In Nehemiah, we read "when the gates of Jerusalem *began to be dark* before the Sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut" (Neh. 13:19). "Began to be dark" shows that it was not dark yet, even though the evening shadows had begun to grow long. In the same way, in saying Jesus "began to be" thirty, Luke indicates Jesus was approaching his thirtieth birthday, but had not yet attained thirty years of age.

This is further confirmed by the word "about" ("Jesus himself began to be *about* thirty"). A similar phrase (though a different Greek word) is used by Paul of Abraham in Rom. 4: 19: "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was *about an hundred years old*, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb." Although Paul calls Abraham "about an hundred," when we read Genesis, we find that in fact Abraham was **only ninety-nine** when the promise of Isaac's birth was made (compare Gen. 17:17, 24; 21:5). Therefore, "about an hundred" means "almost an hundred." By the same token, "began to be about thirty years of age" can only mean "began to be almost thirty."

The word "about" in Lk. 3:23 is from the Greek "*hosei*" and is defined by Strong's (#5616) as "*as if: - about, as (it had been, it were), like (as)*". Hence, *hosei* describes something that is not, as if it were. In fact, the root of this word ("*hos*" #5613) occurs in Rom. 4:17 in almost exactly these terms "*God who quickeneth the dead and calleth those things **which be not as though they were.***" If "about" ("*hosei*") is used to call that "which is not as though it were," then it follows that Jesus was **not** 30 years old when baptized. And since a man is thirty years old the whole period between his thirtieth and thirty-first birthdays, it remains only to determine whether Jesus was more or less than thirty; *viz.*, whether he was twenty-nine or thirty-one years old. Here there can be no doubt. Luke's use of "began to be about thirty" excludes the possibility the Lord was thirty-one, for one who is

thirty-one has past his thirtieth year and is not *about to begin* it as Luke describes.

15th of Tiberius, Christ's Baptism, and Dec. 31st A.D. 29

Luke says that Jesus was baptized in the 15th year of Tiberius (Lk. 3:1). Roman emperors dated their reigns from Jan. 1-Dec. 31st following their accession (the "non-accession" method). Augustus Caesar, who preceded Tiberius and was the reigning emperor when Jesus was born, died August 19, A.D. 14. Thus, the 1st regnal year of Tiberius would have been the calendar year A.D. 15. Counting forward from here, the 15th year of Tiberius would have been Jan. 1-Dec. 31st, A.D. 29.

The A.D. 29 baptism of Christ is corroborated by Daniel's seventy prophetic weeks where he states that the Messiah would appear 483 years ("seven weeks and three score and two weeks") from the commandment to restore and rebuild the gates and walls of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25). Dating from the commandment of Artaxerxes given to Nehemiah in 454 B.C. (Neh. 1:1; 2:1), this would bring us to A.D. 29 (454 - 483 = 29 A.D.). Christ's baptism is the point at which Jesus was publicly declared to be the Messiah and his ministry is dated. Thus, the testimony of Luke and Daniel agrees.

When Luke states Jesus was 29 going on 30 the 15th of Tiberius that is the same as to say he was 29 going on 30 in A.D. 29. And since undoubtedly Luke's intention is to indicate Jesus turned 30 that very year, Dec. 31st becomes a boundary or terminus on one end, and Jesus' baptism a boundary or terminus on the other, with his birthday falling somewhere in between. Thus, if we can identify when Jesus was baptized, we can identify the weeks and months remaining to the year in which Jesus birthday would have occurred, and where Dec. 25th stands in relation thereto.² The simplest way to identify

² Assertions Jesus was born as early as 6 B.C. based upon Herod's asserted death in 4 B.C. contradict scripture and are wrong. This dating was based upon a lunar eclipse reported by Josephus near the time of Herod's death (*Antiquities*, XVII, vi, 4). Since there was an eclipse March 13, 4 B.C., it has been assumed that this identifies the year Herod died. However, modern scholarship has reopened this question, showing that a 4 B.C. death of Herod cannot be reconciled with the chronological facts in our possession, and that the Jan. 10, 1 B.C., eclipse alone is consistent with the evidence. (See W. E. Filmer, *The Chronology of Herod's Reign, and The Date of*

when Jesus was baptized is to first determine the length of his ministry and then reckon backward from its end to its beginning, from Calvary to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John.

The Duration of Christ's Ministry

Scripture teaches that Jesus had a three-and-a-half-year ministry. This is seen in 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" (three and a half years) would be "cut off," causing the sacrifice and oblation to cease (Dan. 9:27; cf. Isa. 53:8). This 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

The 3 ½ yr. ministry of Christ is confirmed by the gospels, particularly the gospel of John, whose record of events and succession of annual feasts allows us to determine the duration of Jesus' ministry:

- Jn. 2:13, 23 – John records a Passover shortly after the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Passover was typically in April, though it could occur as early as March or as late as May.
- Jn. 4:35 – Jesus commented that there were "yet four months, and then cometh harvest." Harvest occurred about 50 days following Passover, and was marked by the feast of Pentecost. Since there were four months remaining until harvest, this would place Jesus' comments in January or February. Thus, between the first Passover (Jn. 2:13) and the time recorded here, almost one year has transpired.

Christ's Birth Corrected.) A 2 B.C. birth and the fact Jesus was not yet 30 yrs. old at the time of his autumn baptism A.D. 29 also obviates the possibility of a Jan. 6th birthday as held by the early Eastern Church. Finegan, § 473, p. 278.

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

- Jn. 5:1 – John mentions another, unnamed feast. Many believe this was Passover (the second), but the evidence is unclear. In Jn. 6:4, another Passover is recorded, which was preceded by Jesus’ feeding the five thousand (Jn. 6:5-14). Luke records the feeding of the five thousand in Lk. 9:10-17. Before this, Luke records an occasion where the disciples plucked ears of grain while passing through a field, placing this near harvest (Lk. 6:1). However, this harvest was too early to be associated with the Passover preceding the feeding of the five thousand, but too late to be associated with the Passover in Jn. 2:13. Thus, without identifying the feast in Jn. 5:1, we are able to determine that another year has passed.
- Jn. 6:4 – A third Passover is mentioned. Jesus’ ministry has thus covered the space of about two and a half years (three Passovers, plus the partial year prior to his first Passover).
- Jn. 7:2 – John records the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurs in the fall.
- Jn. 10:22 – John mentions Jesus’ presence at the Feast of Dedication commemorating the re-dedication of the altar by Judas Maccabaeus following its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes (I Macc. 4:59). He specifically mentions that it was winter.
- Jn. 11:55 – The fourth, and final Passover.

Thus, Jesus’ ministry spanned four Passovers, plus the period from his baptism to the first Passover, for a total of three and a half years.⁴ Passover occurs the 14th day of Nisan at the full moon (Ex. 12:2-6, 18). Jesus died on the Preparation (Friday) before the Sabbath, the day following Passover, or Nisan 15, A.D. 33 (Mat. 27:62; Lk. 23:54). He rose the third day, the morning of the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1). Reckoning backward three and a half years from Nisan 15, A.D. 33, will thus bring us to the time of Christ’s baptism. There are some issues with the Jewish calendar that we must take into account to identify the specific date (so far as this may be known), but without more, we can already place Jesus’ baptism in autumn A.D. 29 (four Passovers brings us to the spring of A.D. 30; the period between the first Passover and Christ’s

⁴ This conclusion is joined by Eusebius who, based upon Josephus, confirms that Christ's ministry was confined within the space of four years, bounded by the high priestships of Ananus and Caiaphas. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk. X.

baptism brings us to the preceding autumn). Knowing, therefore, that Christ’s birthday occurred sometime between fall and the close of the year A.D. 29, the traditional, early winter birth becomes a distinct possibility. For if Jesus turned 30 before the December 31st, A.D. 29, and if the other three quarters of the year are ruled out by the fact that he had not had a birthday when baptized in the fall, then the window remaining in which he was born is confined to the last several weeks or months of the year.

