

g. The Advent of Jesus § 10

Luke 2:1–7

Luke records for us now the event to which all the preceding angelic revelations and the Spirit-directed prophecies have pointed—the birth of Jesus Christ.

Luke desired to give a more complete account of His life and so added the beautiful narrative of his lineage, His birth, and announcement to the humble Judean shepherds. Matthew desiring to link the person of the Messiah up with the ancient prophecy gave his own independent account. Luke narrates in simplicity and brevity, with consummate art the circumstances of the birth, and adds the testimony of various divinely chosen witnesses, who give the interpretation and world-wide significance of the event. Matthew adds to this testimony of universal interest, introducing the narrative of the Magi, the providential flight into Egypt, and return to Nazareth in fulfillment of God's plan revealed in prophecy.¹

Since Luke was a careful historian, he recorded the time of Christ's birth. There are many difficulties associated with dating the birth of Christ. Hoehner writes concerning the time of Christ's birth:

In A.D. 525 Pope John I asked Dionysius, a Scythian monk, to prepare a standard calendar for the Western Church. . . . The Commencement of the Christian era was January 1, 754 A.U.C. (*anno urbis conditae* = from

the foundation of the city [of Rome]) and Christ's birth was thought to have been on December 25th immediately preceding. So 754 A.U.C. became A.D. 1 in the calendar of Dionysius.

In the broadest terms Luke 2:1 states that Christ was born in the reign of Caesar Augustus (who reigned from March 15, 44 B.C. to August 19, A.D. 14). Since this is so broad, one needs to narrow the limits. In the attempt to arrive at a more specific date, it is essential to establish two concrete limits, the *termini a quo* (the earliest limiting point in time) and *ad quem* (the final limiting point in time). With respect to this, the *terminus ad quem* is the death of Herod the Great, and the *terminus a quo* is the census of Quirinius (Cyrenius).

According to Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5, Christ's birth came before Herod's death. Herod was proclaimed king of the Jews by the Roman Senate in late 40 B.C. by nomination of Antony and Octavian and with the help of the Roman army he gained the possession of his domain in 37 B.C. He reigned for thirty-seven years from the time he was made king or thirty-four years from the time of his possession of the land.

According to Josephus, an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before Herod's death. It is the only eclipse ever mentioned by Josephus and this occurred on March 12/13, 4 B.C. After his death there was the celebration of the Passover, the first day of which would have occurred sometime between March 12th and April 11th. Since the thirty-fourth year of his reign would have begun on Nisan 1, 4 B.C. (March 29, 4 B.C.), his death would have occurred sometime between March 29 and April, 4 B.C. Therefore, for these reasons, Christ could not have been born later than March/April of 4 B.C.

According to Luke 2:1–5 a census was taken just before Christ's birth. Thus, Christ could not have been born before the census. The purpose of a census was to provide statistical data for the levy of taxes in the provinces. . . . 'This census took place before Quirinius was governor of Syria'. Luke is not distinguishing an earlier census from one during the governorship of Quirinius, but is merely stating that the census at the time of the nativity took place some time before Quirinius held office. This gives good sense to

the passage at hand. As stated above, Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6–7 and possibly also, as Sherwin-White has argued, in 3–2 B.C. If this has reference to his governorship in A.D. 6–7 then this census is before the governorship when he had conducted the well-known census mentioned in Josephus and Luke. On the other hand, this also fits nicely if he were governor in 3–2 B.C.; for Luke is then stating that just before Quirinius was governor in Syria in 3–2 B.C. there was a census in Herod's domains.

The exact date of the census cannot be determined with precision. However, it is reasonable to think that the census would have been after Herod came into disfavor with Augustus in 8/7 B.C. More specifically it was probably after Herod's execution of his sons Alexander and Aristobulus in 7 B.C. when there was an intense struggle for the throne by his other sons which resulted in Herod's changing his will three times before his death in the spring of 4 B.C. In 7 B.C. Herod named Antipater as sole heir, and then in 5 B.C. a new will was drawn up, making Antipas the heir. Finally, five days before Herod's death

Antipater was executed and a final will was drawn up, naming Archelaus as king of the whole realm. Furthermore, not only were there the intrigues within the household, but Herod's illness became more intense. His death was imminent. With such instability and such a bad state of health, it would have been an opportune time for Augustus to have had a census taken in order to assess the situation before Herod's death. It must also be noted that Augustus was well aware of the situation in Palestine, because each time Herod changed his will and each time he wanted to get rid of one of his sons, he had to ask the emperor's permission. Therefore, a census within the last year or two of Herod's reign would have been reasonable, and in fact, most probable.

