

## The Life and Times of Jesus Christ

# 3

## The Birth of the Messiah

In this lesson, we zero in on the most remarkable event in human history – the birth of the Son of God. Over the millennia, multiple billions of children have been born, but only one birth has set a dividing line in history. As Homer Rhea says:

“The most outstanding record that is graven on the scroll of time is the date of the birth of Jesus Christ. No issued document is legal, no signed check is valid, and no business receipt is of value unless it bears the statistical reference to this great historic event.”<sup>1</sup>

The story of Christ’s birth has been woven into the cultural heritage of the world. It has been a favorite subject for artists and the focus of countless Christmas cards. Carols are sung each year, with familiar words like “Away in a manger” and “Hark, the herald angels sing.” And yet for all its familiarity, the details of the Christmas story are often lost in the fog of Christmas tradition.

In this lesson, we will evaluate our Christmas tradition through the lens of both history and the Gospel record in order to determine the true facts of the nativity.

### Comparison of the Accounts

Only Matthew and Luke record the circumstances of Jesus’ birth, and like two eyewitnesses taking the witness stand in a court of law, their testimonies can be cross-referenced to confirm or deny their accuracy and reliability.

#### **Points of agreement**

There is general agreement between the two accounts. Both accounts record the following ten occurrences:

A Portrait of the Messiah

The Divinity of the Messiah

▶ **The Birth of the Messiah** ◀

The Childhood of the Messiah

The People of the Messiah

The Inauguration of the Messiah

The Opposition to the Messiah

The Last Week of the Messiah

The Trial of the Messiah

The Death of the Messiah

The Resurrection of the Messiah

The Ascendancy of the Messiah

- Jesus was born in the last days of Herod (**Matthew 2:1,13; Luke 1:5**)
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (**Matthew 1:18,20; Luke 1:35**)
- His mother, Mary, was a virgin (**Matthew 1:18,20,23; Luke 1:27,34**)
- Mary was betrothed to Joseph (**Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:27; 2:5**)
- Joseph was of the lineage of David (**Matthew 1:16,20; Luke 1:27; 2:4**)
- God directed that he be named Jesus (**Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:31**)
- Jesus was proclaimed as promised Savior (**Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:11**)
- The birth was announced by angels (**Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:26-27**)
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem (**Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4,6**)
- The family returned to Nazareth (**Matthew 2:23; Luke 2:39**)

### ***Points of difference***

But much has been made of the apparent differences between the two accounts.

- **Matthew** and **Luke** tell two very different stories surrounding the birth of Christ. **Matthew** tells of magi arriving from the distant east. **Luke** tells of shepherds arriving from the nearby hills.
- **Matthew** tells us that immediately after the visit of the magi, Herod unleashes a massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, and the family flees to Egypt, where they stay for a few years. It is only upon their return that they head toward Nazareth. According to **Luke**, however, after they had “done everything required by the Law of the Lord” (in the circumcision and dedication of their son at the Temple), it seems they immediately “returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.”

How can these differing stories be reconciled? In order to answer this question, we need to understand how the nativity accounts were compiled and why.

## **Sources of the Nativity Story**

Matthew and Mark drew their nativity accounts from different sources. This can be clearly shown in Luke’s introduction in **Luke 1:1-3**:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, *just as they were handed down to us* by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have *carefully investigated everything from the beginning*, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account...”

Two things emerge from Luke’s statement:

- His narrative (and by assumption, Matthew’s too) was based on the eyewitness accounts “as they were handed down to us.”
- He wrote an “orderly account” piecing together elements of the narrative as he saw fit. This means the Gospel writers functioned more as editors\* than authors, with each account bearing the unique stamp of the editor.

\* The official word is “redactor,” which means “someone who to edits or revises something in preparation for publication.” Redaction also has the meaning of reducing. In other words, the Gospel writers took all the available information, selected only what they wanted to use, and compiled it in a fashion that best suited their purpose.

Since Matthew's account probably emerged among the Galilean community of Aramaic-speaking believers, it is likely that Matthew derived his account of Christ's infancy from James, the brother of Jesus, or from Christ's immediate family. Luke, on the other hand, may have given his account from the perspective of Mary, who might have been one of the "eye witnesses" he mentions in the introduction of his account (**Luke 1:2**).

Did Matthew know the story of the shepherds who visited Jesus at his birth? Did Luke know the story of the magi who came from the east? Almost certainly. So why did Matthew and Luke decide to record these events uniquely? In **John 21:25**, John indicates that he was extremely selective in the stories he chose to include in his account. The same is obvious in **Matthew, Mark** and **Luke**. Luke selected the shepherd story from among many, since it suited his purpose best. Likewise Matthew selected the magi story from among many, since it best fulfilled the purpose of his account.

## Two Announcements

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**Read Matthew 1:18-25**

**Read Luke 1:5-80**

The story of Jesus' birth begins with two angelic announcements, both by the angel Gabriel.

