

Luke 2:1-7

The Birth of the Messiah

There is great anticipation in the coming of a child. Preparing the nursery, buying baby clothes, and stocking up on diapers are all a part of getting ready for the baby. No doubt Mary and Joseph were doing many of these same things, if somewhat differently than we do today. As they prepared to begin a home together, news came of a command from the emperor himself, and events that had been foreseen for nearly a millennium came to pass.

The Date

The dating of Christ's birth is a modern concern, not a 1st century agrarian society concern. The early church did not celebrate the birth of Christ in any significant way. Christ, and other church martyrs, were celebrated on the day of their death. The actual date of Christ's birth was forgotten by the second century, and many dates came to be considered.

Hippolytus (2nd century) and Sextus Julius Africanus (3rd century) referred to Christ's birth on December 25. Chrysostom (late 4th century) affirmed this as well. In 354 the Church first celebrated that day as Christ's birth, perhaps as an alternative to a pagan holiday of the god Mithra celebrated at the same time, or perhaps because it was exactly nine months after the date the Church celebrated as the conception of Christ, March 25.

The Year

In terms of the year of Christ's birth, the first calendar using BC/AD was prepared by Dionysius, a monk, at the request of Pope John I in about 525. Dionysius dated Christ's birth from the founding of the city of Rome (a common practice) and therefore 754 years after Rome was founded became 1 AD. Since later research showed that King Herod died 750 years after the founding of Rome, and Matthew 2:1 states that Christ was born before the death of Herod, this means that Jesus was born BC!

Matthew 2:1, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem"

The Jewish historian, Josephus, informs us that Herod died just before Passover. We also know that an eclipse of the moon occurred shortly before that. Astronomical evidence can date the eclipse to March 12-13 of 4 BC and Passover that year began on April 11. Therefore, Herod must have died sometime between those two dates. But we can narrow it even further. The historical record states that Herod reigned in Judea for 34 years. The 34th year of his reign began on March 29 of 4 BC. Herod must have died then sometime between March 29 and April 11 of 4 BC. Jesus had to be born before that.

But how early could Jesus have been born? In discussing the census, Luke 2:2 states "This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria." Yet, Quirinius served governor of Syria in 6-7 AD. To resolve this issue there are two options. First, Quirinius held other government posts earlier in Judea, so Luke may be using the term "governor" loosely. That is unlikely since Luke is so very specific in other aspects. A better solution is to understand that the word "first" *protos*, can also be translated "before" implying that this census was taken before Quirinius was governor of Syria. Why would Luke

do that? Perhaps to distinguish it from the census mentioned in Acts 5:37, “After this man [Theudas], Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered.” This census took place in 6 AD.

So we can conclude that Jesus was born sometime in the winter [by tradition, not historical record] of 5-4 BC.

While we’re at it

Other things were added throughout the years: gift giving from the early pagans, mistletoe from the ancient Druids, the manger scene (creche) from St. Francis of Assisi, and Christmas cards first appeared in London in 1843. Santa Claus is the secular representation of St. Nicholas, the 4th century bishop of Myra in modern Turkey. According to legend he provided dowries for three daughters from a poor family so they could marry and avoid a life of prostitution. He did this by placing a bag of gold coins in the stockings of each of the young girls as they left them hanging to dry after doing laundry. Early American settlers from The Netherlands, where this saint was popular, called him Sinterklaas.

The World Scene

Their timing could not have been better in the ancient world. From Scotland to Syria was under one nation. It was the beginning of the Pax Romana, a time of peace and prosperity unequalled in human history. A common language, relative safety and ease of travel, and a sense of common nationhood made this a perfect time for the founder of a new religion to be born.

God moved the heart of the most powerful man in the world at that time. “A decree went out from Caesar Augustus” calling for a census to be taken in all his possessions. Octavian had come to power after a long series of struggles following the assassination of his great-uncle Julius Caesar in March of 44 BC. Though he at first ruled with others (Mark Antony and Lepidus) and fought wars to maintain his position, his reign was dated from that time in the Roman historical record. The Roman Senate gave him the title Augustus (revered one).

