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## When Was Christ Born?

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# WHEN WAS CHRIST BORN?

*John A. Tvedtnes*

*Abstract: Many people still believe that Jesus Christ was born on 25 December, either in 1 BC or AD 1. The December date is certainly incorrect and the year is unlikely.*

Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets. Behold, I come unto my own, to fulfil all things which I have made known unto the children of men from the foundation of the world, and to do the will, both of the Father and of the Son—of the Father because of me, and of the Son because of my flesh. And behold, the time is at hand, and this night shall the sign be given. (3 Nephi 1:13–14)

**T**he question of when Christ was born can be considered in two parts: 1) In what year was Christ born? 2) On what day of the year was Christ born?

## **The Year of Christ's Birth**

Christians of the sixth century wanted a calendar that was not tied to the Roman rulers. About AD 525 (1278 AUC), Dionysus Exiguus ("the little"), a Scythian monk living in Rome, prepared, at the pope's request, a new calendar based on the year in which Christ was born. He determined that the Savior was

born on 25 December 753 AUC.<sup>1</sup> Since Dionysus commenced the AD system with the year following Christ's birth, this would place the nativity in 1 BC by his reckoning, with ad 1 beginning a week later. Modern scholars acknowledge that he erred by at least four years, perhaps because his calculations were based on the regnal years of the Roman emperors, and he counted the reign of Caesar Augustus from 27 BC, neglecting the four years Augustus reigned under his own name, Octavian, prior to becoming emperor.<sup>2</sup>

The Bible has clues that can help us pinpoint the approximate year of Christ's birth. The first hint comes from Matthew 2:1, where we read that he was born in the time of "Herod the king." That this refers to Herod the Great and not to one of his sons or grandsons of the same name, is clear from the fact that neither Herod Antipas nor Herod Philip were kings, but tetrarchs only, while the kings Herod Agrippa I and II were too late in time. It is true that Herod had named another of his sons, Herod Archelaus, as king, but Matthew 2:22 makes it clear that this Archelaus, in whose time Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned from Egypt to Nazareth, was son of the Herod who had ordered the slaughter of the children at Bethlehem.

Luke 1:5 notes that the birth of John the Baptist had been announced "in the days of Herod, the King of Judaea." John's mother Elizabeth was a cousin of Jesus's mother Mary and John was evidently born six months before Jesus (Luke 1:24–36). So

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1 AUC derives from the Latin *ab urba condita* ("from the founding of the city") and denotes the years following the founding of Rome, 753 BC by our reckoning. AD is from the Latin *anno Domini* ("year of the Lord").

2 For thirteen years following the assassination of Julius Caesar, there was a power struggle among his close friends. Mark Anthony refused to acknowledge Octavian as Caesar's heir and led the Egyptians in revolt against Rome. The matter was settled in 31 BC when Anthony died in the Battle of Actium and his ally and paramour Cleopatra committed suicide. Octavian was sole ruler of Rome at that point, but did not adopt the name Caesar and become emperor until 17 BC.

Luke agrees with Matthew in placing the birth of Christ in the time of King Herod.

The problem is that scholars consider that Herod died earlier than Dionysus Exiguus placed the birth of Christ. This is based on the fact that the first-century ad Jewish historian Flavius Josephus recorded that Herod had died after an eclipse of the moon and before the following Passover (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.6.4, 17.9.3). Famed German astronomer Johann Kepler (1571–1630) calculated that there would have been a partial lunar eclipse (40%) visible in Palestine during the night of 13–14 March 4 BC, a month before Passover, which fell on 14 April that year.<sup>3</sup> This would mean that Jesus could not have been born later than that time. Several modern astronomers have suggested that the lunar eclipse of which Josephus wrote was not the one that occurred in 4 BC, but a later one.<sup>4</sup> There was, in fact, a total lunar eclipse visible from Jerusalem on the night of 9–10 January 1 BC, about three months before the beginning of Passover on 8 April.<sup>5</sup> But there are other records that also suggest the earlier date.<sup>6</sup>

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3 There were other partial lunar eclipses in the years 4 BC (2), 2 BC (2), 1 BC (1), AD 1 (1), AD 2 (2). The only eclipse close to the time of Passover was in 4 BC.

4 John P. Pratt, "Yet Another Eclipse for Herod," *The Planetarian* 19/4 (December 1990), 8–14. The article has been posted on a number of web sites. Pratt is a Latter-day Saint, and while I find his research interesting, he seems to have preconceived ideas that guide his conclusions, and there are a number of problems with some of his reasoning that cannot be discussed here.

5 At least one researcher, in an attempt to establish the 4 BC eclipse as the one mentioned by Josephus, wrote that the eclipse occurred on the night following a "fast," which he identified as Purim, the day commemorating the Jewish fast in the days of Esther that saved the exiled Jews from being massacred by the Persians. He placed the fast on 13 March and the eclipse on 14 March 4 BC. A careful reading of his source (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 17.6.4) reveals that Josephus's mention of the fast day was a retrospective view in a parenthetical insert and that it did not occur on the day before the eclipse. As much as I would welcome such additional evidence for the 4 BC date, it is clear that this researcher's view of the timing of the eclipse is incorrect.

6 Some have argued that the events Josephus recorded as having taken place during the period between the 4 BC eclipse and Passover (29 days) could

Josephus, who lived less than a century after Herod's death and had access to records of the time (including those of Nicolaus of Damascus, Herod's biographer),<sup>7</sup> noted that Herod the Great was named king of the Jews in "the one hundred and eighty-fourth Olympiad, when Caius Domitius Calvinus was consul the second time, and Caius Asinius Pollio [the first time]" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.14.4–5). The Greeks and Romans counted the founding of the Olympic games in 776 BC, with games every four years thereafter. Consequently, the 184th Olympiad ended in 40 BC. Elsewhere, Josephus wrote that Herod died 37 years after being named king of the Jews by the Roman Senate, which would have been 3–4 BC (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.8.1; *Wars of the Jews* 1.32.8).<sup>8</sup>

According to Josephus, following the death of Herod, his son Archelaus sent to Caesar (Augustus) his petition for approval of Herod's testament. Caesar consulted with others, including his grandson Gaius, about the matter (*Antiquities of the Jews* 17.9.5). From a Roman source (*Preneustus Fasti*), we learn that Gaius left Rome for the Orient on 29 January 1 BC. This excludes 1 BC as a possible year of Herod's death.

Josephus gives us further clues that support 4 BC as the year in which Herod the Great died. He notes that Herod's son, Herod Philip, was made tetrarch of the region east of the Sea of Galilee upon his father's death and died in the 37th year of

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not have occurred during such a short space of time. This is rather subjective reasoning and I find no difficulty believing that they all happened within that time.

7 Josephus mentions Nicolaus several times in his writings.

8 The Jews resisted acknowledging Herod as king because, as the son of a proselyte, he was not a native-born Israelite, as required by Deuteronomy 17:15. Consequently, Herod had to fight for the kingdom given him by Rome. In the third year of his reign, his army besieged and took Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.15.14). This date is confirmed by Josephus's notation that the destruction of Jerusalem took place "when Marcus Agrippa and Canninius Gallus were consuls of Rome, on the hundred and eighty-fifth Olympiad, on the third month, on the solemnity of the fast" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 14.16.4).

his own reign,<sup>9</sup> corresponding to the twentieth year of Tiberius Caesar (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.4.6). Since Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would place Philip's death in AD 34, and hence his reign began in 3 BC, meaning that his father died before that time.