### ***The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist***

The announcement to Zechariah that he was going to have a son sets in motion the events that would lead eventually to the Cross of Calvary. Both Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are descended from Aaron, and thus of the priestly line. This would have made John the Baptist also of the priestly line.

**Luke 1:7** tells us that "Elizabeth was barren; and [Zechariah and Elizabeth] were both well along in years." In other words, Elizabeth was *doubly* barren. She had been unable to bear children during her childbearing years, and now she was beyond the age of childbearing. It was into this physically impossible situation that the angel Gabriel came with the announcement of John the Baptist's birth, foreshadowing an even greater miracle that was to take place just six months later – the birth of God's own Son. The Lord was setting the pace with the birth of John the Baptist. God is a God of the impossible. The Gospel account begins with God overriding the impossible – a barren womb – and it climaxes with God overriding the impossible – an empty tomb.

The story of John the Baptist's birth also sets the pace for the Gospel story in another way. Significantly, the last prophecy of the Old Testament is taken up as the first prophetic fulfillment in the New Testament.

**Read Malachi 3:1**

**Read Malachi 4:5-6**

In **Matthew 17:10**, the disciples referred to this last prophecy when they asked the Lord: “Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?” Jesus’ reply, in **Matthew 17:11-12**, was:

“...To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished...”

In response to this answer, the disciples then “understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist” (**Matthew 17:13**). On another occasion, he told the crowds in **Matthew 11:11-14**:

“I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.”

This strong identification between John the Baptist and Elijah is also found in the announcement of his birth. In **Luke 1:17**, Gabriel declares:

“And he will go on before the Lord, *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This one verse summarizes the ministry of John the Baptist. But did you notice that it draws strongly upon the prophecy of **Malachi 4:5-6**? John the Baptist acts as the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He is the last prophet under the Old Covenant and the forerunner – the “advance messenger” – of the New Covenant.

### ***The announcement of the birth of Jesus***

Exactly six months after the announcement to Zechariah in Judea, Gabriel arrives in a small village of Nazareth, located in the hills of western Galilee. He arrives in the enclosed courtyard of a home in which a girl, in her early teens, is probably doing her household chores or maybe getting up ready for a new day. The girl’s name is Miriam (in Hebrew), rendered in our Bibles as Mary (in English).

This one moment in time would mark the dividing line between old and new. Before this moment, all Israel had been waiting in eager expectation for God’s promised Messiah. But after this angelic visit, human history would take a totally new course. Let’s look at this angelic announcement more closely.

**Read Matthew 1:18-25**

**Read Luke 1:26-38**

The name given to this promised son was Jesus (in Hebrew, Yeshua or Yeshu, which is rendered “Joshua” in English translations of the Old Testament). This name means “The Lord saves” or “The Lord is salvation,” a meaning which the angel explains further in **Matthew 1:21**, saying “because he will save his people from their sins.”

Take another look at **Matthew 1:18-25** and **Luke 1:26-38**. Do you notice how different they are? **Luke** records the story exclusively from Mary's perspective, whereas **Matthew** records it exclusively from Joseph's perspective.

This is just one example of how each of the four Gospel writers approaches the subject of recording the life of Jesus. None tries to tell the whole story. Each selectively edits his account, drawing on his own particular sources (some unique and some common to other writers), and molds the story according to a specific design. Each writer's unique perspective and purpose flavors his narrative, and also accounts for the apparent differences we occasionally see. This is something we will see in more detail as we progress in our study of the life of Jesus.

## The Virgin Birth

The virgin birth of Jesus is a foundational tenet of the Christian faith. Without it, Jesus is merely a man among men, without qualification to be the sinless Lamb of God. As I M Haldeman explains:

“If Jesus Christ were not virgin born, then, of course, he had a human father; if he had a human father, then he inherited the nature of the father; as that father had a nature of sin, then he inherited his nature of sin; then Jesus himself was a lost sinner, and he himself needed a Savior from sin. Deny the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and you paralyze the whole scheme of redemption by Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

The virgin birth is established strongly in all four Gospel accounts:

- **Matthew – 1:16** describes Joseph not as the father of Jesus but as “the husband of Mary, *of whom was born Jesus...*” **1:18** tells us that “before [Mary and Joseph] came together [in sexual union], she was found to be with child *through the Holy Spirit*.” In **1:20**, the angel says, “Joseph son of David,\* do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because *what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit*.” In **1:23**, Matthew quotes from **Isaiah 7:14** in support of the virgin birth: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son...” And **1:25** tells us that Joseph “had no union with [Mary] until she gave birth to a son.”
- **Mark** – Although Mark's account doesn't describe the supernatural events surrounding Jesus' birth, in **6:3**, Jesus is described as “the son of Mary.” According to Jewish custom, Jesus would be called “the son of Joseph,” even if Joseph had already died (which is indicated in the Gospel record). By calling him “Mary's son,” the villagers of Nazareth indicate the dubious circumstances surrounding his birth.

