

# BIRTH OF JESUS

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## HISTORY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT by Jack Kilmon

Jesus is born.

The date of Jesus' birth cannot be placed with certainty. One must do a little historical detective work to sort out the biblical references.

This is assisted by Luke who mentions certain personages whose history is known. First among these is Herod the Great, King of Judea. Luke 1:5 places the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist in the days of Herod, King of Judea. The best historical evidence places the death of Herod shortly after an eclipse occurring on the night of Sunday, March 12/13, 4 BCE. and the Passover of Wednesday, April 11, 4 BCE. This corresponds to the year 750 A.U. of the Roman Calendar. Jesus was therefore born prior to 4 BCE.

The second person mentioned by Luke for this detective story is one Cyrenius; who was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, Roman soldier, senator and consul under Augustus. In 6 CE Quirinius was sent to Syria as legate along with Coponius who would be the first prefect of Judea and a predecessor of Pontius Pilatus. The registration and census of 6 CE is too late to be connected with the birth of Jesus. Additionally, the registration of 6 CE did not include the Galilee.

This has long been a stumbling block in the determination of the date of Jesus' birth and many scholars merely assumed that Luke had made a mistake. In 1912, however, the discovery by W. M. Ramsey of a fragmentary inscription at Antioch of Pisidia arguably established Quirinius was in Syria on a previous occasion.

(1) His role was more military to lead a campaign against the Homanadenses, a tribe in the Taurus Mountains. This is confirmed by Tacitus. This means that Quirinius would have established a seat of government in Syria, including Palestine, from the years 10 to 7 BCE. In this position he would have been responsible for the census mentioned by Luke. This census of 7 BCE would therefore have been the first census taken when Cyrenius was governor (Luke 2:2) and the historically documented census of 6/7 CE was really the second. There is further evidence of this first census of 7 BCE in the writings of Tertullian who records the census taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus.

(2) C. Sentius Saturninus was Legate of Syria from 9 to 6 BCE. Another inscription, the Lapis Tiburtinus, was found in 1764 near Tivoli (Tibur). Composed after 14 CE, the inscription names an unknown personage who was legate of Syria twice. The man is described as having been victorious in war. There is considerable dissension among scholars as to whether the unnamed person is Quirinius. I think it is more likely that it refers to the famous consul and soldier.

Scholars have debated about the historicity of this first census since

there is no record of it in the Roman archives. Their chief argument is that Augustus would not have imposed a census for the purpose of taxation in the kingdom of a client king like Herod. Herod had his own tax collectors and paid tribute to Rome from the proceeds. They further pose that the census in 6 CE was imposed because Herod's nutty son Archelaus had been deposed and Judea was placed under direct Roman rule. These are good arguments.

As a layman, I am forced to go back to Luke and ask why he would record an event that never took place. Luke was well educated with diversified talents. He seems careful in his historicity and, although very young at the time, may very well have met Jesus. He knew and interviewed those who were closest to Jesus. Some scholars think that the story of the first census and the birth in Bethlehem is theologoumenon. This is a term scholars use for that which expresses an event or notion in language what may not be factual but supports, enhances, or is related to a matter of faith. In other words, a white lie. I don't buy it in this case. There is no advantage to matters of faith in the invention of a census of 6 BCE.

Some scholars argue that the early census was invented to support a mythological birth in Bethlehem in support of Messianic prophecy. We'll cover the Bethlehem issue below. As for the early census, I am inclined to believe Luke and Tertullian (even though Tertullian isn't one of my favorite characters). I can think of a number of reasons based on the history of the time. Lack of records is not evidence for or against an historical event. Records are lost and destroyed, particularly those that are two millennia old. Rome burned in 64 CE and there have been numerous conflagrations and sackings of the city over the centuries.

Could Augustus have deviated from convention and imposed a census in Syria/Palestine in 6 B.C.E.? Of course he could. He was the Emperor. Herod the Great was ill and, by all accounts of the time, nuttier than a fruitcake. He who had once been an able and effective administrator and builder, was now paranoid and vicious. He had murdered most of his family, including his sons and the wife he loved most. The joke in the Roman court by Caesar himself was that one was safer being Herod's pig than Herod's son. Josephus records in *Antiquities of the Jews*, XVI, ix 3 that Augustus was furious with Herod in 8 BCE and threatened to treat him no longer as a friend (Client), but as a subject (subject to taxes).

I believe that the prudent and prudish Augustus, scandalized by Herod's outrageous reputation and increasing madness, began the movement toward making Judea a prefecture in 8 BCE and part of that preparation was a registration. Caesar could have delayed actual imposition of direct rule in deference to Herod's ill health and the hope that his successor would not be as loony toony.

When Herod died and Archelaus turned out to be crazier than his father, Augustus threw in the towel (or Toga) and made Palestine a prefecture. He sent Quirinius as Legatus (a second time) and Coponius as the first prefect. The census of 6 CE therefore becomes the first census under direct Roman rule and fell in schedule with the Roman census on a 14 year rotation. The census of Jesus' birth, perhaps only a registration, became lost in the archives. In this scenario, it would make sense to send Quirinius back as Legatus since he presided under the previous registration. Quirinius was no minor functionary. He was a Roman senator

of the Equestrian order and had been consul since 12 BCE. He had won an insignia of triumph for the Homanadensian war and had accompanied Caesar to Armenia in 3 CE. He died in 21 CE.

(3) Service in Palestine was not considered prime duty by Roman functionaries but the governorship of Syria was one of the most important positions in the Empire. The post was always given to the most respected and capable of Imperial functionaries chosen from the elite of Roman aristocracy. The Syrian Legatus was the commander-in chief of the entire Roman East and responsible for the Parthian border. I believe this Roman soldier, senator and administrator, who had already served Caesar well, returned to Syria as a personal favor for his emperor/friend. I must, therefore, be an audacious layman and disagree with the majority of New Testament scholars. I conclude that Luke is accurate.