In his compilation of ancient chronographies, Michael, the Jacobite Christian patriarch of Antioch, Syria (1166–1199), wrote that the wise men came in Herod's thirty-fifth year and that the king died at the age of 70 after a reign of 37 years. His son Archelaus ruled for nine years, after which he was succeeded by Herod (Antipus) the tetrarch, in the same year that Caesar Augustus died and Tiberius Caesar succeeded him for twenty-three years (*Chronicle* 5.10, p. 139).<sup>10</sup>

The second-century Christian writer Clement of Alexandria wrote that some had calculated that Christ was born in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Caesar Augustus (*Stromata* 1.21). Since Augustus became emperor in 31 BC, this would indicate a date of 4 BC for the Savior's birth. Isidore of Seville (died AD 636) wrote that Christ was born in AM 5155, 587 years after the Jews were taken captive into Babylon,<sup>11</sup> it being the forty-second year of Octavian's rule (*Chronicon* 65–66).<sup>12</sup> If counted

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9 A coin minted in Philip's thirty-seventh year is known.

10 Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)* (Paris, 1899; reprint, Brussels: Culture et Civilisation, 1963), 1:139. In the same passage, Michael wrote that Pilate became procurator in the fourteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, which would have been AD 28. (An inscription from Pilate's time found at his headquarters in Caesarea, calls him "prefect of Judaea." The title *procurator* was introduced later.)

11 AM denotes Latin *anno mundi*, "year of the world," which was used in some early Christian writings to denote the time since Adam. It is generally accepted by modern historians that the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC.

12 In *Chronicon* 67, Isidore placed Christ's crucifixion in AM 5229, making Christ 74 years old at the time of his death, which is impossible. In the same place, he says that Christ was crucified in the eighteenth year of Tiberius; since we know that Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would make Jesus 32 years of age, which is more reasonable, especially considering Luke's declaration that he was "about thirty years of age" when he was baptized (Luke 3:23).

from the year in which Octavian became emperor, this would place Christ's birth in AD 11; but if we count from the death of Octavian's predecessor, Julius Caesar, in 44 BC, then Christ was born in 2 BC. A similar date is derived if one follows the witness of two other early Church Fathers, Irenaeus (*Against the Heresies* 3.21.3) and Tertullian (*An Answer to the Jews* 8), both of whom wrote that Jesus was born in the forty-first year of Augustus.<sup>13</sup> If one counts from the time that Octavian was named consul in August 43 BC, this suggests a birth year of 2 BC for Jesus. Tertullian also noted that Christ was born twenty-eight years after the death of Cleopatra (August 30 BC) and fifteen years before the death of Augustus (August AD 14), again giving us 2 BC.<sup>14</sup>

The fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius wrote that Christ was born in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus Caesar and twenty-eight years after the death of Anthony and Cleopatra (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.5.2). Augustus became emperor upon the death of these two enemies in 31 BC, so it is clear that Eusebius was counting Augustus's reign from the death of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, in 44 BC, which would give us 3 BC for the birth of Christ, which is precisely twenty-eight years after 31 BC, when Mark Anthony died in the Battle of Actium. Eusebius also declared that Christ entered his thirtieth year at the time of his baptism, being the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.10.1–2).<sup>15</sup> Since Tiberius became emperor in AD 14, this would place

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13 Actually, Irenaeus wrote that "our Lord was born about the forty-first year of the reign of Augustus." Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:452.

14 The medieval Ethiopic *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 14:9 indicates that Christ was born in the thirty-second year of the reign of Augustus Caesar. If one counts from 31 BC, when Augustus became emperor, this places the Savior's birth in AD 1, which is closer to the date calculated some centuries earlier by Dionysus.

15 *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 15:11–13 indicates that Christ was thirty years of age when he was baptized and that he was crucified in the nineteenth

Christ's baptism in the year AD 29 and his birth in the year 1 BC Eusebius derived his information from Luke 3:1–2, 23, where we read that Jesus was “about thirty years of age”<sup>16</sup> at the time of his baptism and that John the Baptist began preaching “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod [Antipas] being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother [Herod] Philip tetrarch... Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests.”<sup>17</sup>

A Syriac text known as *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, says that

It came to pass in the 309th year of Alexander, the son of Philip the Macedonian, in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in the government of Herod, the ruler of the Jews, that the Angel Gabriel, the chief of the angels, by command of God went down to Nazareth to a virgin called Miriam,<sup>18</sup> of the tribe of Judah the son of Israel (her who was betrothed to Joseph the Just), and he appeared to her and said, “Lo there ariseth from thee the one who spake with our fathers, and he shall be a Savior to Israel; and they who do not confess him shall

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year of Tiberius.

16 Under the law of Moses, Israelite priests could begin their service at the age of 30 (Numbers 4:3). This would apply to John the Baptist, but Christ was not of the priestly clan. Moreover, the term “about” suggests that Luke did not know precisely how old Jesus was at the time of his baptism.

17 This method of dating events seems to have been borrowed from the Romans, who indicated years by who the proconsuls were at the time. Lucius Caecilius Firmianus Lactantius, a fourth-century Christian apologist, seems to have misunderstood Luke, for he dated the death of Christ in the year that, according to Luke, the Savior was baptized. He wrote, “But from the time in which [the Old Testament prophet] Zechariah lived, until the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, in which Christ was crucified, nearly five hundred years are reckoned; since he flourished in the time of Darius and Alexander, who lived not long after the banishment of Tarquinius Superbus” (*The Divine Institutes* 4.14, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:114).

18 *Miriam* is the Hebrew form of her name. English *Mary* (and French *Marie*) derives from Latin *Maria*. The Greek texts call her *Marian*.

perish, for his authority is in the lofty heights, and his kingdom does not pass away.”<sup>19</sup>

The *Arabic Gospel of the Infancy of the Savior* 2 agrees with this dating, saying that, “In the three hundred and ninth year of the era of Alexander, Augustus put forth an edict, that every man should be enrolled in his native place. Joseph therefore arose, and taking Mary his spouse, went away to Jerusalem, and came to Bethlehem, to be enrolled along with his family in his native city.”<sup>20</sup> The Syriac *Chronicle of Edessa*, composed ca. AD 540, also says that Christ was born in the year 309.<sup>21</sup> Alexander the great died in 323 BC, so 309 years later brings us to 14 BC, which seems much too early for Christ’s birth. The second-century AD Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote, “We say that Christ was born one hundred and fifty years ago under Cyrenius” (*First Apology* 46).<sup>22</sup> Since Justin died in AD 165, his words suggest that Christ was born no later than 15 BC, which is too late given other evidence.

Since the western calendar is based on the work of Dionysius Exeguius, as noted earlier, it is interesting that other Christian calculations differ with respect to the year. Thus, the Abyssinian Church of Ethiopia follows a calendar that is seven years behind ours and marks the new year in September. The Abyssinian year 2000 actually began on 12 September 2007. This would suggest that Jesus was born in 7 BC.

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19 J. Rendel Harris, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* (Cambridge University, 1900), 25.

20 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:405.