\* There is no question that in Matthew's view, Jesus claims his royal descent from David via Joseph (according to Jewish tradition). This is because even though Joseph is not Jesus' *biological* father, he is Jesus' *legal* father. The term “son of David” is due to the common biblical practice of truncating a genealogy by skipping generations (see the Supplementary Study **SP112-03** for further details). Since David was the primary ancestor of Jesus, he is referred to in **Luke 1:32** as “[Jesus'] father David.” Likewise, in **Matthew 1:1**, Jesus is called “the son of David, the son of Abraham” – an example of a double truncation.

- **Luke** – At the time of the announcement of Christ’s birth, Mary is described as “a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph” (1:27). To the question, “How will this be...since I am a virgin?” (1:34), the angel answers, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”
- **John** – Like Mark, John doesn’t refer specifically to the virgin birth, but implies it strongly. In 1:1-2, Jesus is described as being divine and pre-existent and in 1:14, his arrival in the world is described as “the Word became flesh.” In 8:41, Jesus’ enemies state, “We are not illegitimate children” (NIV) or “We were not born of fornication” (NKJV). This appears to be a deliberate slight against Jesus, based on rumors of his illegitimate birth.

Although the virgin birth is stated more specifically in Luke, it is actually Matthew that addresses most strongly the virgin birth of Christ, despite the fact that he leans so heavily upon the legal paternity of Joseph. In fact, he goes out of his way to establish, not the natural connection of Jesus to the throne of David (which no one apparently denied) but the *legitimacy* of his connection to the throne. As the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains:

“No one seems to have questioned that Jesus was born of Mary and was closely connected with the royal house. The question was whether He was of legitimate birth. It was charged – and the slander which was very early in origin and circumstantial in character obtained an extraordinary hold upon the hostile Jewish mind – that Jesus was the illegitimate offspring of Mary. The Gospel of Matthew meets that slander by giving a bird’s-eye view of the movement of the history from Abraham to the Messiah in the form of the genealogy of Joseph, who in the light of the facts concerning the origin of Jesus, marries Mary and gives her the protection of his stainless name and royal lineage. The extraordinary boldness and brilliancy of this apologetic method ought not to be overlooked. The formal charge that Jesus is son of Mary, not Joseph, is admitted – the slander involved is refuted by bringing Joseph forward as a witness for Mary. Nothing could be more natural for a man fearless in the confidence of the truth; nothing could have been more impossible for one insecure in his hold upon the facts.”<sup>3</sup>

Another look at Matthew’s genealogy draws our attention to another interesting fact. Unlike any other Jewish genealogy of the time, Jesus’ genealogy contains not just one but five women. To the Jews of the first century, this would have stood out glaringly, for it was “a practice not only foreign but abhorrent to ordinary usage.”<sup>4</sup> Why did Matthew do this? He did it purposely to highlight the fifth woman in his genealogy – Mary.

Each of the five women listed by Matthew would be considered “serious blots in the family history of the Davidic house.”<sup>5</sup> Yet each was also honored as righteous. Let’s take a brief look at each:

- **Genesis 38:6-26**– Tamar acted as a temple prostitute, yet was within her rights under levirate custom, since when Judah refused to give his youngest



son in marriage to Tamar, the obligation fell to Judah himself. Yet when she became pregnant, she was accused of prostitution and came close to being put to death. Judah, however, declared her “more righteous than I” (**verse 26**).

- **Joshua 2:1-21** – Rahab apparently owned a brothel in Jericho. She gave shelter to the two spies sent by Joshua and aligned herself with Israel. Due to this righteous act (see **Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25**), she and her family alone were spared in Jericho (**Joshua 6:17,23-25**). She went on to marry Salmon (or Salma) and, like Tamar, became the ancestress of David.
- **Ruth 1-4** – Ruth was a Moabitess and in the natural excluded from God’s covenant, but because of faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi, she became part of the covenant community of Israel. Interestingly, she married Boaz (who was the son of Salmon and Rahab). She became the great-grandmother of David (see **Ruth 4:21-22**).
- **2 Samuel 11-12** – Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, yet in seeking to acquire her, David committed two sins – adultery and murder. In time, David sought and received forgiveness from God (note **Psalms 51**), and their first live child, Solomon, later became king of Israel and the forebear of Jesus.
- **Matthew 1:16,18-25** – The genealogy now focuses on the fifth and last woman, Mary, who like Tamar was accused of fornication and like the other women became one of disrepute. But Matthew shows that in all things, both Joseph and Mary were blameless.

Matthew then appeals to **Isaiah 7:14** as a prophecy foretelling the virginal nature of Christ’s birth. Yet this prophecy has been a point of contention among Jews and Christians for almost 2000 years. Is **Isaiah 7:14** really speaking of the Messiah? Did Isaiah really mean that a virgin would give birth to a child? Let’s now take look at **Isaiah 7:14** to determine the nature and circumstances of this prophecy.

