

# When Was Jesus Born?

Christ's birth, death and resurrection have influenced human history more than any other event. Millions of pages recording the impact of Christ's life have been written. That God would become a man, allow beings He created to kill Him and then translate that event into a pathway of salvation is the most astonishing story ever told. Yet, *when* those events occurred remains in dispute.

To understand several prophetic timing messages requires that we know when those events occurred. In turn, that helps us to grasp key end-time events that relate to the great Jewish holidays – festivals.

Here's the challenge: The Passover lamb was to be killed on the 14<sup>th</sup> of the Jewish month of Nissan (Abib), prepared and eaten that night (after sundown, Nissan the 15<sup>th</sup>, when a new day began). This date must occur at a full moon. That, in turn, is predicated on a subjective beginning of the month stated by observers when the new moon (first silver of its crescent phase) was seen. Jesus, the Passover Lamb, was killed on Friday (the preparation day), which would have to be Nissan 14 at full moon.

Since the beginning of the month could be off one to two days and since no one can tell with certainty which year a Jewish "leap" month was added 2000 years ago (a 13-month year), scholars have defended A.D. 27, 30, 33 and 36 as crucifixion dates.

Adding complication to this conflict are the many calendars used to date time. Often an event was dated by the year a king was in power. The Julian calendar was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C., chosen after consultation with the Alexandrian astronomer Sosigenes. That calendar had a year of 12 months and a "leap year" added every four years – not a leap month.

In 525 A.D. Dionysius Exiguus invented, at Pope John I's request, B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini – Year of our Lord). He did not accurately know when Christ was born. In addition, in transferring from 1 B.C. to 1 A.D. he failed to put in a "zero."

It took nearly 400 years for this system to be adopted. In combination with the Julian calendar (which determined the beginning of the months and years), Dionysius' system continued until 1582 A.D.

In 1582 A.D. Pope Gregory XIII set about to deal with growing inaccuracies of the Julian and Dionysius systems. Because a year was not exactly 365 days long, seasons were beginning to occur at different times of the year. The rules he set up were exactly like the Julian calendar except for a leap-year system. This was done by bringing the vernal equinox back to March 21.

Although software can handle dates as far back as 4700 B.C., it is not totally objective. Various countries adopted these calendars at vastly different times. Thus, their records are often inaccurate. Astronomers can show in detail the sequence backward of the new and full moons, but can't be certain when Friday, Nissan 14 occurred because of problems in Jewish timing. Since prophecy is tied to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus, some system of dating must exist to guide our Biblical understanding. It is possible to take astronomically the yearly

sun and moon cycles and set a "yearly" sequence of these celestial objects. Tying that to the simple fact that the movement from A.D. to B.C. and visa versa must include the year zero, an accurate *numerical sequence* can be made. Then one can plug in *historical events*, with all the clues God has given to date Biblical messages. He knew that "timing" issues would be a challenge. That is why *so much* of the prophetic Scripture is *time-* and *event-*related!

### **Clues that Matter**

Jesus' baptism was during the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1, 21). That is historically determined to be 27 A.D. This was prophesied over 500 years previously in Daniel 9:25 by the end of the 69 weeks when Messiah the Prince would make His debut.

The "commandment" to "restore and to build Jerusalem" to "Messiah the Prince" began in 457 B.C. That "decree" related to the re-establishment of the Jewish theocratic nation. It was given by Artaxerses I (Longminus). It was a *spiritual decree* as was the word *Jerusalem* used spiritually. This prophecy relates to the restoration of a people, God's church, a holy nation. To Messiah the Prince would be 69 Sabbatical Sabbaths or 483 years. Sabbatical Sabbaths were the issue involving captivity (II Chronicles 36:21) *and* restoration (Daniel 9:24).

### **Calculations**

483 years of prophetic timing

- 457 B.C. year of restorative decree

26 A.D.

+ 1 year for the missing year of zero

27 A.D. in the Gregorian calendar

Now we have developed two ways to determine 27 A.D. – Daniel's 9:25 prophecy and the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar. This becomes a key for additional timing issues.

This year is *when* Jesus is baptized, anointed of God and enters His 3-year ministry. His work as the Messiah began then. Luke 3:23 notes that Jesus was "about 30 years of age" at this time. This would coincide with the age a male in Israel would enter the priesthood (Numbers 4:3).

This information would mean that Jesus was born in 3 B.C.

## Calculation

30 years of age

- 27 A.D.