Can we get more specific? Indeed, we can. We can narrow the window to within 53 days. But to do this we must discuss the niceties of the Jewish calendar.

Table No. 1, Ministry of Christ

Baptism A.D. 29 – Passover A.D. 30

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

The Jewish Calendar and Ministry of Christ

If we were dealing with only the Julian or Gregorian calendar, identifying the specific date of Christ’s baptism would be relatively straightforward. We could simply reckon backward from Jesus’ crucifixion 3 ½ years to the desired date. This is possible because our calendar has a fixed number of weeks and months, which stand in fixed relation to our world and its astronomical phenomena. The summer and winter solstices and the vernal and autumnal equinoxes occur at precisely the same point in our calendar each year (June 21/Dec. 21 and March 21/Sept. 21, respectively). However, the Julian and Gregorian calendars are relatively new in terms of their universal use and acceptance. The Julian calendar dates from B.C. 44, the Gregorian from A.D. 1582. (The Gregorian calendar reformed small errors in the Julian calendar by adjusting the method of intercalating leap years to keep it in closer synchronization with the solar year.) The Julian calendar, which was the civil calendar of the

Romans, existed side by side with local calendars and methods of dating used by the various nations of the Roman Empire. The chief difference between the Julian and other calendars used by ancient peoples is its complete break with the lunar month, establishing a fixed relation between civil dates and the annual course of the sun.

In ancient times, most of the world used a moveable calendar, whose months tracked the cycles of the moon. The Jews used this sort of calendar. Months were determined by the new moon and hence lunar, but the beginning of the year was determined by the vernal equinox and hence solar. The first month in the Jewish calendar was Nisan (or Abib), when Passover was celebrated. Passover occurs at evening the 14th day of Nisan at the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox. Most readers will have noticed that Passover and Easter occur at different times from year to year. The reason for this is that they are based upon lunar cycles, which occur at their own seasons without regard to the solar year. The vernal equinox may occur 365 days apart from year to year, but the full moon occurs in 29 day cycles, independent of the course of the sun. Depending upon where the moon is in its cycle when the vernal equinox occurs determines the period remaining until Passover and Easter. Because the phases of the moon are not synchronized with the astrological points of the year, all dates in the Jewish (lunar) calendar shift against the backdrop of the Gregorian (solar) calendar this way, so that from one year to another the correlation between their dates is never the same. This lack of synchronization is due to the fact that the lunar (Jewish) year is 11 days shorter than the solar (Julian/Gregorian) year. The lunar year is 354 days, the solar year is 365. This difference keeps the two systems forever out of sync and is why a luni-solar calendar historically created so many challenges for civilization (and why the Romans finally abandoned it). In the period of three years, the lunar year leaps ahead of the solar year about 33 days. Hence, it was necessary to periodically bring the two systems back into synchronization, or feasts nominally set to occur in spring will soon occur in the dark of winter. To accomplish this, the Jews and other ancient peoples alternated the length of their months between 29 and 30 days ($6 \times 29 + 6 \times 30 = 354$), and added a 13th month at regular intervals in a 19-year cycle. This intercalation was originally determined by observation of astronomical and other phenomena, but eventually was reduced to mathematical formula.

The Babylonians are credited as the first to discover a 19-year cycle and a fairly complete record of Babylonian intercalations exists from as early as 629 B.C. However, the cycle settled into its classic form beginning about 432 B.C. by the discovery of the

Greek mathematician, Meton of Athens. Meton found that the time covered in 19 solar years was equal to 235 lunations, and that by adding seven months in 19 years the lunar and solar years could thus be reconciled. Leap years are tabulated on the Metonic table, and occupy the years 3, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, and 19 in the cycle. It is known that the Jews also used a nineteen year cycle.⁵ However, whereas under the Metonic cycle the month intercalated was always 30 days, with the Jews the extra month might be either 29 or 30 days as to them seemed best. Moreover, the Jewish cycle is so arranged that its first year answers to the ninth year in the Metonic cycle, with the result that one leap year out of seven in a 19-year cycle does not match. The eighth year (a leap year) in the Jewish cycle falls on the sixteenth year (a regular year) in the Metonic (see illustration).

Since leap years were intercalated about once every three years, this means that in the course of Jesus' three-and-half-year ministry at least one leap year of thirteen months would have occurred. In fact, due to the differences we have been discussing, by the Metonic cycle there were two intercalary months, one in A.D. 30, and one in A.D. 32, but by the Jewish cycle there was only one, in A.D. 32.⁶

⁵ "There is much to make it look as if, in general, the Babylonian system came to prevail relatively early, but with some variations in Jewish practice from the Babylonian...Therefore, in spite of the fact that the Jewish system used only added Adars, the result was the same as in the Babylonian system and seven months were intercalated in nineteen years." Finegan, pp. 35-39, §§ 71-80. Of course, the 19-year cycles merely accomplish mathematically what can otherwise be determined by observation; the regular accumulation of extra days due to the difference in the lunar and solar year mean that approximately every third year an extra month would have been added in any event. Thus, provided the same starting point is used, the placement of leap years will be the same whether mathematical tables are used or not.

⁶ For the years A.D. 30 and 32 the equation works like this: $747 + 30 = 777 \div 19 = 40$ with remainder of 17. $747 + 32 = 779 \div 19 = 41$ with no remainder. Because the divisor is nineteen, a remainder of "zero" equals the nineteenth year of the cycle. Thus, A.D. 30 and 32 were both leaps year. See the article *The Babylonian Calendar* after R.A. Parker & W.H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology* at

All this to say, that the difference in length between lunar and solar years and the intercalation of an extra month in A.D. 32 prevents us from identifying the date of Christ's baptism by simply reckoning backward from Christ's crucifixion in Gregorian years. The succession of feasts by which we track the length of Jesus' ministry in the gospels and Daniel's prophecy of Christ's crucifixion are both based upon a lunar calendar and must be reckoned accordingly. 42 months (3 ½ yrs) in the Gregorian (solar) calendar equal 1277 days. But 42 months on the Jewish (lunar) calendar equals 1240 days (20 months of 29 days, 22 months of 30 days). Thus there is a difference of 37 days between them. Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, following Passover, on the 15th day of the Jewish month Nisan, A.D. 33. 3 ½ years backward from this date will bring us to **Heshvan 15**, A.D. 29. Heshvan 15th in the Jewish calendar that year translates into Nov. 8th in our Roman calendar. This then becomes the date of Jesus' baptism, **Nov. 8th**.⁷

A Nov. 8th baptism leaves only **53 days, or less than 15%** of the calendar year remaining in which Jesus' birthday would have occurred. If we can imagine the circle of the year like a clock in which 11 o'clock is November, 12 o'clock is December, and 1 o'clock is January, the period from 11 to 1 o'clock would be the portion remaining to the year after Jesus' baptism, and from 1 o'clock to 11 o'clock the portion of the year that was already spent. This simple illustration proves that the Dec. 25th birth of Christ was fully and historically possible. 85% of the year was spent, 15% of the year remained, and both Jesus' birthday and Dec. 25th fell

<http://www.friesian.com/calendar.htm>. Another formula, that used by modern Jews, is to multiply the Jewish year × 235, subtract 234, and divide by 19. If the remainder is larger than 12, it is a leap year, if less, it is a regular year. For the year A.D. 32 the formula is $3792 \times 235 = 891120 - 234 = 890886 \div 19 = 46888.73684$. $46888 \times 19 = 890872$. $890886 - 890872 = R14$. Thus, by Jewish reckoning, A.D. 32 is also reckoned a leap year, however, by this same method A.D. 30 is not. For a complete explanation of the *modern* Jewish calendar, see <http://roarbush.com/jewcal/index.html>.