## Immanuel

### Read Isaiah 7:10-16

The context of this prophecy is Ahaz’ refusal to ask God for a confirmatory sign. This angers the Lord, who then provides his own sign for Ahaz: “A virgin will be with child.” There is no question that this was meant to be a sign fulfilled in Ahaz’ lifetime, for Isaiah explains: “...before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste” (**7:16**).

As we have seen in previous lessons, **Isaiah 7:14** is an example of a dual fulfillment of prophecy. Yet the word used in **Isaiah 7:14**, translated “virgin,” is *almah*, which actually doesn’t mean a virgin, but rather a young woman of marriable age. Thus a more accurate rendering of the original Hebrew of **Isaiah 7:14** would be: “A young woman will be with child and will give birth to a son.”

There is actually nothing in the original prophecy to predict that in the future a virgin would conceive and bear a son. So how can Matthew use **Isaiah 7:14** in support of the virgin birth of Jesus?

The answer lies in the Bible from which Matthew is quoting. The *Septuagint*, you will remember, was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, used extensively throughout the Roman world in Jesus' day. The translators of the *Septuagint* translated the Hebrew word *'almah* into the Greek word *parthenos*, which means "a virgin." This Greek translation is significant in two ways. Firstly, it reveals the messianic thinking of the original Greek translators. And secondly, it suddenly extends the original prophecy of **Isaiah 7:14**, fulfilled in the days of Ahaz, into a prophecy which looked ahead to messianic times. Thus for the people of his day, Matthew had every right to use the existing Septuagint version of **Isaiah 7:14** to show that the virgin birth of Christ had indeed been foretold.

It must also be remembered that the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 does not stand alone, but is part of a series of prophecies culminating in **Isaiah 9:1-6**:

- **9:1-2** – "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan – The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned" – This prophecy is fulfilled, according to **Matthew 4:13-16**, in the ministry of Jesus.
- **9:6-7** – "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this." – This prophecy looked forward to the time of Jesus, who would "reign on David's throne and over his kingdom."

For this reason, even though **Isaiah 7:14** had an immediate significance in Isaiah's generation, it also had a wider messianic significance, especially when seen within the context of the messianic proclamations of **Isaiah 7-9**.

For Matthew, it is an open-and-shut case. Once he has established that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Septuagint's prophecy that "a virgin will be with child," he then equates Jesus, the son of the virgin, with the prophesied "Immanuel." This name means "God with us," and is in the mind of Matthew the perfect description of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God had entered the human scene. In Jesus, God was indeed "with us."

## The Birth of Jesus

Both **Matthew** and **Luke** place the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and **Matthew 2:4-6** tells us why. Bethlehem was the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah.

**Read Micah 5:2**  
**Read John 7:42**



But only Luke provides us with the reason that Jesus, whose parents came from Nazareth, would end up being born in Bethlehem. **Luke 2:1-3** sets the context for the birth of Jesus with these words:

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.”

Historical records show that Rome conducted numerous such censuses.

“The million or so Jews living [in the Roman province of Palestine], who had come under the yoke of Rome when Pompey’s legions took Jerusalem in 63 BC, were little more than taxpaying units in one of history’s most extensive systems of taxation – a system dependent upon the contributions of the conquered populations from all over the empire. The great works of Roman government – straight roads and soaring aqueducts, marble buildings and spacious public areas – were partly funded by taxes, which proved most burdensome on the lowliest members of society. In taxation as in everything else, Rome was a strong-arm overlord. Provincial governors were periodically empowered to conduct a census to organize Rome’s tax rolls. It was such a mandate that sent Joseph and Mary on a 90-mile journey to Bethlehem.”<sup>6</sup>

Tradition has it that Mary rode on the back of a donkey, while Joseph walked beside her. While there is nothing in the Gospel narrative to support this, we can be reasonably certain that this was probably the case, since Mary, in her late-term pregnancy, could not have survived the five-day walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They would have carried a goatskin waterbag because of the scarcity of water on the route, particularly if they went via the Jordan rift, as most devout Jews did, in order to avoid travel through the despised country of the Samaritans. They would also have taken the bare essentials, probably just one change of clothes, and some money for the journey.

The rest of the story is known so well from centuries of retelling. Joseph and Mary arrive at an inn in Bethlehem, but the rooms are all booked out (due to the surge of crowds registering for the census) and so they are turned away by the innkeeper. Instead, they find shelter in a stable, where the child is born. The baby is wrapped in “swaddling clothes” and laid in a manger, surrounded by adoring cows, sheep and donkeys. Later in the night, shepherds from the hills arrive, and then three wise men make their entrance, bearing gifts for the newborn king. And over this stable hovers the shining light of the guiding star.