3 B.C. (includes B.C. 0 – 1 – 2 – 3  
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The Gospels tell us that Herod, king of Judea, died shortly after Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:15). A traditional view holds this to be 4 B.C. More recently W. E. Filmer,<sup>1</sup> Ernest L. Martin<sup>2</sup> and Ormond Edward<sup>3</sup> have argued that 4 B.C. was too early. Josephus had noted that Herod died between a lunar eclipse and the Feast of Passover. The *traditional* date assumed an eclipse of March 13, 4 B.C. There was also a spectacular total eclipse on September 10, 1 B.C., which Josephus also mentions. This would allow for Jesus to be born in the fall of 3 B.C. Four early Christian writers additionally reported that Jesus was born in 3/2 B.C. (Irenaeus 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Clement of Alexandria approximately 200 A.D., Tertullian early 3<sup>rd</sup> century and Africanus early 3<sup>rd</sup> century).

Luke's account says: "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city" (Luke 2:1-3.) Some translations say "census," others "registration." This fulfills the prophecy of Daniel 11:20.

The census of Caesar Augustus was during the time of Cyrenius (Latin Quirinius). The Syrian providence at that time *included* Judea where Herod the Great was still its head.

"Cyrenius was, however, not an ordinary governor; he was a Roman *procurator* who had powers directly from Augustus, which in contemporary terms means a powerful 'man-Friday,' a *Legatus Augusti* [Justin Martyr said that Roman records showed Quirinius as the *procurator* of Syria: *Apol.* I, 34. *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. X, pg. 216, has this revealing comment on the role of a Roman *procurator*: 'Each *province* had its equestrian procurator who in the eyes of the provincials was almost as important as the governor himself {see Tacitus, *Agric.*, 15}. These procurators were appointed by the Emperor quite independently of the *legatus* {governor} and the relations between the two were frequently none too friendly'."4

In 3 B.C. Quirinius was special governor during the time of the Syrian governorship of Saturninus, who was responsible for conducting the special census, preparing for the *Pater Patriae* for Augustus.

The *Pater Patriae* was a title of "Father of My Country," conveyed to Augustus by the Roman

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<sup>1</sup> Filmer, W. E.; Martin, Ernest L. and Edward, Ormond; The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great, *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966): 283-298.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, Ernest L., *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 2d ed. (Pasadena, CA: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Ormon Edwares, Herodian Chronology, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1982): 29-2.

<sup>4</sup> [www.versebyverse.org/doctrine/birthofchrist.htm](http://www.versebyverse.org/doctrine/birthofchrist.htm) (emphasis added).

Senate. This was given on February 5, 2 B.C. when he was 60 years old and at his Silver jubilee. The census and taxation was all part of the *preparation* for this time of celebration. All people were to sign an oath to Rome at that time.

There are other documents that substantiate the timing of this census.

"The Armenian historian, Moses of Khorene, said that the native sources he had available showed that in the second year of Abgar, king of Armenia (3BC), the census brought Roman agents 'to Armenia, bringing the image of Augustus Caesar, *which they set up in every temple.*'"<sup>5</sup>

"One Orosius, who lived in the fifth century and quoted early sources, wrote: '[Augustus] ordered that a census be taken of each province everywhere and that all men be enrolled ... This is the earliest and most famous public acknowledgment which marked Caesar *as the first of all men* and the Romans as lords of the world, a published list of all men entered individually ... This first and greatest census was taken, since in this one name of Caesar all the peoples of the great nations *took oath*, and at the same time, through the participation in the census, were made a part of one society' [VI, 22 and VII, 2; he also identified the year as 3BC]."<sup>6</sup>

Josephus mentioned that an oath of allegiance was demanded by Augustus about twelve or fifteen months before the death of Herod.<sup>7</sup>

### **Death of Christ**

Evidence suggests that Jesus was born in the fall of the year at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. This would be beautifully symbolic and draws on the meaning of His name Emmanuel God with us He now tabernacles with us.

Daniel's 70 weeks of years prophecy noted that Jesus the Messiah the Prince would be cut off in the midst of the last week. That week of seven years would be divided in half, making a 3-1/2 (1260 days) and 3-1/2 (1260 days) time division.

Jesus begins His ministry at about 30 years of age (fall of 27 A.D.). Three and a half years later, 31 A.D. in the spring, at the time of the Passover, He is killed. This had to be (by divine directive) Nissan 14, Friday, the preparation day at full moon. Many have challenged this because of astronomical data (which allegedly shows a full moon cannot be on Friday, Nissan 14, *except on 30 or 33 A.D.*). That is why we did not use the Jewish calendar in this analysis. There are too many problems in looking backward through this time.

Based upon clear Biblical data and historical documents we can clearly state that Jesus was born 3 B.C., anointed or baptized 27 A.D. and died 31 A.D. At this season when anti-Christian voices are rising, we can welcome the celebration of Jesus' arrival on planet earth as Biblically true, historically factual and as a God with us and for us!

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<sup>5</sup> *History of the Armenians, trans. R. W. Thomson, Book II, p. 26.*

<sup>6</sup> Josephus, Flavius; *Antiquities*, VI, 22 and VII, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, Flavius; *Antiquities*, XVII, 41-45.

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