21 A later Syriac text, *Book of the Bee*, 35, says that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the birth of her son in the year 307 after Alexander.

22 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:178.

## The Taxation

Luke muddled the waters by placing Jesus's birth at the time of the taxation under "Cyrenius, governor of Syria" (Luke 2:1–2).<sup>23</sup> When Herod the Great died, his son Archelaus (mentioned in Matthew 2:22) became king of Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea; another son, Herod Antipas, became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and a third son, Herod Philip, became tetrarch of Ituraea, Trachonitis, and the area known today as the Hulah Valley and the Golan Heights. Archelaus fell into disfavor with the Jews, then the Romans. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus banished him in his tenth year of rule (AD 6) and made Judaea a Roman prefecture, with Coponius as the first prefect. Coponius and Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, senator and governor of Syria (the Cyrenius of Luke's account), went to Judaea for the express purpose of reviewing the financial records of Archelaus, which may have included taking a census of the people for taxation purposes.<sup>24</sup>

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23 Luke was perhaps not a Jew, which would explain why he placed the birth of Christ in the context of the Roman world, rather than the Jewish (Matthew places the divine birth in the reign of Herod, king of the Jews). Luke traced Christ's ancestry to Adam, the father of all mankind, while Matthew, a Jew, traced his pedigree to Abraham, ancestor of the Israelites. Luke is the one who recounts the story of the good Samaritan and Jesus's healing of ten lepers, of which only the Samaritan returned to praise God. He is also our only source for information on the seventy disciples chosen to assist the twelve apostles. His account of the missionary service of Paul, in the book of Acts, suggests that he had much more interest in non-Jews than the other gospel writers. It is strange, then, that Matthew, not Luke, is the source of our information about the wise men.

24 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.1.1–2, 2.2; *War of the Jews* 2.7.3. Dion Cassius (55.27) wrote that Archelaus was deposed during the consulship of Lepidus and Arruntius, which was in AD 6. This taxation prompted the revolt of Rabbi Judah of Galilee, who founded the anti-Roman Zealot party (he is mentioned in Acts 5:37). Because King David had brought severe punishment upon the Israelites because he ordered a census (2 Samuel 24:1–17; 1 Chronicles 21:1–17) and because the Lord had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their posterity would be so numerous they could not be counted (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:12), the Jews felt it wrong to count their numbers.

Since Joseph and Mary lived in Galilee, they were under the rulership of Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great), not Coponius. Because the prefect of Judaea had no authority over Antipas's territory, scholars have doubted that Joseph could have gone to Bethlehem for taxation purposes. If he did go at the time specified by Luke, it would have been in AD 6, ten years after the death of Herod the Great. Some have suggested that the Greek term *prote*, rendered "first" in the King James version of Luke 2:2, sometimes has the sense of *protera*, "before," giving the meaning "This census was held before that which took place when Cyrenius was governor of Syria." The second-century AD Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote that Joseph went to Bethlehem "on the occasion of the first census which was taken in Judaea" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 78).<sup>25</sup> An inscription uncovered at Tivoli, Italy, in 1764, suggests that Quirinius was twice governor of Syria, but since we know the names of the Roman officials who governed Syria from 9 BC until AD 11, Quirinius's first term in that office must have been much too early to correspond with the birth of Christ.

Some have suggested that Luke's Cyrenius was Quinctilius Varus, who became governor of Syria in 6 BC, around the time of another Roman census, and held the office at the time of Herod's death. However, records of the time suggest that each census conducted in the time of Caesar Augustus was of Romans only, not of subjugated peoples. An inscribed marble stone found at Ankara, Turkey, mentions three censuses ordered by Augustus, one in 726 AUC (28 BC), one in 746 (8 BC), and one in 767 (AD 14), but they specifically called for the enrollment of Roman citizens. From Roman records, it is clear that, during a fourty-two-year period, the emperor Augustus ordered censuses only of Roman citizens, never requiring that the people

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25 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:237. That Joseph went to Bethlehem to be enrolled prior to taxation is affirmed in *Book of the Bee*, 36.

return to their ancestral homes. Some Egyptian papyri dating to the time the Romans ruled the land, indicate that Egyptians who could not pay their taxes were required to return to work their farms so they could pay. We do not know if this rule applied elsewhere.

According to the *Chronographia* of John Malalas, bishop of Antioch (ca. AD 491–578), Augustus issued an order to take a census of all lands held by Romans during the consulship of Agrippa II and Donatus. This would have been in 5 BC. The Byzantine historian Suidas (10th c.) noted that the census was conducted in Palestine the following year. Christian apologist Tertullian mentioned a census during the time Sentius Saturninus was governor of Syria (9–6 BC), so this remains a possibility if Christ was born prior to 5 BC (*Against Marcion* 4.19).

The Greek term usually rendered “taxed” in translations of Luke 2:1, 3, 5, really means to “be enrolled.” Thus, this would have been a census, not a taxation. Some have suggested that Joseph owned property in Bethlehem, which would have required him to register for taxation purposes. In view of the fact that he was rather poor, this seems unlikely. Moreover, if he had land in the region, he surely would have had family members who could have put him and Mary up in a house. Moreover, it would have been a bureaucratic nightmare for the Romans to compel people to travel to their ancient homes to register and then return to their cities of residence where they would have to pay the taxes.

Most early Christian pseudepigrapha follow Luke’s declaration that Caesar Augustus decreed “that all the world should be taxed” (Luke 2:1). Thus, *History of Joseph the Carpenter* 7 declares, “There came forth an order from Augustus Caesar the king, that all the habitable world should be enrolled, each man in his own city. The old man therefore, righteous Joseph, rose up and took the virgin Mary and came to Bethlehem, because the

time of her bringing forth was at hand. Joseph then inscribed his name in the list; for Joseph the son of David, whose spouse Mary was, was of the tribe of Judah.”<sup>26</sup> Since Rome did not control the entire known world, the statement about “all the world” seems somewhat hyperbolic. *Protevangelium of James* 17 differs from Luke’s account, saying that “there was an order from the Emperor Augustus, that all in Bethlehem of Judaea should be enrolled.”<sup>27</sup> But why the emperor should concern himself with a minor village in a distant Roman province seems rather odd.

### Age of the Jerusalem Temple

Another complication comes from John 2:20, where we read that the Jerusalem temple had already been forty-six years in the building early in Jesus’s ministry.<sup>28</sup> Since Herod had begun the structure in his fifteenth (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 15.11.1) or his eighteenth year (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 1.21.1), forty-six later would bring us to AD 24 or 28 for Christ’s baptism.<sup>29</sup> Because he began his ministry when he was “about thirty years of age,” this would agree with an earlier birth date between 7 and 4 BC. To this, we must add that all four gospels agree that Jesus was crucified during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate, a fact on which both Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.3.3) and the contemporary Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals*

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26 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:389.

27 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 8:365.

28 Writing in the early third century AD, Origen wrote, “For forty and two years, I think, after the date of the crucifixion of Jesus, did the destruction of Jerusalem take place” (*Against Celsus* 4.22, in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:506). The Romans destroyed the temple and much of the city in AD 70, at the end of the First Jewish War, and destroyed virtually everything that remained in AD 135, at the end of the Second Jewish War led by Simon Bar Koseba (Bar Kochba). Using Origen’s figure, this would place the crucifixion at either AD 28 or AD 93. The latter date is far too late, but the former is possible.