⁷ See the date converter at <http://roarbush.com/jewcal/calsec10.htm> where Nov. 8, will return Thursday, Chesvan 15, A.D. 29. Our charts of the priestly courses place Heshvan 15, A.D. 29, on a Wednesday

within the same narrow space. But we are not through, and can get closer still.

Table No. 2

Days Remaining to the Calendar Year A.D. 29

Fall Baptism ----- 53-Day Window -----Dec. 31st
 30th Birthday Occurred within 53-day Window following Baptism

Jesus' Forty-Day Fast and Wilderness Temptation

Jesus was 29 years old when baptized Heshvan 15 (Nov. 8), A.D. 29. He then undertook a forty-day fast (Lk. 4:2), after which he was tempted of the devil. Following his temptation, Luke informs us that Jesus began active, public preaching (Lk. 4:14). The implication here is that Jesus' fast and temptation were taken in preparation for his public ministry and timed to end on or about his 30th birthday, for Jewish men were required to be 30 yrs old before beginning active public teaching.. Forty days from Jesus' Nov. 8th baptism, will bring us to Dec. 18th. We are not told how long Jesus' temptation following his fast lasted, but we are told that he hungered and was tempted to turn stones into bread, then was taken to a high mountain where he was tempted with the kingdoms of the world, then to Jerusalem where he was tempted to cast himself down from a pinnacle of the temple (Lk. 4:3-13). It seems improbable that these were supernatural events or transportations, which happened in an instant of time. The better view is that they transpired over a period of several days, and that Jesus was in fact wrestling against the lusts of his flesh as we all do. The flesh is the source of all human lust and temptation, and scripture affirms that Jesus was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15; cf. Gal. 6:18-22; Jm.1:14-16). Jesus' fast following his baptism ended Dec. 18th. If we therefore allow seven days in which these temptations were accomplished, that will bring us to Dec. 25th.

There are 365 days in the year. The chances therefore are very small that Jesus' birthday should fall anywhere near Dec. 25th. Yet, we find to the contrary that simple chronology places Jesus' birthday in the part of the year occupied by the one day historically associated with his birth, and this in the course of events whose narrative makes *specific reference* to his impending

birthday. Surely, this is too great a coincidence to assign to chance. If Luke had not mentioned Jesus' birthday, perhaps the coincidence could be dismissed. But Luke *did* mention Jesus' impending birthday, and this makes the conclusion almost impossible to resist: Jesus' fast and temptation were taken in preparation for his public ministry and calculated to end on or about his 30th birthday, which simple arithmetic places on or about Dec.25th.

Three and a half years backward from Christ's crucifixion Nisan 15, A.D. 33, brings us to Heshvan (Nov. 8) 15, A.D. 29. Jesus' fast and temptation ended Tebet 3 (Dec. 25th), forty-seven days later.

The Baptism and First Disciples of Christ

Other evidence showing Jesus' 30th birthday occurred in the closing days of A.D. 29 consists in Jesus making his first disciples. It was a law and custom with the Jews that Jewish men must attain 30 years of age before beginning active, public teaching. In fact, this is why Luke tells us Jesus was on the threshold of the 30th birthday when baptized; *viz.*, he was about to turn 30 and so begin his public ministry. Since Jesus would not have made disciples before he was 30, by determining when he did begin making disciples and teaching, we can determine when his 30th birthday would have occurred.

The synoptic gospels (Mathew, Mark, and Luke) tell us that, following his baptism, Jesus underwent a period of fasting and temptation in preparation for his ministry. John tells us that, following this, Jesus returned to John the Baptist at Bethabara where he proceeded to make his first disciples. John enumerates seven consecutive days, ending with the wedding at Cana.

- Christ baptized in the Jordan by John shortly before his 30th birthday. Nov. 8th, A.D. 29
- Jesus undertakes a forty-day wilderness fast in preparation for his ministry. 40 days
- Jesus is tempted by the devil, being led to a high mountain, then to Jerusalem (Lk. 4:3-13; cf. Matt. 4:2). ----
- Jesus returns to Bethabarba, ----

where John was baptizing.

- Jesus remains with John four days. The four days occur at Jn. 1:26, 29, 35, and 43. During these four days, Jesus made disciples of Andrew and Peter, Phillip and Bartholomew (Nathaniel). 4 days
- The third day there is a wedding in Cana of Galilee (Jn. 2:1) where Jesus performed his first miracle (Jn. 2:1-11), commemorated by the Feast of Epiphany (Jan. 6th). 3 days/Jan 6

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus manifested his glory to his disciples by turning the water into wine. This first miracle is commemorated by the Feast of Epiphany. "Epiphany" means a "manifestation." Many are unsure what the Feast of Epiphany commemorates. Some suppose it commemorates Jesus' baptism, or his Nativity, or even the arrival of the Magi. But Ephiphanius tells us that it celebrates the miracle of Cana, and this fits the chronology where the others do not. The Feast of Ephiphany has been kept Jan. 6th from at least as early as the 3rd century A.D. If we count backward seven days from Jan. 6th, that will bring us to Dec. 31st. This then becomes the day Jesus returned to John at Bethabara - Dec. 31st, the same boundary or terminus as before and with the same result. For if Jesus was making disciples the first three or four days of January, then his birthday almost certainly occurred sometime *after* his baptism, but *before* his return to John Dec. 31st. Irenaeus makes this point very clear when he notes that Jesus would not have made actual disciples before he turned 30:

*"For how could he have had disciples, if He did not teach? And how could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed thirty years of age (for thus Luke, who has mentioned His years, has expressed it: 'Now Jesus was, as it were, beginning to be thirty years old,' when He came to be baptized)."*⁸

Disciples require a master, but a master must be 30 years old. Andrew and Nathaniel called Jesus Rabbi,

⁸ Irenaeus, *Contra Haeresies*, II, 4, 5; Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. I, p. 391

indicating he was recognized as being of age to be a master or teacher (Jn. 1:38, 49; cf. 3:2, Nicodemus). Therefore, although at his baptism Jesus was still only 29 years old, when he returned to Bethabarba about 53 days later (Dec. 31st), he had turned 30, and thus began actively to teach and to make disciples. Since his birthday occurred within the narrow period between his baptism and return to John at Bethabarba, and since within that same narrow window the traditional date of Jesus' birth occurred, we have every reason to accept the received date as authentic, established by the voice of two witnesses as required by scripture.⁹

AD 70, the Course of Jehoiarib, and Nativity of John the Baptist

⁹ This chronology is confirmed by Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis on the island of Cyprus. Epiphanius originally supposed Epiphany celebrated both the Nativity and miracle at Cana, but later changed his mind and agreed that Dec. 25th was the correct date of the Nativity, placing the baptism of Christ on Nov. 8th, and assigning Jan. 6 to the miracle at the wedding in Cana: "*Epiphanius boldly removed the date of the Baptism to the 8th of November. 'January 6' (= Tobi 11), he writes, 'is the day of Christ's Birth, that is, of the Epiphanies.'* He uses the plural, because he adds on January 6 the commemoration of the water miracle of Cana. Although in 375 he thus protested that January 6 was the day 'of the Birth after the Flesh,' he became before the end of the century a convert, according to John of Nice, to the new opinion that December 25 was the real day of this Birth." Encyclopedia Britannica, *Feast of Epiphany*, 11th ed (1911). See also the New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia, which gives Nov. 6th as the equivalent of Athyr 12: "Epiphanius (Haer., li, 27, in P.G., XLI, 936) says that the sixth of January is *hemera genethlion toutestin epiphanon*, Christ's Birthday, i.e. His Epiphany. Indeed, he assigns the Baptism to 12 Athyr, i.e. 6 November. Again in chapters xxviii and xxix (P.G., XLI, 940 sq.) he asserts that Christ's Birth, i.e. Theophany, occurred on 6 January, as did the miracle at Cana, in consequence of which water, in various places (Cibyra, for instance), was then yearly by a miracle turned into wine, of which he had himself drunk."

