

The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life

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In 1968 I published an article that offered fresh evidence in support of Friday, 3 April A.D. 33, as the date of the Crucifixion.¹ Since then, much attention has focused on the other terminus of Jesus' life in response to recent recalculations of dates for the death of Herod the Great and the birth of Christ. Although a precise date, as in the case of the Crucifixion, still seems unattainable for the Nativity, some further refinement within the usual range of 7 to 4 B.C. is possible, which would suggest late 5 B.C. as the most probable time for the first Christmas. This time frame, along with 3 April A.D. 33 for the Crucifixion, provides a very balanced correlation of all surviving chronological clues in the New Testament, as well as the extrabiblical sources. Earlier or later dates, in either case, tend to disregard or manipulate at least one or more of the sources. Using the form of a running commentary on the relevant chronological *sedes* in the New Testament, I will respond briefly to the current status of research on each.

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1. P. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion," *CH* 37 (1968) 3-13. Previously, A.D. 33 had been advocated by J. K. Fotheringham, "The Evidence of Astronomy and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion," *JTS* 35 (1934) 146-62; G. Ogg, *The Chronology of the Public Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1940) 244ff.; and B. Reicke, *New Testament Era* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 183-84. Since then, this date has also been endorsed by H. W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972) 183, and *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 95ff. For the most recent support, by C. J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, see n. 27 below and their essay in this volume.

The Nativity

The Decree of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1)

The claim that no non-Christian record exists of a universal Roman census ordered by Augustus is still valid.² The three celebrated censuses conducted by Augustus in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14—Achievement No. 8 in his *Res Gestae*—are apparently enrollments of Roman citizens only, although they *may* have involved censuses in the provinces also, since some Roman citizens certainly lived outside Italy. Luke rather intends here a provincial census of noncitizens for purposes of taxation, and many records of such provincial registrations under Augustus have survived, including Gaul, Sicily, Cilicia, Cyrene, and Egypt. Among these were client kingdoms such as that of Herod the Great; for example, Archelaus (unrelated to Herod), client king of Cappadocia, instructed a subject tribe “to render in Roman fashion an account of their revenue and submit to tribute.”³ Provincial enrollments are also well attested in Dio Cassius (53:22) and Livy (*Epistles* 134ff.; *Annals* 1:31, 2:6). There is also an epigraphic mention of a census by Quirinius at Apamea in Syria (an autonomous “client” city-state).⁴

In view of such provincial enrollments, Mason Hammond concludes that Augustus began “a general census of the whole Empire for purposes of taxation” in 27 B.C.⁵ This is congruent with Luke 2:1, but the only chronological clue for a Nativity enrollment would have to be some relationship with the middle census of Augustus in 8 B.C. Perhaps this citizens’ census had a provincial counterpart instituted months later, although evidence is lacking.

Quirinius and the Census of Judea (Luke 2:2)

A bibliography on the vexed issue of which census and when Quirinius governed would fill pages, and the problem itself shows little hope of present solution. None of the proposed chronologies of the life of Jesus can resolve it, since the one recorded tenure of P. Sulpicius

2. See, for example, T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1888), 2/3:417; L. R. Taylor, “Quirinius and the Census of Judaea,” *American Journal of Philology* 54 (1933) 129; and R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 548–49.

3. Tacitus, *Annals* 6:41. The tribe involved (the Clitae) rebelled at the census concept in a manner parallel to the Judeans in A.D. 6.

4. H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (3d ed.; Berlin: Weidmann, 1962) 2683. Other provincial censuses are in Dessau 950, 1409, and 9011.

5. M. Hammond, *The Augustan Principate* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 91.

Quirinius as governor of Syria and the census he administered in Judea dates to A.D. 6, a decade after the death of Herod the Great. The suggestion that Quirinius had a previous term as governor of Syria founders on the fact that the list of the relevant Syrian governors is not only apparently complete, but well peopled with personalities who are far more than names on a stone fragment somewhere.⁶ Two of these governors play dramatic roles on the pages of Josephus in the final years of Herod the Great: C. Sentius Saturninus (9–6 B.C.) served as judge over Herod’s sons Alexander and Aristobulus at Beirut (*Jewish War* 1:538–39, *Antiquities* 16:361ff.), and P. Quintilius Varus (6–4 B.C.), victim at the Teutoberger Forest massacre, judged Herod’s son Antipater in Jerusalem (*Jewish War* 1:617–18, *Antiquities* 17:89ff.).⁷

Since Luke links Quirinius’s name with a census famous enough to merit designation simply as “the census” without further description in Acts 5:37 (Gamaliel’s controversial speech), it becomes difficult to dislodge Quirinius and the Luke 2 census from a dating of A.D. 6—so difficult, in fact, that Tertullian sought to cut the Gordian knot by simply stating that the census was taken under the governorship of Saturninus instead of Quirinius (*Against Marcion* 4:19).