29 Though most of the work had been done by the time Jesus began preaching in the temple, it was not completed until AD 63, in the time of the Roman procurator Albinus (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9.7), just seven years before the Romans destroyed it during the first Jewish war.

of *Imperial Rome* 15.44) agree. Pilate governed from AD 26 to AD 36. At one point in Christ's ministry, the Jews said to him, "Thou art not yet fifty years old" (John 8:57). The early second-century AD Christian bishop Irenaeus of Lyon argued that this could only mean that Jesus was in his forties when he preached, rather than his thirties as is usually supposed (*Against the Heresies* 2.22.6).<sup>30</sup> Since Pilate subsequently heard the case against Christ prior to being sent back to Rome in AD 36, this would place Jesus's birth no later than AD 4 and likely earlier still, if we accept that he was in his forties at the time of his death. But evidence from the Book of Mormon suggests that Christ died 34 years after his birth (see and compare 3 Nephi 1:19; 2:7–8; 8:5; 10:18; 4 Nephi 1:1), which agrees with traditional Christian views.

Acknowledging that Herod the Great died in 4 BC, Christ could not have been born after that time. Matthew, who recorded the visit of the wise men to Herod, also noted that after the departure of the wise men, Joseph "took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod" (Matthew 2:14). This suggests that they remained in Egypt for more than just a month and this would mean that Jesus was born before 4 BC, especially when we consider that he was two years old when the wise men visited (Matthew 2:7, 16). This lends support to those who place his birth in 6–7 BC.<sup>31</sup>

There was a time when Latter-day Saints, based on an all-too-literal reading of D&C 20:1, would have argued that Christ

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30 In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 74 and 77, Irenaeus seems to have confused King Herod the Great with his son, Herod Antipas, for he makes King Herod and Pontius Pilate contemporaries and says that Christ was crucified in the time of Nero, who became Roman emperor in AD 54.

31 Much of this speculation depends on the nature of the star seen by the wise men, which cannot be discussed in this present article.

was born in 1 BC.<sup>32</sup> The expression “since the coming of our Lord” in the verse has the same meaning as “year of the Lord” (Latin *anno Domini*, from which we get “AD”). When it became clear, from the available evidence, that we do not really know precisely when he was born, things changed. When the Church began publishing its own edition of the King James Bible in 1979, all dates were omitted from the time of Christ’s life from the “Chronology” chart in the Bible Dictionary included at the end of that edition. The dates in the left-hand column end abruptly just before the birth of Christ and resume only after his crucifixion.<sup>33</sup>

### Astronomical Timing

A number of Bible scholars and astronomers have sought answers to the date of Christ’s birth in the appearance of the star that guided the wise men to Bethlehem.<sup>34</sup> The concept of an exploding star, called a nova, long proposed as the star

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32 James E. Talmage, citing D&C 20:1, wrote, “Without attempting to analyze the mass of calculation data relating to this subject, we accept the Dionysian basis as correct with respect to the year, which is to say that we believe Christ to have been born in the year known to us as BC 1, and, as shall be shown, in an early month of that year” (*Jesus the Christ*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 103).

33 Elder Bruce R. McConkie, who oversaw the preparation of the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Bible, mentioned Elder Talmage’s preferred date and noted that President J. Reuben Clark Jr., in his book *Our Lord of the Gospels*, had opted for late 5 or early 4 BC as the year in which Christ was born. McConkie also quoted the view of Elder Hyrum M. Smith of the Council of the Twelve in his *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*: “The organization of the Church in the year 1830 is hardly to be regarded as giving divine authority to the commonly accepted calendar.” Elder McConkie concluded “that Gabriel came to Zacharias in October of 6 BC; that he came to Mary in March or April of 5 BC; that John was born in June of 5 BC; and that Jesus was born in December 5 BC, or from January to April in 4 BC” See McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 349–50, 356; *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965) 1:91.

34 The Bible never says the wise men followed the star from their homeland, only that it guided them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem after their visit with King Herod.

(“nova” means “new”), has been abandoned in recent years for lack of evidence, but other dates have been proposed based not on specific stars, but on either 1) the conjunction or proximity of two or more heavenly bodies in the night sky or 2) on the movement of the planets through the signs of the Zodiac. Based on such observations and on the possibility of calculating where each planet was at any given time in the past (or future), some have proposed dates between 10 and 6 BC for the birth of Christ.

Here are some of the planetary/astrol conjunctions that have been considered:

Jupiter and Saturn Late March/early April 7 BC

Jupiter and Regulus 3 BC

Jupiter and Venus 17 June 2 BC

### The 600 Year Prophecy

Some Book of Mormon prophets announced that Christ would come 600 years after the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 10:4; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19; 3 Nephi 1:1; 2:6). Lehi fled his homeland in the first year of Zedekiah, king of Judah, which would make it 598 BC. If Christ was born even as late as 4 BC, this would separate Lehi’s departure from the Savior’s birth by 594 years at a minimum. While many readers probably accept the 600 years as literal, the Book of Mormon suggests that this may be an approximation. For example, Mosiah 6:4, recounting events in the time of Mosiah<sup>2</sup>, noted that this was “*about* four hundred and seventy-six years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.” Describing the destruction that occurred at the time of Jesus’s crucifixion, 3 Nephi 8:2 adds the caveat that “*if there was no mistake* made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away.”<sup>35</sup> There is

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35 Other Book of Mormon passages suggest that there may have been mistakes in the records. See 1 Nephi 19:6; Mormon 8:12; 9:31–33; and the last paragraph of the title page of the Book of Mormon, written by Moroni.

less uncertainty about the prophecy of the Lamanite prophet Samuel, who declared that the sign of Christ's birth would be given in five years (Helaman 14:2; 3 Nephi 1:8–21; 2:7–8).

In modern Hebrew the word *me'ah*, “hundred,” is also used to denote a century. The same is true in other languages, including English, where the word “century” derives from *cent*, “hundred,” having come to us from Latin via French.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that the 600 years should be read as an approximation, i.e., six centuries. That the term “hundred” is often used as an approximation in the scriptures is clear from Abraham's prophecy of the 400 years of Israel's captivity in Egypt (Genesis 15:13), while later records indicate that it was actually 430 years (Exodus 12:40–41; Galatians 3:17). Moreover, the Lord also told Abraham that his descendants would leave Egypt “in the fourth generation” (Genesis 15:16). Similarly, some Book of Mormon prophecies indicate that the Nephite nation would be destroyed in “the fourth generation” following Christ's appearance (1 Nephi 12:12; 2 Nephi 26:9; Alma 45:12; Helaman 13:10; 3 Nephi 27:32), though other passages indicate that it occurred after about 400 years (Mormon 8:6; Moroni 10:1), while the great battle at Cumorah took place after 385 years (Mormon 6:5). Thus, both “generation” and “hundred” are used as approximations.<sup>37</sup>

### The 5500 Years

Some have wondered why the Bible is not as precise in its prophecies of the Messiah as the Book of Mormon. The second-century Christian philosopher Justin Martyr wrote, “In these books, then, of the prophets we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man's estate.... And

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<sup>36</sup> Thus one cent is a hundredth of a dollar, while a centimeter is a hundredth of a meter.

<sup>37</sup> For one attempt to explain the 600 years, see Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998).