Other evidence that may be offered in proof of Christ's December 25th birth consists in the priestly courses. David divided the priests into 24 courses, which served at appointed times in the temple (I Chr. 24:7-18). The two courses that concern us here are Jehoiarib, the first, and Abijah, the eighth. Luke informs us that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a member of the course of Abijah, and was burning incense in execution of his priestly office when Gabriel appeared and announced that his wife, Elizabeth, would conceive a son. Based on statements in Luke, John was about six months older than our Lord (Lk. 1:36, 56). If it can once be determined when Zechariah was serving, and therefore when John was conceived, it is thus possible to identify the approximate time of Christ's birth 15 months later.

To identify when Zechariah may have been serving requires that we first recreate the priestly courses; to do this we require a point of reference from which to begin. Happily, history has not left us without a witness. The Jerusalem Talmud records a saying of Rabbi Yose ben Halafta, which dates to about A.D. 150, or 80 years of the event, stating that the course of Jehoiarib was serving when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans:

"Whence do we know that the second Temple was also destroyed on the 9th of Ab? We have learned in a Boraita: 'A happy event is credited to the day on which another happy event happened, while a calamity is ascribed to the day when another calamity occurred;' and it was said that when the first Temple was destroyed it was on the eve preceding the 9th of Ab, which was also the night at the close of the Sabbath and also the close of the Sabbatical year. The watch at the time was that of Jehoiarib, and the Levites were chanting in their proper places, at that moment reciting the passage [Psalms, xciv. 23]: 'And he will bring back upon them their own injustice, and in their own wickedness will he destroy them'; and they did not have time to end the passage, which concludes, 'yea, he will destroy them--the Lord our God,' before the enemy entered and took possession of the Temple. This happened also at the destruction of the second Temple."¹⁰

That Jehoiarib is reputed to have been serving the 9th of Ab (August 4) when the temple was destroyed tells us the courses were not static and did not serve the same

¹⁰ *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* (30.86-97). Rabbi Yose ben Halafta is confirmed in part by Josephus, who says that the first and second temples were destroyed upon the same day 556 years apart. *Wars* VI, iv, 1, 5.

weeks and months year after year. For Jehoiarib being first could not have served in Ab unless the rotation of courses somehow advanced in their ranks.¹¹ However, while this tells us that the courses did advance, it does not tell us how they advanced. Two basic models have emerged. The continuous succession model supposes that each course followed its immediate predecessor through the 24 courses, at which point the first course began again, and so on *ad infinitum*. This model has been shown to conflict with basic facts in the gospel narratives, and therefore is not used here.¹² The approach adopted here is that the priestly rotations were framed within a 24-year cycle, originally set in

¹¹ That the courses were not static but advanced is confirmed by the saying of Rabbi Abbahu (AD 300) in Jerusalem Talmud y. Sukka 5.7-8. Finegan, 133, §242.

¹² According to this model, the courses may be extrapolated backward in continuous succession from the 9th of Ab, A.D. 70, to the relevant year to determine where any particular course would have been serving. To do this, we multiply 365.25 days by the number of years covered, divide this by seven to obtain the number of weeks, and then divide this number by 24 to obtain the number of courses fulfilled in the period. In the present case, there were 72 years between the fall of Jerusalem Ab 9, A.D. 70 and Ab 9, 3 B.C., the year John would have been conceived. This equals 156 complete cycles of priestly courses, plus 13 additional weeks ($365.25 \times 72 + 18 = 26,298 \div 7 = 3,756.857 \div 24 = 156.53$. $0.53 \times 24 = 12.72$). We have been working backward. To arrive at the beginning of the 156th cycle, we count forward 13 steps to the last week of October. This is the point where Jehoiarib would have been serving. Abijah is the eighth course, which would place it on duty eight weeks later in the middle of December 3 B.C. The birth of Christ 15 months later would thus occur in mid-March, 1 B.C. This is too late, for we have already seen from Luke that Jesus' was born in 2 B.C. The courses served twice annually. Abijah would also have been on duty 24 weeks earlier, the first week of July. What is the result in this case? 15 months from this point would place Jesus' birth at the end of September 2 B.C. This will not do either, for Luke tells us that Jesus' was not yet 30 when he was baptized in November A.D. 29, which would have been the case had he been born in September. Thus, the continuous succession model cannot be reconciled with the facts in our possession. See also Seldon, *Theanthropos*, pp. 72-74.

motion by Solomon and renewed by Ezra, which commenced the Sabbath on or next before Tishri 1 (I Kings 8:2; Ezra 7:1).¹³ Each course served one week twice annually, plus such additional weeks necessary to fill out the year, coming in the evening of the Sabbath (Friday) and going out the evening of the Sabbath (Friday) following. Assuming each course advanced annually to the next station, the cycle of priestly ministrations would be completed in 24 years, at which point it would begin anew.¹⁴

Rabbinic tradition placing Jehoiarib on service when the temple was destroyed allows us to identify the station in the twenty-four year cycle. From there we can find when the cycle began. Then, by reckoning backward in twenty-four year increments to the course preceding the conception of John the Baptist in 3 B.C.,

¹³ Tishri (October) is the Jewish New Year for accession of kings, rotation of priests, and all things except the cycle of feasts, which took their start with Passover in the spring. Other sources (rabbinic, Qumran) show that the priestly courses took Tishri 1 as their regular beginning point, which would have no meaning under the continuous succession model. For the rotations once set in motion, Tishri 1 could have no further significance to their progression. It is only under a system where the courses were static or advanced as herein proposed that recurring reference to Tishri 1 can have any meaning. Finegan, p. 134, §§243, 246.

¹⁴ Since there are 24 courses, if they served twice annually, this will fill up 48 weeks, leaving just less than 3 weeks remaining in the normal lunar year, but 8 weeks in a leap year. The approach taken in our tables of priestly courses is that the extra weeks in normal years were filled by the courses next in order (Jehoiarib, Jedaiah, and Harim), after which the cycle advanced anew, so that in effect, the first three courses served three times annually. However, for all anybody knows, these extra weeks may have been filled by lot. The assumption with leap years is that the courses whose lot it was to be on duty in Adar each served an extra week during the intercalated month of Adar II to allow for the unbroken progression of the courses. That a course served extra weeks does not mean that the same men served, however, only that their course provided the extra men necessary to fill out the weeks.

we can putatively identify the week and month Zechariah was serving. The number of steps from the first station of Jehoiarib's second ministration (for the first does not reach so far) to the week of Ab 9 is twenty-one stations. Thus, A.D. 70 was the twenty-first year in the twenty-four year cycle. To return to the beginning of the cycle we subtract twenty years from A.D. 70, which brings us to A.D. 50. Subtracting twenty-four more years brings us to A.D. 26; this course would therefore have consisted of the years A.D. 26-49. Twenty-four more years brings us to A.D. 2; this course would have consisted of the years A.D. 2-25. 24 years more bring us to 23 B.C. (there was no year zero). This course would have consisted of the years 23 B.C. to 1 A.D.