The exact year of this census, which would mark the *terminus a quo* of Christ's birth, is difficult to pinpoint but it was probably taken sometime between 6 and 4 B.C., preferably the latter part of this span of time. This fits well with both Matthew's and Luke's chronologies, which seem to indicate that the census and Christ's birth were shortly before Herod's

death. . . .

Conclusion. Having considered some of these chronological notes, it seems the evidence would lead one to conclude that Christ's birth occurred sometime in late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C.

There have been lengthy discussions on the day of Christ's birth. . . . The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 165–235) has been December 25th. In the Eastern Church January 6th was the date for not only Christ's birth, but also the arrival of the Magi on Christ's second birthday. . . . Chrysostom (A.D. 345–407) in 386 stated that December 25th is the correct date and hence it became the official date for Christ's birth in the Eastern Church.

Although the exact date may not be pinpointed it seems that there is “a relatively old tradition of a midwinter birth, therefore a date in December or January is not in itself unlikely.”

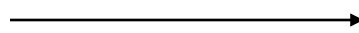
The one objection raised for the winter date is the fact of the shepherds attending their flock in the night (Luke 2:8). Usually, it

is noted, the sheep were taken into enclosures from November until March and were not in the fields at night. However, this is not conclusive evidence against December being the time of Christ's birth for the following reasons. First, it could have been a mild winter and hence the shepherds would have been outside with their sheep. Second, it is not at all certain that sheep were brought under cover during the winter months. Third, it is true that during the winter months the sheep were brought in from the wilderness. The Lukan narrative states that the shepherds were around Bethlehem (rather than the wilderness), thus indicating that the nativity was in the winter months. Finally, the Mishnah implies that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside all year, and those that were worthy for the Passover offerings were in the fields thirty days before the feast—which could be as early as February—one of the coldest and rainiest months of the year. Therefore, a December date for the nativity is acceptable.

In conclusion, the exact date of the birth of Christ is difficult to know with finality.

However, a midwinter date is most likely.

It is clear that Christ was born before Herod the Great's death and after the census. In looking at the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke one would need to conclude that Christ was born of Mary within a year or two of Herod's death. In looking to some of the other chronological notations in the Gospels, the evidence led to the conclusion that Christ was born in the winter of 5/4 B.C. Although the exact date of Christ's birth cannot be known, either December, 5 B.C. or January, 4 B.C., is most reasonable.²



Jesus Christ was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Farrar notes the consideration that was given to Jewish feeling toward the taxation ordered by Quirinius:

In deference to Jewish prejudices, any infringement of which was the certain signal for violent tumults and insurrection, it was not carried out in the ordinary Roman manner, at each person's place of residence, but according to Jewish custom, at the town to which their family originally belonged. The Jews still clung to their genealogies and to the memory of long-extinct tribal relations; and though the journey was a weary and distasteful one, the mind of Joseph may well have been consoled by the remembrance of that heroic descent which would now be

authoritatively recognized, and by the glow of those Messianic hopes to which the marvellous circumstances of which he was almost the sole depository would give a tenfold intensity.³

Herod showed considerable wisdom in selecting the mode of the enrollment for future taxation.

The Jewish method of collecting taxes is illustrated in the incident recorded in Matthew 17:24 where we read: “After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, ‘Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?’ ” The Jewish tax was a head tax, and each individual was assessed an equal amount. This tax was collected by the tax collectors at the place of residence. In contrast to this, Stauffer summarizes the law of the Roman census thus:

The law of the Roman census stated: “Whoever has property in another city must deliver his tax declaration in that city. For land taxes must be paid to the community in whose territory the land is situated.” This provision necessarily lent a particular character to the census procedures in Palestine. For in that country ownership of property outside the community was not uncommon. The Romans were constantly encountering the family property of the “patriarchal houses,” whose rights of possession were extremely difficult to disentangle.