Jesus' birth in the year 7 BCE would conform with the statements of Luke but what was the day of his birth? Scholars are nearly unanimous that Jesus' birth did not occur on December 25 and on this I do agree. December 25 was the Roman festival day of *Natalis Invictus*, the birth of the Sun. The emperor Constantine, contrary to tradition, was not a Christian but an advocate of the cult of *Sol Invictus*. More for political expediency than for religious reasons, Constantine tolerated Jesus as an earthly manifestation of *Sol Invictus*, the son god. Since Christian doctrine was being promulgated by Rome, compromises were being made between Christianity, *Sol Invictus* and Mithraism. Constantine saw this as a way of maintaining harmony. An edict by Constantine in 321 CE ordered the courts to be closed on the venerable day of the sun and Sunday was chosen as the day of observance rather than the traditional Saturday Sabbath. If not on Christmas day, therefore, on what day was Jesus born?

The "Star of Bethlehem", Fact or Fiction?

Many biblical scholars have long contended the story of the Star of Bethlehem to be a myth, another of those theologoumenons (there's that word again). Astrology played an important role in the ancient Middle East, including the Jews. It would not be uncommon to correlate some celestial event with the birth of Jesus, just as the eclipse had been correlated to the death of Herod and a comet with the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. No comets or Novae, new stars, can be associated by astronomers with the period of Jesus' birth. Hence the source of the Star of Bethlehem remained a mystery or was considered myth.

In Prague, in 1603, shortly before Christmas, the astronomer and mathematician, Johannes Kepler, was making observations of the stars through his rudimentary telescope. He was observing the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. The two planets had converged to look like one larger and new star. Kepler later remembered something he had read by the Rabbinical writer, Abravanel (1437-1508). Jewish astrologers maintained that when there was a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in Pisces, the Messiah would come. In ancient Jewish astrology, the constellation of Pisces was known as the House of Israel, the sign of the Messiah. Jupiter was the royal star of the house of David and Saturn was the protecting star of Israel, the Messiah's Star. Since the constellation of Pisces was the point in the heavens where the sun ended its old course and began its new, it is understandable why this

conjunction would be viewed as a portent of the Messiah.

Kepler concluded that he had found the star of Bethlehem but his hypothesis was rejected. It was not until 1925 that the hypothesis was re-examined when references to this conjunction were found in the cuneiform inscriptions of the astrological archives of the ancient School of Astrology at Sippar in Babylonia. Sippar was an ancient Sumerian city lying on a canal which linked the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It was a very important commercial and religious center. Excavations at the site of Abu-Habbah during the latter part of the 19th century unearthed the remains of a temple and ziggurat dedicated to Shamash and the ancient scribal School of Astrology.

The most important discovery were tens of thousands of clay tablets from the school archives that dated from the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods. In 1925, the German Scholar P. Schnabel found, among the endless cuneiform records of dates and observations, a note on a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. The position of Jupiter and Saturn, converged in Pisces, had been recorded over a period of five months in 7 B.C.E!! Calculations show that the conjunction was observable three times over the course of the year, May 29, October 3, and December 4.

The conjunction in Pisces is observable in the southern sky over Judea and would sit directly over Bethlehem if one were observing along the road leading from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Matthew 2:2 stating "We have seen his star in the east" is a mistranslation of the Greek phrase EN TH ANATOLH "in the east" from the original wording which means idiomatically, the first light of dawn (which comes from the east) when the conjunction is visible. The correlation of this celestial event with the first visit of Quirinius and a preliminary registration in Syria is too much of a coincidence for this layman to ignore. I must therefore humbly and respectfully disagree with the majority of New Testament scholars who again contend that the story of the Star of Bethlehem is another of those little white lies. I conclude again, therefore, that the Gospel account is accurate.

Accepting the Star of Bethlehem as an historical fact, our detective work gives us three possible dates for the birth of Jesus, May 29, October 3, and December 4 in the year 7 BCE. I would rule out May 29 as too early. Scholars also contend that the Gospel account of the three Wise Men is another of those theologoumenon white lies. If one were to accept the story of the three magi (astrologers), or at least three visitors who came to Judea based on the astrological omen, as containing an element of fact, May 29 is too early.

Why would wise men, astrologers/magi in Babylon care about a celestial event predicting the Jewish Messiah? Christians are normally unaware that Babylon was as important a center for Judaism as Jerusalem in the ancient world. It is the center for the predominating Babylonian Talmud. It is very likely that the wise men were scholars of the School of Astrology in Sippar and likely of Jewish ancestry dating to the mass deportations of Jews to Babylon in the 7th century BCE.

Steeped in their Jewish messianic hopes and in astrology, these men would have been convinced that the birth of the Messiah was imminent. Given their background, an expedition to the Homeland would seem the most likely

course of action for validation of both their scholarly, astrological and religious prognostication. These astrologers would have observed the first conjunction on May 29 and then made preparations to travel to Judea, arriving for the time of a predicted second conjunction.

October 3 intrigues me because it is within days of the time of other recorded Roman censuses. Including the one in 6 CE. December 4 would be too late for Shepherds to be tending their flocks. These were usually brought in around the first of November. I must therefore again, with all respect to the New Testament scholars, disagree that the Gospel story of the Wise Men from the East is fiction. In this historical detective story, correlating the Gospel accounts of the registration with the celestial phenomenon, I choose Saturday, 10 Tishri, 3755 (October 3, 7 BCE.) as the date of the birth of Jesus. Interestingly, that day was a Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.