Counting forward from 23 B.C. to 3 B.C. when John was conceived shows that the course of Abijah would have been serving at its twenty-first station when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah (23 B.C. to 3 B.C. = 21). Assuming Zechariah's course was in its *second* ministration, this would mean he was on duty the week of Elul 27-Tishri 4 (Sept. 5-11). We do not know how long after Zechariah's ministration his wife conceived. Human fertility cycles run about 28 days, during which a woman is fertile only about 7. If we allow that Elizabeth conceived the third week after Zechariah returned home, this would place conception in the week of Tishri 26-Heshvan 2 (Oct. 3-9). Normal human gestation is 38 weeks. A 38-week gestation would place John's birth the week of Tammuz 20-26 (June 20-26), 2 B.C. Based on statements in Luke, John was six months older than our Lord (Lk. 1:36, 56). Six months is 26 weeks. Twenty-six weeks from John's birth brings us to Tebet 26-Shebat 3, which answers to the week of December 21-27.

Thus, assuming the model suggested herein is correct, rabbinic tradition regarding the priestly courses and destruction of Jerusalem corroborates the received date of Christ's birth. (To consult tables of priestly courses, [click here](#).)

Arrival of the Magi & Death of Herod the Great

(or the Slaughter of the Innocents & Herod's execution of Antipater)

Matthew reports that Magi came from the east seeking the new-born King. When word of this reached Herod, he learned from the scribes and elders of the Jews that Christ would be born in Bethlehem. He then called the Magi and diligently inquired when the star had first appeared. Herod then sent the Magi to Bethlehem, with the request that they return to him when they found the Christ-child so he could worship him also

(Matt. 2:1-9). We know, however, that the Magi did not return to Herod. Rather, being warned in a dream that Herod would seek to destroy the child, they departed home another way, while the holy family fled to Egypt (Matt. 1:11, 12; 2:13-15). Thus mocked, Herod sent to destroy the children two years old and under, based upon the time he learned from the Magi the star had first appeared (Matt. 2:16).

From Matthew's account, it is often assumed that the Magi found the holy family in Bethlehem and that it is from thence that Joseph, Mary, and the Babe fled to Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15). However, this is almost certainly wrong. The law of Moses deemed a woman unclean for 40 days following the birth of a son, after which a sacrifice for her purification was to be made. The law also required that first-born sons be redeemed. (Ex. 13:2; Lev. 12:2-6; Lk. 2:22-24). Luke informs us that forty days after Christ's birth, the holy family thus went to Jerusalem to perform the requirements of the law and then returned home to Nazareth (Lk. 2:39). Assuming a December 25th birth, February 3rd would be the point at which Mary was deemed pure and able to perform the rites required by the law. Since there is no time for the flight to Egypt between Christ's birth and the sacrifices performed in Jerusalem forty-odd days later, it is clear that the Magi did not find the holy family in Bethlehem. Rather, being sent by Herod to Bethlehem to find the Christ-child, the star they had seen in the east wondrously appeared again, leading them to where the child actually was (Matt. 2:9, 10).

Bethlehem is less than ten miles from Jerusalem. Given Bethlehem's close proximity to Jerusalem and the fact Herod expressly sent them there to find the new-born child, the Magi certainly did not need the star to lead them to Bethlehem. This would be absurd. The better view, therefore, is that the star was interposed by heaven to lead the Magi to Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary returned following the sacrifices performed in Jerusalem. The Roman census had recently concluded, if it was not still under way, and it would have been a small matter for Herod to identify Joseph's and Mary's presence in Bethlehem and the birth of their son, and to trace their home to Nazareth from the Roman register. Galilee was part of Herod's kingdom and jurisdiction. The holy family was therefore forced to flee Palestine entirely, "for Herod would seek the young child to destroy him" (Matt. 2:13). Hence, it is from Nazareth, not Bethlehem that the holy family almost certainly fled to Egypt, where they remained until the death of Herod. (For a full account, see the article [here](#).)

When Herod learned that the Magi had returned home another way, he ordered the Slaughter of the Innocents. Secular history corroborates Matthew's account. In a

chapter reporting the witty sayings of Augustus Caesar, Macrobius states that when Augustus was told about the Slaughter of the Innocents and the execution of Herod's son, Antipater, Augustus said "it is better to be Herod's hog, than his son."¹⁵ Thus, Macrobius not only becomes an independent source verifying sacred history, but, by tying the Slaughter of the Innocents to the time of Antipater's death, provides important chronological links to reconstructing the Nativity. Josephus reports that Herod survived Antipater by only five days.¹⁶ Hence, the Slaughter of the Innocents was one of Herod's last acts on earth. Where we tend to assume that Joseph and Mary were in Egypt a long while, perhaps as much as several years before Herod died, we find instead that they were there only a short time. This in turn allows us to reckon backward from Herod's death to arrive at an approximate time for the birth of Christ.

According to the best sources (Filmer, Finegan, Martin), Herod died sometime after the eclipse of January 10, 1 B.C. Josephus, however, is more specific and places Herod's death just before Passover.¹⁷ By reckoning backward from Herod's death, subtracting 40 days for Mary's purification, plus several weeks for the Magi to arrive, a short while more for Herod to discover they returned home another way and to decide upon the execution of Antipater and Slaughter of the Innocents, the period remaining in which Christ was born narrows to a small window during the early weeks or months of winter 2-1 B.C. We suggest the following approximate timeline. As

¹⁵ *Saturnalia*, II, 4, 11 - "Cum audisset inter pueros quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici filium quoque eius occisum, ait: Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium."

¹⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII, vi, vii; Wars I, xxxii

¹⁷ Josephus, Wars II, i, 3. Recalling that Jesus' birthday followed his fall baptism, the birth narrative therefore is bounded by Passover on the one hand and by late autumn on the other hand, or a period of less than six months. Thus, we find the like window at Jesus' nativity that existed at the beginning of his ministry (five months following Jesus' baptism Passover occurred, Jn. 2:13). In both cases, Passover provides a point of reference from which to reckon backward to his birthday. Interestingly enough, both also contain a forty-day period, Jesus' fast in the one and Mary's period of ritual uncleanness in the other.

with the other evidence we have examined, the facts in our possession are fully consistent with a Dec. 25th birth:

- Nisan 14 (April 5) 1 B.C. – Passover
- Nisan 1st (March 18), 1 B.C. - Death of Herod the Great
- II Adar 25 (March 13), 1 B.C. - Slaughter of the Innocents; Execution of Antipater
- II Adar 11 (Mar. 4), 1 B.C. - Arrival of Magi; flight to Egypt
- Adar 11 (Feb. 3), 1 B.C. - Presentation of Christ at Jerusalem; holy family returns to Nazareth
- Shebat 17 (Jan. 10), 1 B.C. – Lunar Eclipse mentioned by Josephus
- Shebat 1 (Dec. 25), 2 B.C. - Birth of Christ

Church Fathers

This represents the evidence from scripture for the December 25th birth of Christ as we presently understand it. Further evidence (among other) exists in the universal practice of the church and tradition of the church fathers. The testimony of the church fathers is almost unanimous in favor of the December 25th birth of Christ. The weight of their testimony also comes down in favor of his birth in the year 2 B.C. (For a full discussion of the year of Christ's birth, see W.E. Filmer, here and our article here.)