Those seeking to preserve Lukan accuracy had best resort to alternate translations, such as, “This enrollment was *before* that made when Quirinius was governor of Syria,” which is possible according to Greek syntax and the textual variants.⁸ An alternative suggestion turns on the idea that since it took forty years to complete one of the censuses in Gaul, the registration process could have begun under Herod, but then been completed under Quirinius, who was sent to clean up the mess left by Herod’s son, Archelaus (*Antiquities* 17:355). Quirinius, in any case, helps but little in dating the Nativity.

The Last Years of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1, Luke 1:5)

Both Matthew (2:1) and Luke (1:5) agree that Herod was on the throne at the time Jesus was born. Indeed, his death between a lunar eclipse (12/13 March 4 B.C.) and the spring Passover festival (April 11) has for many years pointed to the error in our present calendar, made

6. [The list is open in 12–10 B.C., however—]. Vardaman.]

7. *Antiquities* 16:361 speaks of “governors of Syria” in the plural—Saturninus and Volumnius are intended—even though the latter was procurator. Still, this lax reference may offer some fuel to those seeking an earlier term or similar governing role for Quirinius.

8. For further discussion, see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 394ff., 414–15, 547ff.; and Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 13ff.

by the sixth-century Scythian monk who fathered reckoning in years B.C. and A.D. Recently, however, several scholars have claimed that Dionysius Exiguus may not have committed such a gaffe after all, particularly W. E. Filmer, who argues that the lunar eclipse of 9 January 1 B.C. was the one Josephus had in mind (*Antiquities* 17:167). By adjusting the traditional dating of Herod's accession (when he was declared king by the Romans) from 40 to 39 B.C., or (when he actually conquered Jerusalem) from 37 to 36 B.C., and using accession-year reckoning, Filmer claims to satisfy the Josephan parameters for Herod's life.⁹

A major difficulty in this otherwise attractive thesis is the chronology of the Herodians after Herod. Josephus's accounts of the reigns of Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip all correlate perfectly with a 4 B.C. date for their father's death—and not with 1 B.C. Filmer resorts to coregencies by which the reigns of the first two sons overlapped Herod's by several years, and he emends the text in the case of Philip to adjust his reign appropriately, but T. D. Barnes has convincingly refuted this attempt to transpose Herod's death.¹⁰ Resort to coregencies is a malady that should never have infected New Testament chronological research to the extent it has. Having for years displaced the Crucifixion by three years due to the almost universal adoption of a joint rule of Augustus and Tiberius, this "solution" has now affected Nativity chronology as well. To arguments that Herod's sons and successors would try to augment the length of their reigns in this fashion, I note that Josephus was under no necessity to let them get away with it, writing as he did in Rome, under no pressure from any Herodian prince. His time grid for the Herodians holds up well enough without tampering.

Recently, P. M. Bernegger has underlined Barnes's refutation of a post-4 B.C. date for Herod's death by further elucidating Josephan chronology and confirming 37 B.C. (the year of Antigonus's death) as the start of Herod's *de facto* kingship.¹¹ Josephus's precise statements in both *Jewish War* (1:665) and *Antiquities* (17:191) that Herod reigned thirty-four years from the death of Antigonus can, by inclusive reckoning—that is, counting fractional portions of the years at the beginning and end of Herod's reign as complete years—point only to 4 B.C. as the year of his death.

9. W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *JTS* 17 (1966) 283-98. A similar chronology has been proposed by E. L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (2d ed.; Pasadena: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980).

