

The Evening Before Jesus' Birthday

Was Jesus born on December 25th in the year zero? There is no year zero, only the year before (1 B.C.) and the year after (1 A.D.) Jesus was born. The present B.C. and A.D. calendar designations were configured over 150 years after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. It is supposed that Jesus was crucified 40 years prior to the fall of Jerusalem under Titus Vespasian, and that Jesus was 30 years old when he died. So, the fall of Jerusalem appeared to be 70 years after his birth. After 320 A.D. Constantine successfully united Rome's pagan rituals with Christian themes. The December winter solstice was merged with Jesus' birth, as were fertility rites (symbolized by rabbits and eggs) to the goddess "Ishtar" blended with Jesus' new life to give us "Easter". However, the Bible and various extra-biblical writers who were contemporary to the first, second, and third centuries after the fall of Jerusalem, record information that locates Jesus' birth date relative to other dates.

A second century Roman historian named Tertullian recorded that Augustus Caesar began his reign 41 years prior to Christ's birth, and that he then died 15 years after Christ's birth. The Holy Spirit made sure that Luke recorded that, "in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth". This adds context to Jesus' birth. Augustus began his rule in the autumn of 43 BC, so 41 years later would have been 2 BC. Augustus died in August of 14 AD. Counting back 15 years (remember there is no year zero) confirms the year as 2 BC. Tertullian also stated that Jesus' birth was 28 years after the death of Cleopatra in Egypt. She died in 30 BC, so 28 years later would once again confirm the year 2 BC. Another second century writer, Irenaeus, stated that Jesus was born during the 41st year of Augustus Caesar, which would be between the autumn of 3 BC and the autumn of 2 BC (his 41st year). Eusebius (264-340 AD) is often called the "father of church history". He records that Jesus was born in the 42nd year of Augustus and the 28th year since the Egyptian subjection to Rome at the death of Marc Anthony and Cleopatra in 30 AD. The 42nd year of Augustus Caesar was from the autumn of 2 BC to the autumn of 1 BC. The 28th year of the Egyptian fall was from the autumn of 3 BC to the autumn of 2 BC. The only time overlap of all these dates is the autumn of 2 BC.

Luke 1:5 and verses 8-13; 23-24 describe how Zacharias was of the 8th course of the priestly service in the temple. The complete 24 courses of the priests are outlined in 1st Chronicles 24:7-19 and this 8th course is known as the course of Abiah. The Talmud records that the 8th course was just starting its service at the time of the Roman siege of Titus on Jerusalem. Counting backwards in blocks of 24 courses to the 8th course of Abijah that is closest to, and prior to, the year 2 BC, comes to July 3rd of 3 BC. During Zacharias' term, when he entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, Gabriel told him that he and Elisabeth would have a son, and to name him John. If John was born 40 weeks later, that would be April 19th of 2 BC. This happened to be the start of Passover, in the Jewish month Nisan, in 2 BC.

Why did the Holy Spirit want us to know in Luke 3:1 that John the Baptist started his public ministry in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar? As stated earlier, Augustus Caesar died in August of 14 AD. So, Tiberius becomes Caesar in the autumn of 14 AD, which means his 15th year was the year 29 AD. The book of Numbers (4:3) clearly states that 30 is the acceptable age for a Jewish man to enter the ministry. If John the Baptist was born on April 19th 2BC, he would have turned 30 years old on April 19th of 29 AD, which just happens to be the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar. Mary, the mother of Jesus, saw Elisabeth in her 6th month of pregnancy with John. Counting back from John's April 19, 2 BC birth date places Mary going to Elisabeth in the 4th week of December in the year 3 BC. Gabriel had just told Mary that she too would conceive and have a son. Jesus would have been born 40 weeks later from the 4th week in December. That would place Jesus birth date on September 29th, in the autumn of 2 BC. That date also happens to be in Tishri, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. And the 29th of September in the year 2 BC would have been the first day of the (Feast of Trumpets) That's exciting!

At Jesus birth, the shepherds were in the fields with their flocks, which is consistent with the weather of early fall. It could not have been December when the cold and snow would not allow flocks (and shepherds) outside in the evening. Also, Augustus probably made his decree in the spring or summer of 2 BC so that people could easily travel to their family origin city. During the winter months, the weather was not conducive to travel. The shepherds saw Jesus as an infant baby (brephos in the Greek) in the stable. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus probably stayed in Bethlehem through the winter (rather than travel back to Nazareth) until the spring, because Matthew states that "after Jesus was born" then the Magi arrived, and they did not enter a stable. but a "house". And they did not see Jesus the infant baby, they saw Jesus the young child, a (paidion in the Greek). The historian Josephus records that an eclipse occurred before the death of Herod (Herod died in January of 2 AD). The astronomical charts show that the only eclipse to fit this time frame took place on December 29th, 1 BC. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus never went back north to Nazareth, but left for Egypt right from Bethlehem in the spring of 1 BC, after the Magi's visit. The eclipse came later that year in December and they must have stayed in Egypt from the spring/summer of 1 BC until the spring of 2 AD (after Herod's death in January), or about two years total time. Jesus is then both born in Bethlehem (Micah 2:5) and called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1).