During the 17th century, the Puritans attempted to outlaw celebration of Christ's birth, prompting some of England's greatest scholars to produce books and tracts testifying to the December 25th birth of Christ and celebration of his Nativity in the early church. These become important and useful sources for us today. The most complete catalogue of citations to the church fathers regarding celebration of Christ's birth we have found is the tract "Metropolis Festorum" by an anonymous pastor from the 17th century. Others producing expansive lists include Edward Fisher and John Selden. We can do no more than scratch the surface here.

St. Augustine – A.D. 354-430

Augustine was bishop of Hippo and one of the most influential writers of the early church; his imprint remains even to this day. Augustine is not the earliest source for the Dec. 25th birth of Christ, but he announces a principle regarding the universal practice of the church that is important at the outset, so we will take his evidence first. In his 118 Epistle to

Januarius, speaking of the yearly feasts then observed, Augustine states:

"Those feasts concerning which we have no express scripture, but only traditions, which are now observed all the world over; we ought to know that the keeping of them was commended unto us, and instituted (or commanded) either by the apostles themselves, or general councils, of which there is a most wholesome use in the church of God; such are the feast of our Lord's Passion, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven, and the coming down of the Holy Ghost, which are now kept holy with a yearly solemnity."

In the following epistle (119), Augustine then says:

"It chiefly behooves us that upon the day of our Lord's nativity, we should receive the sacrament in remembrance of him that was born upon it, and upon the return of the year to celebrate the very day with a feasting devotion."

"The return of the year" appears to signify the winter solstice, when the days begin to grow longer. However, the point we should consider here is Augustine's statement that whatever was practiced universally throughout the church in the whole world was presumably set in place by the apostles or by a general church council. But as no council established the Feast of the Nativity, it exists by tradition, and this presumably from either "word or epistle" (II Thess. 2:15; 3:6; I Cor. 11:2, 23) handed down from the time of the apostles. Although ordaining no set form of commemoration for the Nativity, yet certainly the apostles would have known the date of Christ's birth, as would his mother and brethren, all of whom were active in the primitive church. Therefore it should not stretch our credulity to believe that the Dec. 25th birth of our Lord was set in the church by those early sources and has been handed down without interruption ever since. Concerning the date of Christ's birth, Augustine states:

"He was born, according to tradition, upon December the twenty-fifth." (On the Trinity, 4.5, Post Nicene Fathers 3.74)

Regarding the Baptist's June birth, Augustine said:

"John came into this world at the season of the year when the length of the day decreases; Jesus was born in the season when the length of the day increases." (Sermon In Natali Domini xi).

Thus, Augustine places John's birth at the summer solstice and Jesus' birth upon Dec. 25th, at the season of the winter solstice.

Theophilus, Bishop of Caesarea – A.D. 115-181

Theophilus lived in the time of Emperor Commodus; he lived within 100 years of the apostles, and was bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, the very fount whence sprang our faith.

"We ought to celebrate the birth-day of our Lord on what day soever the 25th of December shall happen." (Magdeburgenses, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, de originibus Christianorum)

Hippolytus of Rome – A.D. 170-240

Hippolytus of Rome provides one of the earliest known references to the December 25 birth of Christ in his commentary on Daniel. Chrysostom says that the Feast of the Nativity was kept "from the beginning" by those in the west, and we find corroboration of this in Hippolytus:

"The first coming of our Lord, that in the flesh, in which he was born at Bethlehem, took place eight days before the calends of January, a Wednesday, in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, 5500 years from Adam." (Commentary on Daniel 4:23)¹⁸

The eighth before the calends of January is the twenty-fifth day of December, and the forty-second year of Augustus was 3/2 BC.

Apostolic Constitutions - Circa A.D. 70-250

The Apostolic Constitutions are a compilation, whose material is derived from sources differing in age. Early writers were inclined to assign them to the apostolic age, and to Clement Romanus (A.D. 70), but they are now generally assigned to the second or third century. In the Fifth book, Sec. III, we find:

"Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of the ninth month."

¹⁸ Hippolytus, *Commentaire sur Daniel* (trans. Maurice Lefevre; SC 14; Paris: Cerf, 1947; trans Beckwith, RQ9 (1977): 74. For an account of the manuscript authority for Hippolytus' commentary, see the comments here.

The ninth month counting from Nisan (April) is Casleu in the Jewish calendar, which answers to December in our own.

Diocletian A.D. 244-311

Nicephorus wrote an ecclesiastical history in which he reports Diocletian's destruction of a church on Dec. 25th, filled with worshippers celebrating the Lord's Nativity:

"At Nicomedia (a city of Bethenia) when the festival of Christ's birth-day came, and a multitude of Christians in all ages had assembled together in the temple to celebrate that birth-day. Diocletian the tyrant, having gotten an advantageous occasion whereby he might accomplish his madness and fury, sent men thither to enclose the temple, and to set it on fire round about, and so consumed them all to ashes, even twenty thousand persons."

Selden (Theanthropos, pp. 33, 34) confirms Nicephorus' report, saying that in ancient Greek and Roman martyrology this event is dated to Dec. 25th.

Roman City Calendar A.D. 336

Further evidence for December 25th is found in the Roman city calendar for the year 354. This calendar lists burial places of the martyrs (*Depositio martyrum*) arranged in the order of the days of the year on which festivals were held in their honor. It is believed by some that the calendar first dated to 336, but was later revised and extended to the year 354. The sequence of festivals in the church year begins with the item:



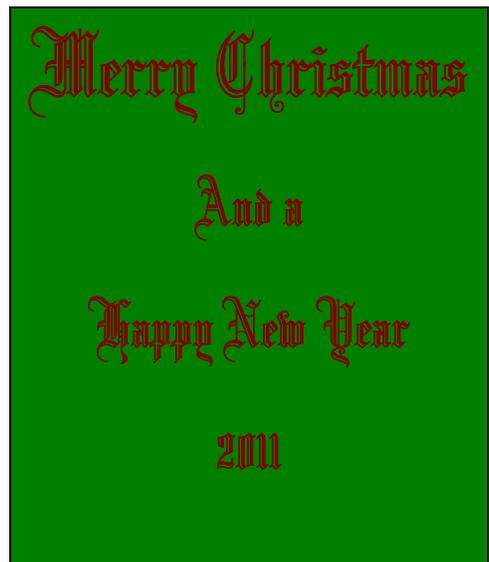
"VIII Kal. Ian. Natus Christus in Betleem Judeae"

The eighth day before the calends of January is December 25th. Thus, in the year AD 336, the festival of the birth of Christ was held on Dec. 25.

We note that in each of these cases the tradition that Jesus was born on December 25th stands upon scripture or the received testimony of earlier ages and nowhere upon the "Christianization" of the pagan solstice or festival of the "unconquered sun" (sol invictus) as is so often suggested. The circumstance that Jesus was born at the time of the solstice should no more disturb us than his resurrection at the vernal equinox when pagans celebrated the rebirth of the earth following the pall of winter death. To the contrary, we should glory at the appropriateness and poetic beauty of a winter birth when the dark of sin and death began to recede before the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2) and light of salvation.

Conclusion

The evidence for the December 25th birth of Christ is as conclusive as the nature of the case will allow: Luke's chronology, the testimony of Jewish tradition and Josephus regarding the destruction of the temple and the priestly courses, the execution of Antipater and Slaughter of the Innocents, and the voice of the church fathers all combine to affirm that the traditional date for the Savior's birth is scripturally based and scripturally sound. May God bless you and your family at Christmas as you pause to remember the day when the Christ-child was born in Bethlehem.