He was predicted before He appeared, first 5000 years before, and again 3000, then 2000, then 1000, and yet again 800; for in the succession of generations prophets after prophets arose” (*First Apology* 31).<sup>38</sup>

A number of early Christian texts suggest that Lord told Adam that he would be born in mortality after 5,500 years (*Conflict of Adam and Eve* I, 3:1–2, 4–5, 15; 7:2; 38:1–2;<sup>39</sup> *Gospel of Nicodemus* 3 [19]; *Discourse of the Abbaton*; Armenian *The History of the Expulsion of Adam from the Garden* and *The Letter Sent to Adam by God*).<sup>40</sup> The third-century Christian historian Hippolytus knew of the 5,500 years, writing, “For as the times are noted from the foundation of the world, and reckoned from Adam, they set clearly before us the matter with which our inquiry deals. For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem, under Augustus, in the year 5500” (*On Daniel*, fragment, 2.4).<sup>41</sup>

## The Date of Christmas

Clement of Alexandria (Egypt), writing in the late second century AD, noted, “There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in

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38 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:173.

39 *Conflict of Adam and Eve* IV, 11:7, notes that the Persian king Cyrus issued his decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem in the year 5000 after Adam. From the Bible and other ancient chronicles, we know that this was in 537 BC. Five hundred years later would bring us to 37 BC, which is much too early for Christ’s birth.

40 This disagrees with the chronology of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, which places Adam approximately 4000 years before the time of Christ. These figures derive from the Hebrew manuscripts used by the KJV and other translators, but other ancient versions, including the second- or third-century BC Greek Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the late first-century AD Jewish historian Flavius Josephus all place the flood about 3100 BC (rather than the twenty-fifth century BC of the KJV), with Adam having fallen more than 1500 years before that time, thus around 5600 BC.

41 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5:179.

the twenty-fifth day of Pachon.... Further, others say that He was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi” (*Stromata* 1.21).<sup>42</sup> The two dates (given in Egyptian months) correspond to 19 April and 29 May, though Clement himself preferred 18 November. An anonymous North African contemporary of Clement gives the date as 28 March.

The earliest date widely accepted in Christianity for the celebration of Christ’s birth, known from as early as the second century, was 6 January, the feast of Epiphany (“appearance”)<sup>43</sup>. This is the date on the Julian calendar (19 January on the Gregorian calendar used by western Christians)<sup>44</sup> on which

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42 Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 2:333. The full passage reads:

Accordingly, in fifteen years of Tiberius and fifteen years of Augustus; so were completed the thirty years till the time He suffered. And from the time that He suffered till the destruction of Jerusalem are forty-two years and three months; and from the destruction of Jerusalem to the death of Commodus, a hundred and twenty-eight years, ten months, and three days. From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon [19 April]. And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings. And they say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth day of the month Tubi [28 March]; and some that it was the eleventh of the same month. And treating of His passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the sixteenth year of Tiberius, on the twenty-fifth of Pharmuth; and others the twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi and others say that on the nineteenth of Pharmuthi the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of Pharmuthi [29 May].

43 In the Eastern Churches of the fourth century AD, 6 January was held to be the date of Christ’s birth, of the visit of the wise men, and of the Savior’s baptism.

44 The Julian calendar was inherited from the Romans and was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. The Gregorian calendar was introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1578 and was initially used only in Catholic nations. It was finally adopted by European Protestants early in the eighteenth century, but was not acknowledged in England and its colonies until 1752.

Christmas is still celebrated in the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Church of Egypt. About the end of the third or the beginning of the fourth century, the main body of Christianity moved Christmas to 25 December. The change was probably intended to dissuade Christians from celebrating the various pagan festivals that fell around that time of year.

In the old Julian Calendar of Rome, 25 December marked the winter solstice (which in our modern Gregorian calendar falls on 21–22 December) and was the Roman festival known as *Brumalia*. In AD 273, the emperor Aurelian designated it *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, “birthday of the unconquerable sun” (in honor of the sun-god Mithras),<sup>45</sup> after which the days in the northern hemisphere become longer until 22 June. It fell in the midst of the very popular Roman festival of *Saturnalia*, a week-long celebration in honor Saturn, father of the Roman gods and the *Juvenalia*, which celebrated the children of Rome. During the *Saturnalia*, Romans hung garlands of laurel in their homes and mounted green trees lit with candles, the light of which, in the dead of winter, was intended to ward off evil demons. During this time, war and the punishment of criminals were suspended and people exchanged gifts with friends and family.

In AD 325, Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, proclaimed Christmas as an immovable feast on 25th December. In AD 349, Pope Julius I specified the 25th of December as the official date of the birth of Jesus Christ. Despite this official sanction, Pope Liberius celebrated the Savior’s birth on 6 January in AD 353. The following year, he switched it to 25 December.<sup>46</sup> In AD 376, John Chrysostom, bishop of Antioch,

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45 Mithra was a Persian solar deity whose cult became Christianity’s major competitor in the centuries following Christ’s birth, especially in the early fourth century AD. Like Jesus, Mithra was said to have been born outside his mother’s home (in the fields) and to have been visited by shepherds.

46 Pope Leo the Great (AD 440–461), in his *Sermon 22 on the Feast of the Nativity*, I 6, denied that Christmas had anything to do with the rising of the

Syria, urged acceptance of the new date in two of his sermons and Antioch became the first of the eastern churches to celebrate Christmas on 25 December. It was later adopted by the churches in Jerusalem and Alexandria, Egypt.<sup>47</sup> *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* 5.3.13 admonishes, “Brethren, observe the festival days; and first of all the birthday which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth of the ninth month; after which let the Epiphany be to you the most honored, in which the Lord made to you a display of His own Godhead, and let it take place on the sixth of the tenth month.”<sup>48</sup>

The transition from a celebration of the reborn sun to the birth of Christ was facilitated by the identification of the Savior as “the Sun of righteousness [who should] arise with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2).<sup>49</sup> Among the early Church Fathers who identified Christ with Malachi’s “Sun of righteousness” are John Chrysostom (*Homily 18 on 1 Corinthians* 6:15, 5), Jerome (*Letter 48 to Pammachius* 21), and Augustine (*City of God* 18.35). Augustine further compared Christ to the sun (*City of God* 18.32) and called him “the Sun of Glory” (*On the Psalms* 40.13), while Jerome called him “Sun of the Church” (*Dialogue against the Luciferians* Introduction, 28). Pope Leo the Great (AD 440–461) rebuked those who celebrated the birth of the

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sun. Yet he retained some of the imagery and terminology, such as one finds in his *Sermon 26 on the feast of the Nativity*, IV 1, where he wrote, “But this Nativity which is to be adored in heaven and on earth is suggested to us by no day more than this when, with the early light still shedding its rays on nature, there is borne in upon our senses the brightness of this wondrous mystery.” See Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, (reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 12:131–2.

47 A Latin text supposedly written by Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (AD 171–183) indicates that the Gauls celebrated Christ’s birthday on 25 December, but the document is thought to be spurious.

48 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 7:443.