But how accurate is this picture? Here are some interesting facts:

- The Gospel record makes no mention of an innkeeper. In fact, it is even doubtful that it was an inn at all. The Greek word translated “inn” in most English Bibles is *kataluma*, which has multiple means, among which is “an inn” or “a caravansary.” But it is also used in other ways. In **Luke 22:11** and **Mark 14:14**, it is used to describe “the guest room” in which Jesus observed the Last Supper with his disciples. In fact, **Luke 22:11** describes

this *kataluma* as “a large upper room, all furnished.” If Luke had intended the word “inn” in his birth narrative, why didn’t he use the more obvious word for inn – *pandokheion* – as he does later in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:30-35**)?

- The Gospel record makes no mention of a stable. All it says is that the child is laid to rest in a manger. This is why it is assumed that the manger was in a stable (or, as a long-standing Christian tradition has it, in a cave used for the shelter of animals). But in the first century, mangers were found in one of the ground floor rooms, which acted as the family stable. This is because the family’s valued animals were regularly kept within the house compound (as protection against weather, predators and thieves).
- But that’s not all! The Greek word translated “manger” is *phatne*, which can also mean “stall” or “tent.” In fact, it is the Greek equivalent used in the *Septuagint* for the Hebrew word *sukkah*, which is translated into English as “tent,” “tabernacle” or “booth.” Although the picture of a stable room on the ground floor of a house fits the facts of Luke 2:7 quite well, there is another intriguing possibility. If Jesus was born during the Feast of Tabernacles, then people would have erected *sukkahs*, or tabernacles, throughout the town. Was Jesus born in a *sukkah*? After all, in **Genesis 33:17** we are told that Jacob made *sukkahs* for his cattle? This is something we will explore in a moment.
- Although the shepherds arrived on the night of Christ’s birth, the magi did not arrive until much later. As we shall soon see, there is no record of how many wise men came, and their arrival may be have as much as two years after the birth of Christ.

Can you see how Christmas tradition can sometimes cloud the Gospel record? We can paint comfortable pictures of what it must have been like, according to comfortable cultural images. But what really happened when Jesus was born.

The evidence from **Luke 2:1-7** indicates that something like the following probably happened. Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem and naturally go to the family’s ancestral home. But because of the census, the guest room is already occupied, and so room is made for them in the domestic stable room downstairs, which contained a manger built into the dirt-packed floor. It was there that Jesus was born, wrapped tightly in linen cloths (according to the custom of the day) and placed in the manger to sleep.

## Fixing the Year of Jesus’ Birth

**Matthew** and **Luke** provide three men who act as historical markers to fix the date of Christ’s birth:

- Augustus
- Quirinius (or Cyrenius)
- Herod

In the nineteenth century, scholars found it fashionable to call Quirinius a myth, since there was no record of his existence outside of **Luke 2:1-3**. But Luke has once again been vindicated as an accurate historian by a recent discovery that Publius Sulpicius Quirinius was in fact a historical figure and was indeed governor of Syria around the time of Christ's birth. It was also found that Roman authorities took a regular fourteen-year census of their provinces, for the purpose of taxation. At each census, everyone had to personally register in his native city.

But there is also a problem. The three historical markers – Augustus, Quirinius and Herod – do not, on the surface, line up. Caesar Augustus is not a problem, for he reigned between 27 BC and AD 14. Quirinius did oversee a census, but the date is AD 6, long after the death of Herod, generally fixed at 4 BC.

For this reason, some scholars follow their predecessors in continuing to reject Luke's account as non-historical. But we must remember Luke's opening statement: "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning..." We saw in **ES108-07** that Luke is considered "a historian of the first rank...In short [he] should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." You will also remember that F F Bruce said: "Accuracy is a habit of the mind...Luke's record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy."<sup>7</sup>

On the basis of Luke's consistent integrity as a historian, we should take Luke's statement as authoritative and proceed to see how the rest of the historical evidence fits in (not the other way, as liberal scholars attempt to do). An ancient manuscript, held in the British Museum, supports Luke's historical record. Translated, it reads:

"Because of the approaching census it is necessary that all those residing for any cause away from their homes should at once prepare to return to their own governments in order that they may complete the family registration of the enrollment..."<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Justin Martyr, in the early second century, asserted that official Roman census records were still available in his day to prove that Jesus had indeed been born in Bethlehem.<sup>9</sup> The fourth century historian Eusebius also appealed to Roman government records in the Imperial Archives to prove that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.<sup>10</sup>

But let's take a closer look at Luke's words. In **2:3**, he identifies the particular census of which he is speaking. "This was the *first* census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria." In other words, he is aware that there was at least one other census under Quirinius' governorship (the one we know took place in 6 AD). Although we don't yet have archaeological evidence for it, we can take the combined **Matthew-Luke** record at face value when it states that the first census of Quirinius fell within the reign of Herod the Great.

So in what year was Jesus born? The answer may seem obvious. AD 1, of course! But the story is not that simple.