10. T. D. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," *JTS* 19 (1968) 204-9.

11. P. M. Bernegger, "Affirmation of Herod's Death in 4 B.C.," *JTS* 34 (1983) 526-31.

Both Barnes and Bernegger, however, argue that the precise date of Herod's death need not be in March/April 4 B.C., according to the standard chronology, but may instead have occurred in December 5 B.C. The eclipse of the moon that preceded Herod's death (*Antiquities* 17:167) is usually dated 12/13 March 4 B.C., but a slightly larger eclipse of the moon was visible in Jerusalem on the night of 15/16 September 5 B.C. And since the *Megillat Ta'anit* speaks of Kislev 7 (December) as a Jewish festival, with a later commentator suggesting that this marked the date of Herod's death, an alternate reckoning would place Herod's death in December 5 B.C. Because so many events seem crowded into the time frame between March 12 and the following Passover of April 11, Barnes finds the December date "clearly preferable."¹²

On the contrary, the traditional dating of Herod's death in 4 B.C. seems preferable for several reasons. First, by inclusive reckoning on the Julian calendar, which Josephus regularly employs for the reign of Herod, 5 B.C. would mark only the thirty-third year since the death of Antigonus (not the thirty-fourth), and the thirty-sixth following his *de jure* kingship announced by the Romans (not the thirty-seventh, as Josephus specifies).

Next, too much time would have to be inserted between a December death for Herod in 5 B.C. and the Passover of 11 April 4 B.C. to accommodate the accounts in Josephus. In these, Herod's principal successor, Archelaus, is shown observing the customary seven days' mourning for his father, but after that, he is understandably eager to sail to Rome as soon as possible in order to gain Augustus's confirmation of Herod's will and, thus, ratification of his own kingship. He had no interest in prolonging any interim period (when his own kingship was in question) that would have violated the provisions of Herod's will, thereby endangering his own political fortunes vis-à-vis the emperor. Indeed, Archelaus even gave in to pressures from hostile demonstrations in Jerusalem "because of his intention of making his way to Rome as quickly as possible in order to learn Caesar's decision" (*Antiquities* 17:209; cf. *Jewish War* 2:8: "in haste to depart"). The Passover, however, intervened, and he could not make the trip until afterward. If the December option for Herod's death were true, affairs would have dragged on at least four months prior to the trip, which is patently improbable.

Finally, the earlier eclipse and death for Herod are extremely unlikely when considered against the background of Herod's own living

12. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," 209.

habits during the last months of his life, when advancing illness demanded optimal comforts. Josephus attaches the lunar eclipse preceding Herod's death to the night when he had burned to death the two teachers and their students who were responsible for the assault on the golden eagle that Herod had placed over the great gate of the temple. Their trial had taken place at his theater in Jericho, where Herod was apparently living at the time in his winter palace. Yet he would hardly have been living here in early September, the time of the earlier eclipse, when the Jordan valley at Jericho, over a thousand feet below sea level, is excessively hot. But he would have been staying at his winter palace in early March, the time of the later eclipse.

Against this background, the notation of Kislev 7 in *Megillat Ta'anit* as marking the presumed date of Herod's death must be interpreted for what it undoubtedly is: the untrustworthy tradition of a late scholiast.¹³ Certainly something as significant as Herod's death—if it were commemorated as a holiday—would have been so recorded in *Megillat Ta'anit* from the start.

This leaves, then, the traditional date of Herod's death in March/April 4 B.C. Against all recent objections that Herod's funeral was too elaborate to compress into the time frame between the eclipse and the Passover, I argue that if Herod did indeed die at the close of March, the Passover would have followed inexorably—no matter whose funeral was involved—and events would have progressed almost exactly as recorded by Josephus.¹⁴

The last events in Herod's life after the eclipse of March 12 are a brief excursion (of unspecified duration) to neighboring Callirrhoe to try its medicinal waters, a summoning of Jewish leaders to the hippodrome at Jericho, and the execution of his son Antipater. Herod himself died five days after the last episode, or approximately the end of March. Counting backward from the Passover of April 11, the following occur: demonstrations against Archelaus, a seven-day mourning period, and Herod's own funeral, again pointing to the end of March for Herod's death. However, if Josephus were reckoning according to the Jewish calendar, Herod's thirty-fourth year of reign would have begun on 1 Nisan 4 B.C., or March 29. Accordingly, we should not miss the mark excessively to estimate Herod's death about 1 April 4 B.C., particularly if Josephus (as seems probable) was using the Julian calendar.

13. See Josephus, *The Jewish War* (trans. H. St. J. Thackeray; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1927), 1:314–15 n. a. [Is it possible that Kislev 7 alludes to Herod's birthday, which Jews of that period could well have observed as though it were the day of a funeral? This mocking practice would be full of biting sarcasm!—J. Vardaman]

14. Contra Martin, *Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 29ff.