49 Though the word employed in Malachi 4:2 is “sun,” in the Book of Mormon it appears as “Son of righteousness” (2 Nephi 26:9; 3 Nephi 25:2). The word-play, though valid in English, where the two words are pronounced the same, does not work in Hebrew, where “sun” is *shemesh* and “son” is *ben*.

sun rather than the birth of Christ, “the new sun” (*Sermon 22 on the Feast of the Nativity II*, 6). It was natural for Christians to associate Christ, “the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9), with the increasing light of the sun following the winter solstice. When Christians adopted 25 December as the date of Christ’s birth, they also adopted the revelry formerly associated with pagan rites.

The *First Homily, on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary*, attributed to Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. AD 213–275) praised the day on which the angel Gabriel announced to Mary the forthcoming birth of her son, saying, “Today are strains of praise sung joyfully by the choir of angels, and the light of the advent of Christ shines brightly upon the faithful. Today is the glad spring-time to us, and Christ the Sun of righteousness has beamed with clear light around us, and has illumined the minds of the faithful.” Expanding on the angel’s salutation to Mary, the passage adds, “Hail, thou that art highly favored, the rising of the rational Sun, and the undefiled flower of Life!”<sup>50</sup> In another homily on the annunciation, he wrote that Gabriel came to “announce the Sun of righteousness.”<sup>51</sup>

Two third-century Church Fathers, Tertullian and Hippolytus, established the method by which the western church calculates the date of Easter, indicating that Christ was resurrected on 25 March. Ultimately, this came to be accepted as the date of Mary’s conception of Jesus as well, since it is precisely nine months before 25 December. In the Christian Armenian calendar, based on the Julian calendar of earlier times, these dates correspond to 7 April and 6 January. Another reason for placing Christmas on 25 December is that Roman Catholic tradition ties Jesus’s circumcision with New Year’s Day (1 January), the beginning of a new life. The Bible calls for circumcision of newborn boys on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12;

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50 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 6:58–9.

51 Roberts and Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 66.

21:4; Leviticus 12:2–3; Luke 1:59; 2:21). Counting Christmas day as day one, the eighth day would be 1 January.

The fourth-century Syrian bishop Ephraim wrote that Christ was born in December, when the days begin to lengthen toward summer (*Hymns on the Nativity* 3.12; 4.10–12). He further suggested that Christ was conceived in the month of Nisan (late March, early April)<sup>52</sup> and born in December (*Hymns on the Nativity* 3.10; *Hymns on the Resurrection* 14.10). His reasoning was that seed is planted in December and the grain harvest begins in March.<sup>53</sup> He further wrote, “In March when the lambs bleat in the wilderness, into the Womb the Paschal Lamb entered!”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Ephraim specified the tenth day of Nisan as the date when Mary conceived Christ. His reasoning was that this was the day the Israelites set aside the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:3) in preparation for its slaughter four days later (*Commentary on the Diatessaron* 1.14; *Commentary on Exodus* 12.2–3). In his *Hymns on the Nativity* 5.2–3, he wrote that “the shepherds also came laden with the best gifts of their flock.... They brought a suckling lamb to the Paschal [Passover]

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52 In this, Ephraim was followed by the thirteenth century Armenian-born Syriac bishop Shelemon (Solomon) of Basra, in his *Book of the Bee*, 35.

53 In the Holy Land, the biblical “first rains” come in late October and November, with a break during December, when wheat and barley seeds are planted. The “latter rains” come during the months of January and February and taper off in early March.

54 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13:230; see also 13:252–3. In a note, the translator cited Ephraim’s commentary on Exodus 12:3, “The Lamb is a type of our Lord, who on the tenth of Nisan entered into the womb; for from the tenth day of the seventh month when Zachary [Zacharias] received the message of John’s birth, even to the tenth day of the first month when Mary received the message from the Angel, are six months” (Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 230n2). His reasoning was actually backward; Christ was born at the same time that lambs are born, i.e., in the spring. He also contradicted this reasoning in *Hymns on the Nativity* 5.1–4, where he wrote that the shepherds brought a newborn lamb when they came to see the newborn Savior.

Lamb, a first-born to the First-born.... The lamb bleated as it was offered before the First-born.”<sup>55</sup>

Some modern Bible scholars have suggested that Jesus was conceived on 25 December and born in the fall, during the feast of Tabernacles (late September, early October), when Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup> This would explain why there was “no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). But this would also be true of other feasts requiring pilgrimage to the nearby Jerusalem temple, such as Passover, the feast of Weeks (New Testament Pentecost), and Tabernacles.<sup>57</sup>

Though some of the eastern churches still celebrate Christmas in January, in today’s western Christianity, 25 December marks the birth of Christ, while the earlier traditional date, 6 January, commemorates the arrival of the wise men at Bethlehem. Indeed, in some countries, gifts are exchanged on this latter date rather than at Christmas, because it is held that the gifts represent those given to Christ by the wise men.

Some modern writers have used information about priesthood service in the Jerusalem temple to calculate the time of year of Christ’s birth. Though there were originally four “courses” of priests, based on patrilineage, King David divided the priests into twenty-four courses (1 Chronicles 24:7–19; see also 2 Chronicles 8:14; 31:2). Zacharias, husband of Mary’s cousin Elizabeth, was “of the course of Abia” (Luke 1:5), which was the seventh of the priestly courses (1 Chronicles 24:10).<sup>58</sup> At

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55 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 13:237.

56 My personal view, based on scriptural passages too numerous to discuss here, is that Christ was born at the time of Passover and will return at the time of the feast of Tabernacles.

57 The law of Moses requires all Israelite males to assemble for these three festivals (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:16).

58 The name Abia in the New Testament corresponds to Old Testament Abijah, where the *j* is pronounced as it was in early English (and other Germanic tongues) as *y*.

the time the angel announced the forthcoming birth of his son, John the Baptist, Zecharias was serving in “the priest’s office before God in the order of his course, According to the custom of the priest’s office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord” (Luke 1:8–9).

According to the Babylonian Talmud, each priestly course began serving at noon on the Sabbath and served until noon on the next Sabbath (TB *Sukkah* 55b). Flavius Josephus, himself a priest, also wrote of the twenty-four courses, saying that each served for one week from Sabbath to Sabbath (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7.14.7). Each course also served twice in each year. The first course began serving in the spring, on the first week of the sacred year, followed by the second and so on. When the twenty-fourth course had served, in the autumn of the year (the first week of the civil year), the first course would commence again, and all of the courses would repeat the order on each of the forty-eight subsequent weeks during the year, one course per week. But during three other weeks, all twenty-four courses served together, during Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, because the need for more priests to serve the pilgrims (TB *Sukkah* 55b).<sup>59</sup>

Since he was serving in the temple at the time the angel appeared to him, we must conclude that it was during one of the five weeks during which Zacharias and his “course of Abia” would have been on duty in Jerusalem. Contrary to those who argue for specific dates for the birth of John the Baptist, the choices are actually more varied. If Zacharias’s wife Elizabeth conceived her son during the week following the return of her husband to their village, we have a choice of five weeks of the year for John’s conception and, consequently, of his birth.

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59 These were the three annual feasts when all Israelite males were to assemble to the temple (Exodus 23:14–17; Deuteronomy 16:1–16).