Our present calendar was created by a sixth century Ukrainian monk called Dionysius Exiguus. He calculated that the birth of Christ occurred in the Roman year 754. He counted AD 1 – the inaugural year of *Anno Domini* (the “year of our Lord”) – as commencing on January 1 of the year following the birth of Christ. Therefore, according to his reckoning, Jesus was born in 1 BC (there is was no “zero year” since the concept of zero had not entered the West).

How did Dionysius come to this conclusion? He based his calculations on the historical records available to him in the Vatican Library at Rome and on the record of **Luke 3:1-2**.

Let’s now take a quick look at the evidence provided by early Christian writers.<sup>11</sup>

- Tertullian stated that Augustus began to rule 41 years before the birth of Christ and died 15 years later. The date of Augustus’ death is known to be August 19, AD 14. This would place the birth of Jesus at 2 BC.\* He also asserted that Jesus was born 28 years after the death of Cleopatra, once again placing the birth of Christ at 2 BC.
- Irenaeus, born about a hundred years after Jesus, wrote: “Our Lord was born about the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus.” This doesn’t contradict Tertullian’s 42 years, since Augustus’ reign began in the autumn of 43 B.C. This places the birth of Jesus in the autumn of 2 B.C.
- Eusebius, in the fourth century, wrote: “It was the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus and the twenty-eighth from the subjugation of Egypt on the death of Antony and Cleopatra.” The 42nd year of Augustus spanned between the autumn of 2 BC and the autumn of 1 BC. The “subjugation of Egypt” took place in the autumn of 30 BC. According to this reckoning, therefore, the 28th year from the subjugation of Egypt spanned from the autumn of 3 BC to the autumn of 2 BC. The only possible date for the birth of Jesus that meets both requirements would be the autumn of 2 BC.

The evidence strongly points to 2 BC as the birth of Christ, making Dionysius out in his calculations by just one year. But a historical problem is raised by this date. For according to common scholarship, Herod died in 4 BC! How do we know this? Because Josephus reported a lunar eclipse occurring shortly before the death of Herod. The lunar eclipse that pinpoints the year of Herod’s death is generally taken as the one that occurred March 13, 4 BC. The only problem with this date is that lunar eclipses are common. Astronomical science has determined that several partial or full lunar eclipses were visible in Jerusalem at the following dates in the period between 5 BC and AD 4:

- March 23, 5 BC
- September 15, 5 BC
- March 12-13, 4 BC
- January 9, 1 BC

\* One year is subtracted because there is no zero year between BC and AD.

In the light of this evidence, the birth of Christ could have taken place as early as 5 BC or as late as 1 BC. When combined with the testimony of early Christian historians, the weight of evidence leans toward the autumn of 2 BC, which also corresponds with Luke's assertion that Christ was "about thirty years old" (**Luke 3:23**) in or just after "the fifteen year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (**Luke 3:1**) whose actual accession to the throne was in AD 14.

## Fixing the Month of Jesus' Birth

If we are able to fix the year of Jesus' birth with reasonable certainty to the autumn of 2 BC, is it possible to identify the month in which he was born? Once again, many would say that this is a no-brainer. It's December 25, of course!

A thoughtful reading of the Gospel accounts, however, will show that it is unlikely that Jesus was born in December. **Luke 2:8** records that "there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." This indicates that Jesus was not born in winter (when shepherds didn't sleep in the fields with their sheep), but in the warmer months. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Joseph and Mary would have undertaken the arduous journey to Bethlehem in the winter months, when the roads throughout Judea were often impassable (note **Matthew 24:20**). As the *Companion Bible* points out:

"Shepherds and their flocks would not be found 'abiding' (Greek *agrauleo*) in the open fields at night in December (*Tebeth*), for the paramount reason that there would be no pasturage at that time. It was the custom then (as now) to withdraw the flocks during the month *Marchesven* [October-November] from the open districts and house them for the winter."<sup>12</sup>

So why did we come up with December 25 as the birthday for Jesus? The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* explains:

"Though speculation as to the time of year of Christ's birth dates from the early 3rd century, Clement of Alexandria suggesting the 20th of May, the celebration of the anniversary does not appear to have been general till the later 4th century. The earliest mention of the observance on December 25th is in the Philocalian Calendar, representing Roman practice of the year 336. This date was probably chosen to oppose the feast of the *Natalis Solis Invicti* [the Nativity of the Unconquerable Sun] by the celebration of the birth of the 'Sun of Righteousness' and its observance in the West, seems to have spread from Rome."<sup>13</sup>

The early Christians didn't celebrate Christ's birthday (they were far more interested in the death and resurrection of Christ) and it wasn't until the fourth century that Christians became interested in Christ's birth date. There was much disagreement as to when it was, however, and finally in AD 440 the Church proclaimed December 25 as Christ's official birthday. They probably chose this date because it coincided with the pagan holiday of Saturnalia and as the birthday of the Sun God. To celebrate Christ's birthday on December 25, in their view, would ease the transition from pagan to Christian worship.



