



THE HISTORICAL JESUS II:

The Birth Date of Jesus I

“ALTHOUGH THE BIBLE doesn’t explicitly identify the birthday of our Lord, many scholars have developed diverse opinions as to the likely birthday of Jesus. (It reminds one of the rabbinical observation: with two Jews, you have three opinions!)”¹ Scholarly opinions regarding the birth date of Jesus range over an entire generation, between 6 CE and 20 BCE.

Scholarly opinions regarding the birth date of Jesus range over an entire generation.

6 CE?

Joseph and his espoused wife, Mary, who was great with child, traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea when Cyrenius (Quirinius) was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-5). Quirinius was commissioned to institute a census for the purpose of taxation immediately after Herod Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea, Samaria and Idumea, was removed from power and exiled to Gaul. According to Josephus, this census took place in the year that became known as AD 6 (AD = Anno Domini = Year of Our Lord). This census occurred 10 years after Herod’s death.²

Rebuttal. Josephus either did not know or refused to acknowledge the fact that Quirinius was involved in an earlier census in 2-3 BCE as well as the later census of 6 CE. Furthermore, to locate the birth date of Jesus in 6 CE would completely ignore the historical role of Herod the Great and would overturn the account of Luke regarding the birth of Jesus (Luke 3:1, 23).

1 CE?

Around 534 CE a Scythian monk known as Dionysius Exiguus established “our present system of counting years BC and AD (or the more modern- and secular-rendition BCE and CE: ‘before common era’ and ‘common era’). Dionysius determined the date of Jesus’ birth entirely based on Luke 3:1 and Luke 3:23. He allowed for one year to pass between the commencement of John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ respective ministries. This makes Jesus’ preaching start around the sixteenth year of Tiberius Caesar’s reign, which he set at 30 CE, with Jesus’ being 30 years old (Dionysius ignored Luke’s *about*) then. So 1 CE became the year of Jesus’ birth.”³

Rebuttal. Dating the birth of Jesus to 1 CE would again conflict with the historical association to Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE.

Dating the birth of Jesus to 1 CE would conflict with the historical association to Herod the Great, who died in 4 BCE.

2 BCE?

“Tertullian (born about 160 A.D.) stated that Augustus began to rule 41 years before the birth of Jesus and died 15 years after that event . . . Augustus died on August 19, 14 A.D., placing Jesus’ birth at 2 B.C. . . . Tertullian also notes that Jesus was born 28 years after the death of Cleopatra in 30 B.C., which is consistent with a date of 2 B.C. . . .

“Ireneus, born about a century after Jesus, also notes that the Lord was born in the 41st year of the reign of Augustus. Since Augustus began his reign in the autumn of 43 B.C., this also appears to substantiate the birth in 2 B.C. . . .

“Eusebius (264-340 A.D.), the ‘Father of Church History,’ ascribes it [the birth of Jesus] to the 42nd year of the reign of Augustus and the 28th from the subjection of Egypt on the death of Anthony and Cleopatra. . . . The 42nd year of Augustus ran from the autumn of 2 B.C. to the autumn of 1 B.C. The subjugation of Egypt into the Roman Empire occurred in the autumn of 30 B.C.; the 28th year extended from the autumn of 3 B.C. to the autumn of 2 B.C. The only date that would meet both of these constraints would be the autumn of 2 B.C.”⁴

Rebuttal. See the following rebuttal under “3 BCE?”

3 BCE?

Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE, a number of revolts broke out in Galilee, Judaea and Jerusalem. “The governor of Syria, Quintilius Varus, had effectively to reconquer the country in order to put down these revolts. This was in the last months of his term as governor, which finished at the end of 4 B.C. . . . This would bring us to 3 B.C., the date preferred by the earliest Christian writers as the birth of Christ.”⁵

Rebuttal. The belief that the birth of Jesus occurred in either 2 or 3 BCE is based on the fact that the census initiated by Saturninus in 8 BCE and then interrupted by Quintilius Varus (4 BCE) was not completed until 3/2 BCE by Quirinius. Thus, 2 and 3 BCE do not represent the birth date of Jesus but the date(s) when his birth was finally registered.

4 BCE?

“ . . . [T]he year of Jesus’ birth is broadly accepted as 4 B.C. . . .

“**[Rebuttal]** . . . primarily from erroneous conclusions derived from Josephus’ recording of an eclipse, assumed to be on March 13, 4 B.C., ‘shortly before Herod died.’”⁶

20 BCE?

“ . . . [I]n *John* we have a passage that implies that Jesus was close to fifty years old during the time of his ministry:

“John 8:57: ‘You are not yet fifty years old,’ the Jews said to Jesus, ‘and you have seen Abraham.’

“There is nothing symbolic about the number (or age) fifty. Thus it is likely that *John* meant the passage to show that Jesus was in his (probably late) forties. This will bring the birth date of Jesus to slightly after 20 BCE.”⁷

Rebuttal. Locating the birth of Jesus in 20 BCE would overturn the historical statement of Luke that Mary, being great with child, went to Bethlehem with Joseph in response to the taxation instituted by Cyrenius (Quirinius) either at ca. 2 BCE or ca. 6 CE (Luke 2:1-6). A birth date of 20 BCE also would contradict Luke’s statement that “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee [28/29 CE], . . . Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age . . .” (Luke 3:1, 23). This would place the birth date of Jesus at ca. 2 BCE rather than ca. 20 BCE.

Furthermore, in their argument with Jesus in the Temple, the scribes and Pharisees were simply being sarcastic. Thus, the Pharisees said to Jesus, “We be not born of fornication . . . Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan[?] . . . Now we know that thou hast a devil” (John 8:41, 48, 52).

Having eliminated the extreme dating of Jesus’ birth date to 6 or 1 CE and to 2, 3, 4 or 20 BCE, the legitimacy of other proposed birth dates between 7 and 6 BCE must subsequently be examined.

Locating the birth of Jesus in 20 BCE would overturn the historical statement of Luke that Mary, being great with child, went to Bethlehem with Joseph in response to the taxation instituted by Cyrenius.

Endnotes

1. Chuck Missler, "When Was Jesus Born?" at www.joshuanet.org/articles/missler/born.htm.
2. See M-E. Boisnard, "In What Year Was Christ Born?" at www.op.org/op/ebaf/inwhat.htm.
3. Paul Tobin, "The Date of Jesus' Birth," at www.geocities.com/paulntobin/birthdate.html.
4. Missler, "When Was Jesus Born?"
5. Boisnard, "In What Year Was Christ Born?"
6. Missler, "When Was Jesus Born?"
7. Tobin, "Date of Jesus' Birth."

Copyright © 2006 Worldview Publications