## Nativity in the Spring

Latter-day Saints have sometimes quoted the opening verse of Doctrine and Covenants 20 to support the idea that Christ was actually born on 6 April. But that passage is not as explicit as one would hope, merely recording the day of the formal organization of the Church in 1830. The best evidence for April as the birth date of Christ is found in Joseph Smith's declaration of 6 April 1833, noting that this date commemorated the creation of the world, Passover, the birth of Christ, and the anniversary of the Church's restoration.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Jesus, the Firstborn, was born and died at Passover, at the time when the firstborn humans and cattle among the Egyptians died while the Israelites, who offered a firstborn lamb, escaped death.<sup>61</sup>

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60 The relevant passage, from *History of the Church* 1:336, reads: "On the 6th of April, in the land of Zion, about eighty officials, together with some unofficial members of the Church, met for instruction and the service of God, at the Ferry on Big Blue river near the western limits of Jackson county, which is the boundary line of the state of Missouri and also of the United States. It was an early spring, and the leaves and blossoms enlivened and gratified the soul of man like a glimpse of Paradise. The day was spent in a very agreeable manner, in giving and receiving knowledge which appertained to this last kingdom—it being just 1800 years since the Savior laid down His life that men might have everlasting life, and only three years since the Church had come out of the wilderness, preparatory for the last dispensation. The Saints had great reason to rejoice: they thought upon the time when this world came into existence, and the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy; they thought of the time when Israel ate the 'Passover,' as wailing came up for the loss of the firstborn of Egypt; they felt like the shepherds who watched their flocks by night, when the angelic choir sweetly sang the electrifying strain, 'Peace on earth, good will to man;' and the solemnities of eternity rested upon them. This was the first attempt made by the Church to celebrate the anniversary of her birthday, and those who professed not our faith talked about it as a strange thing." That Christ, who is called both the "Firstborn" and the "beginning" of God's creation in both the Bible and early Christian texts, should be born on the day commemorating the creation is especially significant, for it was through him that God created the earth.

61 See Exodus 4:22–23 and chapters 11–13 of Exodus.

Some non-LDS Bible scholars have argued that Christ cannot have been born in December, since this is a very cold month in the region of Bethlehem, and that shepherds would not have been “abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8).<sup>62</sup> During the winter months, the sheep are brought into shelter for the night.

During the eight years I taught in the Brigham Young University Jerusalem program (1972–79), it was our practice to take each of the semester-abroad student groups to the hill overlooking Bethlehem from the north to celebrate Christmas Eve. One group went around 6 April, the other in mid-December. During those cold December nights, we never saw shepherds outside (nor snow). But during our April visits, there were always shepherds with their flocks on the hillside, and they often wandered through our group as we sat discussing the Christmas story. It was a wonderful visual aid.

The reason Palestinian shepherds spend the night with their flocks in springtime is that it is the lambing season. A shepherd’s wealth is in his flock, so he must be on hand to assist the ewes should birthing problems arise.

Some have jokingly noted that since U.S. income taxes are due on 15 April, Joseph would have gone to Bethlehem early that month to pay his taxes (Luke 2:1–5). Though Roman taxation practices cannot help us pinpoint the timing of Christ’s birth, they can help us eliminate the month of December. In the Holy Land, the rains begin in November and increase dramatically during the months of January and February. During this time, the lowlands are comprised largely of mud and the highlands are whipped by chilly winds. It seems most unlikely that the Romans would have required people to travel during this time of year.

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62 The word “field” originally meant “outdoors” as opposed to “indoors.” The Greek from which it was translated has this meaning and does *not* allude to a field where crops are planted.

The Passover season, however, would have been a good time for tax registration, since the people always gathered at Jerusalem and nearby towns (such as Bethlehem) to attend the festival at the temple. In the Jewish lunar calendar, Passover (as its Christian counterpart, Easter) falls in late March or early April, when the heavy rains have ceased and warmth returns to the land.

At least one of the early Church Fathers, Gregory Nazianzen, associated the feast of Passover with both the birth and death of Christ. In his *Second Oration on Easter* 21, he told the assembled congregation, “Such is the feast thou art keeping today; and in this manner I would have thee celebrate both the Birthday and the Burial of Him Who was born for thee and suffered for thee. Such is the Mystery of the Passover; such are the mysteries sketched by the Law and fulfilled by Christ.”<sup>63</sup> Gregory also wrote that “the present the Festival is the Theophany or Birth-day, for it is called both, two titles being given to the one thing. For God was manifested to man by birth.... The name Theophany [meaning ‘appearance of God’] is given to it in reference to the Manifestation, and that of Birthday in respect of His Birth” (Oration 38, *On the Theophany or Birthday of Christ* 3).<sup>64</sup>

No matter when Christ was really born, most of the Christian world unites to celebrate the event on 25 December. The very fact that so many people—about a third of the world’s population—turn to thoughts of the Savior at this time of year makes it special indeed. With all of our theological differences, Christmas is probably the single greatest thing that unites Christianity and directs our thoughts to God’s greatest gift, his Son.

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63 Sermon 45 in the collection published in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:431.

64 Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 7:345.

## Addendum

I wrote the first draft of this article in 2002 and the last in 2010, but revisited it before sending it to *Interpreter*. I was therefore not influenced by more recent studies on the subject of Christ's birth. These include two scholarly articles published at Brigham Young University:<sup>65</sup>

- Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ," *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010). A report on the study was posted on the *Meridian Magazine* website on 12 November 2010 (<http://www.ldsmag.com/article/6637/1>).
- Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, "When Was Jesus Born? A Response to a Recent Proposal," *BYU Studies* 51/3 (2012).<sup>66</sup>

Chadwick challenged the view that D&C 20:1 reveals the precise date of Christ's birth and agreed with J. Reuben Clark's view that the Savior was born in December, 5 BC. He amassed evidence for this view. Aside from his view of the opening verse of D&C 20, I find, in his article, many points of disagreement,<sup>67</sup> notably his comments on the Jewish calendar and his identification of the "sixth month" of Luke 1:26 with the calendar month when, in fact, it refers to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Chadwick concludes that Elizabeth's sixth month fell "coincidentally" in the sixth month of the year. That Luke was probably not Jewish and would not have followed the Jewish calendar seems not to have occurred to him. I did, however, learn some things from Chadwick, notably that Elder Orson Pratt placed the birth of Christ at 11 April, 4 BC.

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65 See also Kevin Barney, "When Was Jesus Born?" notes for his gospel doctrine class, posted on By Common Consent, blog, 9 December 2010, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2010/12/19/when-was-jesus-born/>.

66 Wayment had previously authored "The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ," an appendix to volume 1 (of 3) of *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, eds. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Deseret, 2005).

67 I also disagree with a number of Chadwick's assertions that are unrelated to the birth of Christ and will not refer to them here.

Chadwick rightly points out that Joseph Smith never interpreted D&C 20:1 to mean the birth date of Christ and demonstrated that he always celebrated Christmas on 25 December. But neither he nor any of the other writers I have consulted deal with the prophet's 1833 identification of 6 April with the anniversary of the creation, the Exodus, the birth and death of the Savior (1800 years previous), and the organization of the restored Church,<sup>68</sup> which I quote in my note 60.

Blumell and Wayment responded to Chadwick's article and added much information that he did not cover. I concur with most of their disagreements with Chadwick. They cover much of the same ground I do, especially in quoting the New Testament and early Church fathers and even in details such as the question of errors made by Nephite historians. I quote some early writers that are not used by Blumell and Wayment and vice-versa. I did not rely on Julius Africanus, but was pleased to see that he, like others, mentioned that Christ was born in AM 5500, which I discuss in my paper. I have come to believe that the Blumell/Wayment article must be read in connection with mine and wish that the three of us had collaborated to produce a single article.