So is it possible to know in what month Jesus was born? The Gospel record provides some indirect evidence regarding the time of the conception of John the Baptist, and this casts clear light on the time of Christ's birth.

**Luke 1:5** tells us that Zechariah (or, using his Hellenized name, Zacharias) was of the priestly division of Abijah. The priests were divided into 24 divisions (**1 Chronicles 24:7-19**), of which Abijah was the eighth (**24:10**). **Luke 1:8** tells us that it was while the Abijah division was on duty that the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah in the Temple. So the simple question is: When was the division of Abijah on duty?

Working on calculations based on Josephus' statement that the first division of priests had just taken office at the time of the destruction of the Temple,<sup>14</sup> we can figure backwards to establish that Zechariah came off duty on July 13, 3 BC and returned home to Elizabeth (**Luke 1:23**). Elizabeth then conceived (**1:24**), probably within that week, and John the Baptist would have been born approximately 280 days later which (on or around April 26, 2 BC). Interestingly, this date marked the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread that year.

Elizabeth went into reclusion for five months (**1:24**), and at the beginning of her sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, Elizabeth's relative (**1:26**). The time was the first week of January, 2 BC. Jesus' birth, approximately 280 days later would then be on or around October 13, 2 BC. This was the fifteenth day of Tishri – the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles.

Can we be so precise in our calculations of Christ's birth date? Of course not. But the evidence is strong that Jesus was born in September-October, probably during the time of the Feast of Tabernacles (for the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles, read **ES107-07** again).

### Read John 1:14

John declares that "[t]he Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The Greek word translated "dwelling" is *skenoō*, which means "to pitch tent, encamp, tabernacle, dwell in a tent." Thus a more literal translation of **John 1:14** would read: "The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us." Do you think that John may have been alluding to the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles in this verse? Samuele Bacchicchi has to say:

"In seeking to describe the Messiah's first coming to His people, John chose the imagery of the Feast of Booths since the feast celebrates the dwelling of God among His people. This raises an interesting question on whether or not John intended to link the birth of Jesus with the Feast of Tabernacles."<sup>15</sup>

## Witnesses to the Birth of Jesus

The birth of Christ did not pass by without witnesses. Matthew and Luke each record a different set of witnesses to the birth of the Messiah.

### **The Shepherds**

In Luke's account, we read of how an angel (probably Gabriel) visited shepherds who were tending their flocks on the hills surrounding Bethlehem. The Judean



hills were known as good grazing for sheep, for “the grasslands in the hill-country of Judea provide good pasture, but only for sheep and goats.”<sup>16</sup> The shepherds provide a strong historical and redemptive motif to the story of Jesus’ birth.

- **Historical** – Bethlehem is called “the city of David” (see **2 Samuel 5:7; Luke 2:11**). David had been a shepherd boy, and had probably composed some of his psalms (such as **Psalms 23**) upon the very same hills surrounding Bethlehem. And now the angel Gabriel was announcing the birth of the Son of David, the one who, according to the prophecy of **Micah 5:2-4**, would “shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord.”
- **Redemptive** – Being so close to Jerusalem it is likely that these sheep may have been used for sacrifices during Passover. We can see, therefore, a special significance in God’s selection of these humble shepherds as witnesses of the one who would be “the Lamb of God” (**John 1:29**).

After visiting the newborn Messiah, the shepherds became the first evangelists. Luke records how they “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them” (**Luke 2:17-18**).

### **The Magi**

The story is once again very familiar. Our Christmas cards show the common perception of a bright star leading three wise men, usually on camels. But what really happened?

There are two things we *don’t* know about these magi. We don’t know their identity and we don’t know their number. But we can hazard some educated guesses. In Old Testament times, magi were the “magicians and astrologers” who interpret dreams and portents (see **Daniel 2:2**). It is possible that these magi were similar men, possibly belonging to the court of Persia. They came in search for the “king of the Jews” because they “saw his star in the east\* and [had] come to worship him.” It is possible that they had been studying Jewish texts (such as **Numbers 23:7** and **Daniel 7:13-14**), for when they finally reached the child, they seemed to recognize not only his royal pedigree but also his divine status.

Contrary to the popular image, the Gospel record doesn’t say that the star led them to Jerusalem. As *The Interactive Bible* explains:

“There is no evidence that the Magi were led to Jesus by a bright low hovering star. Such a star would have been quite noticeable by many people. The fact that Herod had to ask the Magi when the star first appeared, proves that the star was not out of the ordinary to the untrained eye. Only the Magi, who studied the stars, would notice it.”<sup>17</sup>

Rather, they interpreted what they saw as a stellar phenomenon<sup>†</sup> as being a her-

\* The phrase “in the east” may also mean “when it rose” or “in the dawn.”

