

When Was Christ Born?

In 2017, I prepared a group of handouts, based on Harold Hoehner's book "Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ." This handout pulls information from three of those handouts, with a focus on the birth of Christ.

Dating Systems

- History records more than thirty different calendars have been used for dividing years, months, and days.
- Many of the great cultures and world religions (Egyptian, Chinese, Aztecs, Babylonians, Greek, Romans, Jewish, Catholic, etc.) used solar and lunar calendars.
- Prior to the A.D. / B.C. calendar, it was common for events to be dated based on an historical event; for example: "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius" (Luke 3:1, marking the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry)
- The Romans used a calendar with the suffix A.U.C. which represented *anno urbis conditae*, Latin phrase meaning "from the foundation of the city of Rome" (January 1, 753 A.U.C.)
- The Catholic Church believed Christ's birth to have been on December 25th the following year
- In A.D. 525, Pope John I asked Dionysius Exiguus, a monk to prepare a standard calendar for the church. Dionysius modified the Alexandrian system of dating, changing its base from the reign of Diocletian, a persecutor of the church; to the B.C. / A.D. system based on the birth of Christ
- B.C. means "before Christ"; and A.D. represents *anno Domini*, Latin phrase meaning "in the year of the Lord"; sometimes mistakenly thought to mean "after death"
- So, 753 A.U.C. became 1 B.C.; and 754 A.U.C. became A.D. 1 (no zero date between B.C. and A.D.)
- Based on this new dating system, it was thought that Christ's birth was in 1 A.D.

Year of Christ's Birth

- According to Matthew and Luke's Gospels, we know that Christ was born before Herod's death.
- Early on, Herod's date of death was miscalculated. At some later point, research indicated a slightly later date.
- According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there was an eclipse of the moon around March 12, 4 B.C. Josephus says this eclipse happened shortly before the death of Herod.
- History documents that after Herod's death, the celebration of the Jewish Passover began on April 11, 4 B.C.
- History also notes that Herod was king for 34 years from the time of his possession of the land (37 B.C.)
- The 34th year of his reign would have begun on March 29, 4 B.C.

- Based on these historical dates, we can then determine that Herod died between March 29, 4 B.C. and April 11, 4 B.C.
- We know that when Quirinius was governor of Syria, a census was ordered, causing Joseph and Mary to have to travel to Bethlehem to be recorded and taxed. This census took place between 6 and 4 B.C.
- Now based on the date that Herod died, and the date range for the census, we have now narrowed the date of Christ's birth between 6 and 4 B.C.
- After evaluating other historical events, including the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry (knowing he was slightly older than Jesus); Hoehner believes the evidence leads to a conclusion that Jesus Christ's birth occurred sometime in late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C.

Date of Christ's Birth

- The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (3rd century theologian of Christian church in Rome, A.D. 165-235) has been December 25th.
- In the Orthodox Catholic Church, January 6th was the date they believed for Christ's birth, and for the arrival of the Magi (wise men) on His 2nd birthday.
- Chrysostom (Archbishop of Constantinople) stated in A.D. 386 that December 25th is the correct date, making it the official date for Christ's birth.
- Luke's Gospel says the shepherds were around Bethlehem, rather than in the wilderness, indicating His birth was in the winter months.
- The Mishnah (collection of rabbinic Jewish traditions) indicates that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside all year, and that those worthy for the Passover were in the fields 30 days before the feast (which could be as early as February).
- The exact date of the birth of Christ is difficult to know with certainty. But the traditional December date for His birth is certainly reasonable.

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Information Source:

Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ

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