Questions from our Readers

Q: Hello brother, I read and reread your commentary on Revelation. It is helpful to me. But you mentioned also that Michael the Archangel is Christ. The mighty angel in Revelation is Christ. This is an interesting topic to study. Is Christ referring to this when he said: Before Abraham was I am, John 8:58?

A: "Michael" appears to be the name the divinity uses when acting as the "captain" of God's people while going to battle (Josh. 5:13-15; cf. Dan. 12:1). My understanding of Jesus' pre-incarnate existence is that he was the Spirit of God, by which God made the world (Gen. 1:1; Col. 1:16). Jesus was not the "Son" of God until conceived in Mary's womb (Lk. 1:35). He is also called the Son of God in his resurrection (compare Ps. 2:7 with Acts 13:23). However, so far as I know, Jesus was not the "Son" prior to his incarnation, but was God, or the Spirit of God. It was explained to me this way once: "Jesus was an earthen vessel or body; the life in him was the Spirit; both were from God." Thus, rather than a separate being from God, Jesus was the very Spirit of God himself, clothed upon with flesh. Words are spirit clothed with language: Jesus was the Spirit clothed with flesh and thus called the "Word of God." In other words, not three beings, but one being who manifests himself three ways. At least, that is how I understand it at this time.

I hope that answers your question.

Q: Hi Kurt, Thanks for your reply and explanation about Christ. So, you do not believe the traditional (not scriptural) view of Christ's eternal Sonship. I think you are correct. If am not mistaken, his eternal sonship started with Augustine or Origen who taught Christ's eternal generation which is not also in scriptures.

I am also interested in knowing how you interpret 1Thes.4:16,17. Because the common view is that after all dead in Christ are raised up the living saints will be caught up together with them in the clouds. God bless

A: I have an article about this on my web site: Three Views of the Rapture. But to state it briefly, I believe the word "then" in I Thess. 4:16, 17 ("the dead in Christ shall rise, *then* we which are left etc.) indicates the "catching up" is sometime afterward. The text does not state how long afterward though. The assumption is that this catching up is essentially simultaneous, but that is merely assumed, not stated or even required by the passage. The assumption is based upon language

about the living being "caught up *together with them* (the dead)," but this does not imply time, but destination. If a man was caught up together with others in a political movement, does that mean they all joined the movement at the same time? No, of course it doesn't. "Together" points to the place of destination, not the time of being caught up. Thus, my view is that the living are caught up *one-by-one* as we pass out of this life, where we meet the Lord in the air and are joined together with the dead who went on before us. See the article above for the full explanation.

Hope that helps.

Q: William ___ commented on your note "The Marriage of the Lamb".

William wrote: "Kurt, your argument has flaws. Yes marriage is covenantal but you miss the very point Paul makes with a marriage analogy with respect to the law. In Romans 7, Paul argues that death severs the bond to the law. Thus it is not the law that died, but rather Christ died to it. Hence the text begins that the law has dominion over a man as long as "he" lives. It does not say as long as the law lives. Thus, when the man dies, he is released from the law. Paul's point is that it is the "death of the husband" that freed the both parties in the analogy from the "law of marriage." Thus, the wife could remarry another man since the bond is broken. It is that point and that point alone that is the essence of Paul's reasoning. Lard writes: "The law is never said to die...it is we who die, not the law; but hereby we [those who knew the law] are as effectually released from it as though the law died." "The law of the husband is the law which gives the husband control over his wife, and binds her to him. Now, as by his death, she is released from the law, so also is he; and if he still lived here after death, as does the Christian who dies to the law, he would be as free to marriage again, as is his wife. It is this fact that enables the Christian, who is dead to the law, to become united to Christ. In the fact, moreover, we begin to discover the Apostle's design, which is, to establish first a release from the law by death, in order to justify a union with Christ. them from the law. the law". (Lard, p. 221) That is what released Christ from the law, i.e. his death. Remember, not one jot or tittle could pass till all were fulfilled (Matt. 5:17-18)."

A: Jesus stated he had come (first coming) to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17). Thus, the very passage cited to prove the law was valid until AD 70 shows Jesus fulfilled it at the Cross in AD 33. He fulfilled it then

took it out of the way: "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Eph. 2:15). The verb tense here is perfect tense, showing completed action in the past. What part of "has abolished" would you deny?

The analogy of the marriage covenant was used by Paul to show that by Christ's death the Old Testament had no more force or effect. The marriage covenant terminates with the death of a spouse. This frees the other spouse to remarry. Christ's death thus terminated the Old Testament marriage relationship, freeing believers to enter a new marriage relationship with the risen Christ under the gospel. The law does not "die" but it does terminate and cease to have any legal effect. That is the point of the analogy. The law ended at the Cross and the gospel began. "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached" (Luke 16:16). Since both the grace of the gospel and law of Moses could not exist at the same time, since the shadow of the law was fulfilled in the body of Christ, one had to displace the other. To argue that the law was valid until AD 70 is to argue that the gospel had no effect and that nothing happened at the cross.

Q: Have you written much on the Lord's supper? I remember hearing an old sermon a couple years ago where our old preacher was refuting "realized eschatology". His argument was that the reason behind it is to declare his death "till he comes". I guess I view it as He's here and partaking with us in remembering. I'd love your thoughts.

A: My answer to this objection is that "till" does not signify the Lord's Supper would terminate. When Jesus told the disciples they would not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of man be come (Matt. 10:23), he did not mean evangelizing Israel would then cease. The sense is "before" - "you will not have gone over the cities of Israel *before* he comes." In the same way, the Lord's Supper was a testimony of Jesus' murder by the Jews and its weekly observance until/before he came held out the reason the nation would be punished. Paul did not imply its observance would cease.

Q: I've looked around your site but can't find anything on 1 Corinthians 23-28 discussing Jesus handing the Kingdom over to God the Father so he may be all in all. I understand that Christ was first, then those in Christ at his coming. I can see that. But then the end comes (70AD) and he turns it over to God. So, is Jesus still Reigning over the Kingdom of God (the Earth)?

Was God the Father NOT over Jesus during his reign before "the end?"

Have you written anything on that that you could direct me to?

A: My understanding of Christ's reign and delivering up the kingdom to the Father may be analogized to Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was co-regent and heir apparent of his father Napolassar. His father gave him sole authority to make war and conclude peace. Nebuchadnezzar thus invaded Syria and Egypt, and reduced the Jews to captivity in 586 BC. After returning from his war campaign, he surrendered up his authority to his father, acknowledging his father's supremacy and right as king and monarch, even though Nebuchadnezzar continued to be coregent with his father. This is how I understand Jesus' reign. He is coregent with his father and was given sole authority to make war against his enemies and put them beneath his feet. Having subdued the Jews and Romans, he delivered up/returned the kingdom to the Father, but continued to share the reign. He continues to reign today as coregent with God. Hope that helps.

Q: Hello Kurt, I love your writings; they are so clearly written. You have been of tremendous help to me in my coming out of futurism. I met you (7 or 8) years ago at John Anderson's Prophecy Conference in Sparta. You said you had hitchhiked from the airport. Anyway, you signed my book of "Consummation of the Ages" at the conference. My friend and I were spellbound with your presentation. I am still pouring over Revelation while including the reference materials you cited. So, it takes me a while to get it all. Your little book, "Revelation Explained" is a must have and I do appreciate your stand on covenantal eschatology. I do believe that AD70 points back to AD30 (the Cross).