† There has been much conjecture as to the exact nature of this “star in the east.” Many possibilities have been put forward – a nova (an old star that suddenly flares up over a period of several months, appearing like a new star in the sky), a conjunction of stars or planets, or even a comet. But nothing quite fits the bill.

ald to the birth of “the king of the Jews.” And so they set out to Jerusalem, since their reasoning led them to believe that a “king of the Jews” would naturally be born in the capital of the Jews, Jerusalem.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, their announcement that they were seeking a royal child would have caused great furor within Herod’s royal court, for Herod was “was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (**Matthew 2:3**). As we shall see in the next lesson, Herod was an insecure king and, particularly during the latter years of his life, constantly fearful of a palace coup. And into this political intrigue stepped a band of foreigners who claimed they were looking for a child born to be king.

After consulting with the chief priests and teachers of the Law, Herod informed the magi of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, just six miles to the south of Jerusalem. It was only when they set off for Bethlehem that “the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.”\*

How old was Jesus at the time of the magi’s visit? No one knows for certain, but one thing is obvious from the Gospel record, their visit did not take place on the night of his birth. Herod himself “called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared” (**Matthew 2:7**) and based on this information later ordered that all male children under the age of 2 be slaughtered in Bethlehem. Since Herod would have logically left a margin for error, Jesus could have been as old as 18 months at the time of the magi’s visit. This is also supported by the fact that Greek word used for “child” is not *brephos*, meaning “a newborn infant,” but *paidion*, meaning “a young child,” of an age carried in his mother’s arms.

Why does Christmas tradition say that there were three wise men?† It is assumed there were three magi because they brought three gifts. However, there could have been a dozen magi bringing three gifts each, or just two magi, bringing three gifts between them.

Let’s take a closer look at the three gifts brought to Christ, for they reveal both the faith and the insight of the magi.

- **Gold** – this was the gift to kings (**1 Kings 10:10,21**), and represented *Christ’s royalty*.
- **Frankincense** – this was the gift to God, used in the fragrant incense used in the Temple sacrifices (note **Exodus 30:34-38**). It represented *Christ’s divinity*.
- **Myrrh** – this was a fragrant ointment (**Psalms 44:8**), also used in the Temple sacrifices, particular in the anointing oil that was poured upon the head of the High Priest (**Exodus 30:22-33; 40:13**). Thus myrrh repre-

\* If the original star was a literal star, this obviously now was not. It is likely that the star that “stopped over the place where the child was” was now an angelic manifestation. Indeed, God had led his people in the wilderness through a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. Why should he not lead the magi now through what appeared to be a star?

† Tertullian, in the third century, was the first to refer to them as “kings.” Shortly before AD 600, the Armenian Infancy Gospel named them – Melkon (later, Melchior), Balthasar and Gaspar. But these names have no basis in the Gospel record.

sents *Christ's priesthood*. But it had a double meaning, an added significance connected to Christ's priesthood. Myrrh was an also ointment used for the embalming of a dead body (note **John 19:39-40**). Just as Jesus was later to say of Mary of Bethany, "She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial" (**Mark 14:8**), so this gift was a foreshadowing of Christ's death, burial and resurrection.

When they presented these three gifts, the magi "worshipped" him. The Greek literally means "to do homage," and in the tradition of many eastern nations, would have involved prostrating themselves before the child at full length, so that the knees, hands, forehead and nose all touch the ground at the same time.

What a sight it must have been, and how the relatives must have stood amazed watching these strangers paying homage to a pre-toddler. On top of this, the sight of foreigners arriving in Bethlehem would have attracted quite a crowd on the street. No wonder, as Luke records it, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (**Luke 2:19**).

In the next lesson we will examine the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the magi, and we'll also investigate the childhood of Christ, from the time of his circumcision right up to the time he appeared before John the Baptist in the waters of baptism.

<sup>1</sup> Homer G Rhea, Jr, quoted by Edythe Draper, *Draper's Quotations for the Christian World*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>2</sup> I M Halderman, quoted by Edythe Draper, *Draper's Quotations for the Christian World*, extracted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>4</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>5</sup> *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0, Deluxe Edition.

<sup>6</sup> *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), p.7.

<sup>7</sup> F F Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1972), p.114.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Grant R Jeffrey, *Jesus: The Great Debate* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology*, 1:34.

<sup>10</sup> Grant R Jeffrey, *Jesus: The Great Debate* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 1999), p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Evidence as presented by Chuck Missler, "When Was Jesus Born," printed in "Personal Update" (Coeur d'Alene, ID: Koinonia House), Volume 2, No. 7, August/September 1992.

<sup>12</sup> *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, "Christmas" (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983) p.280.

<sup>14</sup> Evidence as presented by Chuck Missler, "When Was Jesus Born," printed in "Personal Update" (Coeur d'Alene, ID: Koinonia House), Volume 2, No. 7, August/September 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *God's Festivals in Scripture and History Part II: The Fall Festivals*, p.241.

<sup>16</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.47.

<sup>17</sup> *The Interactive Bible*, "The Bible's Story of the Birth of Jesus," <http://www.bible.ca>.

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