During 2012, Ronald P. Millett came to the defense of Elder Talmage (with whom Sidney B. Sperry also agreed) by posting two articles on the Meridian Magazine web site.<sup>69</sup> Like many Latter-day Saints he assumes that the source was revelatory, because (1) *Jesus the Christ* was authored by an apostle, (2) who wrote the book under commission from the First Presidency,

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68 Joseph Smith, Jr. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Documentary History)*. 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 1:336.

69 "Elder James E. Talmage and the Birth Date of Jesus Christ," posted 30 October 2012, <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/1/11684>; "Why So Bold a Statement? Elder James E. Talmage and April 6," posted 12 November 2012, <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/1/11759>. Millett followed these up with a post entitled "Pope Declares Calendar Error on Date of Christ's Birth," posted 27 November 2012, <http://www.ldsmag.com/article/1/11830>.

(3) wrote it in the Salt Lake Temple, and (4) it was published by the Church. I believe that these reasons deserve some comment.

As regards Elder Talmage's apostleship, four other apostles (Orson Pratt, Hyrum Smith, J. Reuben Clark Jr. of the First Presidency, and Bruce R. McConkie) discussed the matter. Of these, Elder Smith, who published his *Doctrine and Covenants* commentary four years after Talmage's book, agreed on the date of 6 April, but rejected Talmage's assertion about 1 BC being the year in which Christ was born. The other three disagreed entirely with Talmage. Like *Jesus the Christ*, Clark's *Our Lord of the Gospels* (1954) was reprinted by the Church as the Melchizedek Priesthood handbook for 1958.

Must apostles and prophets be infallible in their beliefs? Does such a calling derive them of their agency and right to private opinions? Under date of 8 February 1843, Joseph Smith wrote, "[I] visited with a brother and sister from Michigan who thought that 'a prophet is always a prophet;' but I told them that a prophet was a prophet only when he was acting as such."<sup>70</sup> Prophets are, after all, human beings. The fact that they speak for God on occasion does not remove their free agency. Like all of us, prophets have opinions.

Elder Charles W. Penrose, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and later a counselor in the First Presidency, wrote, "At the head of this Church stands a man who is a Prophet.... [W]e respect and venerate him; but we do not believe that his personal views or utterances are revelations from God."<sup>71</sup>

Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "It makes no difference what is written or what anyone has said, if what has been said is in conflict with what the Lord has revealed, we can set it aside. My words, and the teachings of any other member of the Church, high or low, if they do not square with the revelations, we need not accept them. Let us have this matter clear. We have accepted

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<sup>70</sup> J. Smith, Jr. *History of the Church*, 5:265.

<sup>71</sup> *Millennial Star* 54 (21 March 1892): 191.

the four standard works as the measuring yardsticks, or balances, by which we measure every man's doctrine. You cannot accept the books written by the authorities of the Church as standards in doctrine, only in so far as they accord with the revealed word in the standard works."<sup>72</sup>

He further wrote, "When is a prophet a prophet? Whenever he speaks under the inspiration and influence of the Holy Ghost.... When prophets write and speak on the principles of the gospel, they should have the guidance of the Spirit. If they do, then all that they say will be in harmony with the revealed word. If they are in harmony then we know that they have not spoken presumptuously. Should a man speak or write, and what he says is in conflict with the standards which are accepted, with the revelations the Lord has given, then we may reject what he has said, no matter who he is."<sup>73</sup>

Similar thoughts were expressed by President Harold B. Lee in a European area conference: "If anyone, regardless of his position in the Church, were to advance a doctrine that is not substantiated by the standard Church works, meaning the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, you may know that his statement is merely his private opinion. The only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church. And if any man speak a doctrine which contradicts what is in the standard Church works, you may know by that same token that it is false and you are not bound to accept it as truth."<sup>74</sup>

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72 Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-1956), 3:203.

73 J. F. Smith, Jr., *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:187.

74 *The First Area General Conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-*

In January 1970, six months after the first Apollo moon landing, Joseph Fielding Smith became President of the LDS Church. Some anti-Mormon groups took delight in pointing out that he had, during his tenure as an Apostle, declared that it was “doubtful that man will ever be permitted to make any instrument or ship to travel through space and visit the moon or any distant planet.”<sup>75</sup> What these same critics failed to point out was that President Smith never attributed his belief to a revelation from God. Indeed, many of his generation held the same opinion, and all were surprised (but delighted) when proven wrong. Incorrect opinions do not make false prophets.<sup>76</sup> Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in his *The Mortal Messiah*,<sup>77</sup> indicated that the very nature of that book made it inevitable that it would contain some of his own opinions and speculations.

Does a commission from the First Presidency give more authority to Talmage’s view? In 1936, President Heber J. Grant copyrighted a book entitled *Joseph Smith as a Translator*, written by a non-Latter-day Saint named Homans (writing under the

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*day Saints, held in Munich Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses*, 69. I am grateful to Matt Roper for these references.

75 Smith, Joseph Fielding, Jr. *Answers to Gospel Questions*. First ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 2:191. “Following the Apollo moon landings and the death of President David O. McKay, President Smith became president of the Church. At a press conference following his assumption of Church leadership, he was asked by a reporter about this statement. President Smith replied: ‘Well, I was wrong, wasn’t I?’” ([http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism\\_and\\_science/Joseph\\_Fielding\\_Smith\\_claimed\\_that\\_man\\_would\\_never\\_walk\\_on\\_the\\_Moon](http://en.fairmormon.org/Mormonism_and_science/Joseph_Fielding_Smith_claimed_that_man_would_never_walk_on_the_Moon) (accessed January 18, 2014)). This statement was changed in later editions of the book to read as follows: “The Lord will permit men to go just so far and no farther; and when they get beyond the proper bounds, he will check them” (Smith, Joseph Fielding, Jr. *Answers to Gospel Questions*. 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 2:191).

76 Some of the Bible’s foremost prophets, such as Moses and Jeremiah, objected that their lack of eloquence made them unsuited to fill the role the Lord had cut out for them. God overruled these opinions and sent them on their way.

77 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*. 4 vols. *The Messiah Series* 2-5, ed. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979-1981), 1:10.

pseudonym R. C. Webb), who had been asked by President Grant to write the book. I know of no one who would attribute divine revelation to this official publication.

What about the place of Talmage's work? Does the sanctity of the Salt Lake Temple make his book a revelation from God? In addition to relying on the text of the King James version of the Bible, Talmage also used New Testament commentaries written by various Protestant clergymen, notably that of Adam Clarke. This is a highly unusual way of receiving revelation from God!

As for D&C 20:1, it has been noted by Chadwick and others that this introductory verse was added later and was not part of the original. Moreover, it is likely (again, Chadwick provides some evidence for this) that the entire Section 20 is not a revelation, but a statement of principles comprising the Articles and Covenants of the restored Church.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For a discussion, see chapter 44 ("The Role of the Book of Mormon in the Restoration of the Church") in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights From a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999, later reissued by Horizon). An early version of D&C 20 in the hand of Oliver Cowdery has suggested to some that he was the author.