“A census be taken of all the inhabited earth” would be done for two purposes. To determine the number of people available for military service or to determine the potential tax base. Though there is no existing record of this census in the Roman historical record, such censuses were a common ancient practice as emperors tried to rule vast areas.

In the ancient world it took time for things to be done. Communication was slow, and the systems had to be set up to accurately take the census. Herod’s reign was dysfunctional - he had executed three of his sons who were vying to succeed him, and he changed his will several times. Octavian had lost confidence in him. This may have been an ulterior motive for the census in Palestine, since Jews did not serve in the army. The focus may have been exclusively on the tax base available to a new ruling family.

“Each to his own city” was an unusual Roman procedure. People usually registered where they lived unless they owned land in a different area, so this may have been the case with Joseph. Another idea is that the Romans are indulging a Jewish custom which emphasized the importance of family connections.

We can learn that should not be concerned by the actions of national rulers, Ecclesiastes 5:8, “If you see oppression of the poor and denial of justice and righteousness in the province, do not be shocked at the sight; for one official watches over another official, and there are higher officials over them.” The decree passed in about 8 BC coincided perfectly with Mary’s due date a few years later. God is Lord over all.

The Local Scene

“To the city of David, which is called Bethlehem,” had long been prophesied as the birthplace of the Messiah. Micah 5:2, “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,

Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.”

There must have been some deadline with the decree to register for the census, since Mary was near the term of her pregnancy and had to make the journey of seventy miles or so. It was not usually required that the entire family register for a census, though there are cases in the historical record where that is the case. A more likely explanation is that Mary did not want to be away from Joseph at this time, nor would Joseph have wanted to miss the birth of the child he would raise as his son. Like good Jews, they also knew that the prophecy required the Messiah be born in Bethlehem.

“Who was engaged to him” is not a contradiction with Matthew 1:24, “And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife,” Under Jewish law an engagement was equivalent to marriage. Even in Matthew’s account, he speaks of them as already being married, “And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly,” Matthew 1:19.

The Moment

“Gave birth to her firstborn son” is stated without detail or elaboration. No angel, no trumpets, no family, no friends. Firstborn, *prototokos*, cannot be translated “only”, which would be *monogenes*. The perpetual virginity of Mary is argued by Cyril of Alexandria in the 5th century in speaking of the gate of the prince in Ezekiel 44:1-2, “¹Then He brought me back by the way of the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces the east; and it was shut. ²The LORD said to me, ‘This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.’”

“Laid Him in a manger” does not necessarily imply that Jesus was born in a stable. The word manger, *phante*, means feeding trough and could be used anywhere animals were kept. An early church tradition suggests that Jesus was born in cave, an idea which can be neither proven nor disproven. That there “was no room for them in the inn” also need clarification. The word for inn, *kataluma*, is not the normal Greek word for inn and can mean guest room, or shelter, or what we would call a campground. There were many such places for the convenience of traders along the roads in the Middle East and Asia. That it was overcrowded is clear, so Joseph and Mary moved to the next logical alternative, a shelter where the travelers’ animals were kept.

Not to be lost in this is that this was a public birth. There must have been many witnesses to the young couple's plight as they pursued their options of finding a place to stay. The Messiah was not born in secret. When he began his public ministry, perhaps even when He was crucified, there must have been many Jews who remembered that night.

There are certain events which seem to stop time in its place. Those moments when the reality of our humanness is unequivocally evident. Those times are birth and death. And yet, as profound as those moments are for us, for others not involved, it is as if they never happened. The case of the passing of my mother-in-law comes to mind. Yet as detached as others were in the crowded villages around Jerusalem, this was an event they could not escape.

Take Aways

While there are many "misconceptions" regarding the birth of Christ, it is clear from the historical record that He was born. Neither Jews, nor Muslims, dispute this fact.

God's timing in all things is perfect. It is not always our timing, but that is irrelevant.

Government leaders have great power. Our God is greater.