I pulled away from preterit chat groups as I encountered argumentative attitudes. I have so many questions but I would like to talk with you in person. I am a retired Arkansas teacher and that is my excuse! LOL. I want to attend your conference if you plan to host another. I am willing to drive to your area just to talk with you.

I find I am losing friends for Christian fellowship but I do have two and my husband loves me. I keep my mouth shut unless Father gives me utterance. I have too many friends for general fun and they all praise me for my Bible studies but they ask few questions. I just consider you to be my Bible teacher and Todd Dennis falls in there too. That is the only reason I would seek your counsel.

Thank you for your service to our Father. You have certainly blessed me with your books.

Q: Thank you! I very much look forward to reading it [your book]. Only recently have I been bothered to see what the preterists have to say for themselves. I think this started because I was in bed somewhat frustrated that not much eschatology was making sense to me (somewhat contradictory) and I was praying and reading parts of Revelation. As I closed my bible and meditated on what I had read, running it through in my mind, I felt very strongly that the new Jerusalem was not a future literal kingdom to the exact measurements in the book, but rather it was symbolic of the church having life. I was a post-trib premillennialist and greatly discouraged, by the premill writings, from reading anything amillennial or preterist, as if anything not futurist is so wrong it's hardly worth the light of day.

When I went on a preterist site a couple of months ago or so it was greatly pushing partial preterism over full preterism and so I read Chilton's commentary on pdf, which greatly impressed me in parts, disgusted me in other parts, and left me without a full secure understanding. Both post-trib premillennialism and partial preterism had strong biblical points in my view, but both were still left wanting. After some more prayer that God would help reveal to me the truth of all this, I ended up giving full preterism a chance. I was put off by some full preterists' strange ideas of death and resurrection, but in a Facebook group (The Preterist Forum for the new comer) I saw you had answered a post and so I added you as a friend. Then I found your site and read many articles, which made a lot more sense (except for the Hadean Paradise and the reign of the beheaded saints, I'm afraid), and I was happy to see you have more biblical resurrection views. And that's where I'm at right now, but I feel that I have become a preterist in some shape or form, although the early church fathers make me wonder.

Sorry for that long-winded reply. I hope it was interesting though.

Thanks again.

A: Thanks for sharing your journey. When I became a Christian 30 years ago, I had a mentor who was questioning futurist paradigms and who saw distinctly that Matt. 24 had a first century context. He did not have answers to many of the more difficult passages, but the seed he sowed in me took root immediately. I saw right away that, if Jesus came again in AD 68-70 as he said he would, this would have been his "second" coming. So many passages in the Old and New Testaments pointed to first century events and the fall

of Jerusalem, that it was difficult to find any I could conclusively say belonged to a coming that was still future. Although there were several difficult passages I did not know then how to answer, I did not allow these to prevent my adopting a full Preterist view, for it seemed unreasonable to let the few rule over the many. I think most people fall into futurism because that is what they constantly hear and are taught, and because most do not know the Old Testament very well. It is in the Old Testament that we learn the symbolic nature of prophetic language; it is also in the Old Testament that we find so many prophecies pointing to AD 68-70 as the decisive eschatological events in the establishment of Christ's kingdom and dominion over earth. How can anyone read Daniel 2 and 7 and not see the historical context tying it to the time of the Roman Empire? Continue to study and I believe you will grow more confident with the full Preterist view.

I saw some questions from you posted on my Face Book page, so let me answer them here. You asked:

- 1) If Jesus ascended unto his Father in heaven in Acts 1, why was he down in "paradise" reigning with the 1st-century saints beheaded by Romans?
- 2) And why these only? Why not also the ones persecuted to death by stoning of the Jews and also the faithful that died since Adam?
- 3) Who were the saints reigning over and why priests? Were they judging people? Or did I misunderstand that?
- 4) Also it really does seem that the thousand years are one same period because of this verse: "Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison" and this is after talking about the "first resurrection".

Here are my answers:

- 1) Jesus is omnipresent. Even though he ascended to heaven, he was still present with his people on earth. "Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the world/age" (Matt. 28:20). Moreover, John portrays Jesus in Rev. 1 as standing in the midst of the churches/lampstands on earth (Rev. 1:13, 20). Psalm 39 says "if I make my bed in sheol/hell, behold, thou art there." In other words, God is present everywhere, even in Hades Paradise. Thus, there is no contradiction in Jesus having ascended to heaven and also in some form or manner being "with" the saints in Paradise any more than there is a contradiction with Jesus being "with" the saints and disciples on earth. The question is In what sense is he with them? Actually and visibly, or providentially and "omnipresently?" I think the latter is what is intended. Besides, it does not say that he was

with them but that they lived and reigned *with him*. That is, the emphasis is on what the *martyrs* are doing, not what Christ is doing. Can a prince share the reign with his father, even though he may live in a distant part of the kingdom where he administers portions of the kingdom there? Yes, he can, and we read this regarding the sons of David, that they were made princes over various cities in Israel (II Sam. 8:18). They "reigned with" David even though they lived in remote areas of the kingdom administering part of the government there. In the same way, the martyrs "lived and reigned" with Christ, even though they were in Hades and he was in heaven. There is no absolute affirmation that Christ was personally/visibly present there with them.

2) I believe that all the righteous dead from Abel onward "lived and reigned" with Christ in Paradise, but that only the martyrs under Nero are referred to here because of what they were soon going to face. Beheading was a Roman form of execution for those that were citizens. This is why Peter was crucified, but Paul was beheaded (Roman law forbade crucifixion of Roman citizens). Stoning was a distinctly Jewish form of execution. Revelation was written to the churches in Asia where many would suffer martyrdom by beheading and other forms of execution. The purpose of the passage is to show that those who were going to suffer martyrdom would not be forgotten by God, but would "live and reign" with Christ even in death while awaiting the general resurrection. See Rev. 14:13, which portrays these same martyrs and says that they will "rest from their labors" in Hades Paradise. Thus, all the righteous dead lived and reigned in Paradise, but only the martyrs are mentioned because they needed encouragement to persevere in the persecution to come.

3) I believe that the saints are given jobs in heaven governing various events on earth, much as angels did

in the Old Testament. In the resurrection, we will be like angels and thus given tasks guiding events on earth just as the angels did and still do. This is what Jesus meant when he told the disciples that they would sit at table with him in the kingdom, "judging" (ruling) the 12 tribes of Israel (the church) (Matt. 19:28). The saints in Hades are said to somehow participate in this reign, but we are not given specifics. They are called priests because of their intimate service to God. The living saints on earth are also called priests because of our spiritual service in the gospel (Rev. 1:5; I Pet. 2:5).

4) I do not believe the same 1000 year period is in view. The passage alternates between the dragon and the saints. Thus, it starts with the dragon (vv. 1-3), goes to the saints (vv. 4-6), then to the dragon (vv. 7-10), then again to the saints and general resurrection (vv. 11-15). The dragon is bound 1000 years; the saints reign 1000 years. The reign of the saints ends at the general resurrection; the binding of the dragon ends when he is loosed to persecute anew the church. The dragon is loosed BEFORE the general resurrection. The dragon is loosed in vv. 7-10; the saints' Hadean reign ends at the general resurrection. The dragon is bound when the persecution over Stephen collapsed (he was prevented from persecuting the church from AD 38-64). He was loosed when Nero came to the throne, at which time he attacked the church in the persecution under Nero (the battle of Gog and Magog). Since the dragon is loosed before the saints were raised in the general resurrection, this proves that the dragon's 1000 year internment ended BEFORE the 1000 year Hadean reign of the saints. For it is only when the dragon is loosed that the martyrs suffer death and beheading.

I hope that helps. Write again any time.

Kurt

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