



THE HISTORICAL JESUS III:

The Birth Date of Jesus II

“NOW WHEN JESUS WAS BORN in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him” (Matthew 2:1, 2). The magi who came from Persia to Jerusalem were Parthians, who were traditional enemies of Rome and particularly of Herod the Great. The Parthian magi brought profoundly disturbing news to Jerusalem — news of the impending death of one king and the recent birth of a new king. This news was not based on rumor or clandestine plots but on cosmic portents.

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Cosmic Portents of the Birth of Jesus

“On April 17, 6 BC, two years before King Herod died, Jupiter emerged in the east as a morning star in the sign of the Jews, Aries the Ram. The account in Matthew refers twice to the Star’s being in the east with good reasons. When the royal star of Zeus, the planet Jupiter, was in the east, this was the most powerful time to confer kingships. Furthermore, the Sun was in Aries, where it is exalted. And the Moon was in very close conjunction with Jupiter in Aries. Modern calculations suggest that this was close enough to be an occultation (eclipse). But the Sun’s glare would have hidden that event. Saturn was also present, which meant that the three rulers of Aries’ trine (Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn) were present in Aries. Saturn and Jupiter were said to be attendants on the rising Sun, another regal aspect for astrologers. By modern expectations this is trivial, but for ancient stargazers this configuration was truly awesome.”¹

However, because this awesome event involved an eclipse in which the sun hid the conjunction of the moon with Jupiter, the observed significance of this occultation was not the birth of a king but his impending death.² Awareness of this astrological portent would have produced panic across the Roman Empire and particularly in Judea, where Herod the Great was already in a virtually terminal state.

This leads to consideration of a series of prior astrological events that occurred in 7 BCE. Four copies of an ancient Babylonian astronomical text, written in 8 BCE in cuneiform script on clay tablets, have been recovered. This text predicts a triple conjunction of the planets, Jupiter and Saturn, in the constellation, Pisces, on what are now known as May 27, October 6 and December 1, 7 BCE. “The . . . conjunction of 7 B.C.E. . . . was special in that the planets met three times in succession in the same constellation. . . .

“In the Babylonian system, Jupiter, the largest and brightest planet, was known as the star of Marduk, the supreme god of Babylon. Saturn, the second largest planet, was the star of the king, the earthly representative of the god. . . . The constellation Pisces was associated with Ea, the god of wisdom, life and creation. Pisces was also the . . . last constellation that the sun passed through each year. . . . The conjunction of the planets in Pisces accordingly portended two things: the end of the old world order and the birth of a new savior king chosen by God. . . .

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“The fact that Mars, the star of Nergal, the god of war, joined the conjunction in its final phase signified that the new king was to come from the West, specifically, from Syria-Palestine, for Mars was the star of Amurru or the West (Syria-Palestine) in the Babylonian system.

“The prediction of such a king would have held wide interest in 7 B.C.E., when a power vacuum of sorts prevailed in the Near East. . . . [M]any people considered Roman rule illegitimate and hoped that a local Near Eastern king appointed by God would drive the Romans out of the country and create a better world. These messianic expectations are recorded by Josephus and reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

“The conjunction of 7 B.C.E. would have been interpreted as a portent of the birth of precisely this kind of king. The political vistas opened by it would not have escaped the attention of any Babylonian astrologer. . . .

“How could a star lead the magi to Jerusalem and Bethlehem? These Babylonian astronomers would have ‘followed’ a star only based on its astrological significance. In 7 B.C.E., they read the message of the ‘star’ — that a messiah-king would be born in Syria-Palestine — and they headed to a leading political center in the region, King Herod’s court.”³

Reconciling Astral Portents with Historical Events

The fundamental question is, How can the astral events portending the death of one king and the birth of another be reconciled and integrated with the historical events of that very time?

In 9 BCE Herod the Great launched a military campaign against the Nabateans (Arabians), whose capital was Petra, in what is now Jordan. This campaign compromised the policies and edicts of Caesar Augustus, who had declared the Pax Romana (Peace of Rome). As a result, Herod came into disfavor with Augustus. The consequence of this disfavor was that Augustus assigned the imperial census of 8 BCE to Saturninus, governor of Syria. Surprisingly, just a year later (7 BCE) Herod regained the favor of Augustus “through the good offices of Nicolaus of Damascus.”⁴ Herod then immediately acted to condemn two of his sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, to death and to have them strangled at Sebaste (Samaria). He also executed a number of Pharisees suspected of disloyalty.

The following year (6 BCE) Herod drafted his first testament or will, “in which he named Antipater [his son], or if he should die before himself, Herod, the son of the second Mariamme, [as] his successor.”⁵ The assumed purpose of Herod’s testament was to preserve the messianic succession of the Herodian dynasty. The following year (5 BCE) Herod became seriously ill and drafted his second testament. Then, in 4 BCE the people revolted under the rabbis, Judas and Matthias. This rebellion was vigorously suppressed by Herod.

Meanwhile, Herod’s illness became more severe. With permission from Caesar Augustus, Herod executed his son, Antipater, and again changed his will to appoint his son, Archelaus, as king, with Antipas and Philip as tetrarchs. Just five days after the execution of Antipater, Herod died in his palace at Jericho. Augustus then proceeded to appoint Archelaus as ethnarch (rather than king) of Judaea, Samaria and Idumea along with Antipas as tetrarch of Galilee and Philip as tetrarch of Gaulanitis. These appointments — and particularly the appointment of Archelaus — provoked a major revolt from Galilee through Samaria and Judaea. The Roman general, Quintilius Varus, and three legions intervened to quell this rebellion. The provincial city of Sepphoris was besieged and burned to the ground. Over 2,000 Galileans were crucified, and thousands of others were taken into slavery.

Because of the progressive disturbances, the census begun by Saturninus in 8 BCE was delayed. It could not be completed and the registration filed until Quirinius was appointed as an interim governor in the years 3-2 BCE, after Varus had completed his military intervention. Under these circumstances the

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registration of Joseph, Mary and Jesus was not formally submitted for over four years (2 BCE). Luke, who was aware of the documentation, later declared that Jesus was about 30 years old in 28 CE, because 2 BCE was the year that the census begun by Saturninus in 8 BCE was finally registered and officially approved (Luke 3:23).

The astrological events of 7-6 BCE, which were divulged by the magi, signified both the impending death of a king and the birth of a king. These events therefore must have had a profound effect not only on Herod and his family, but on Caesar Augustus as well. Consequently, these events led to the slaughter of the infants (Matthew 2:16) and the flight of Joseph and Mary, with the newborn Jesus, to Egypt (Matthew 2:14). These events also must have influenced Herod's wills and testaments, the murder of his own sons, and Caesar's later denial of kingship to Archelaus.

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Conclusion

The emerging facts definitively locate the birth of Jesus within a 12-month period between May, 7 BCE, and April, 6 BCE. Thus, Jesus' birth preceded the death of Herod by approximately two years.

Endnotes

1. Michael R. Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), pp. 96-101. See also Michael R. Molnar, "Revealing the Star of Bethlehem," at home.eclipse.net/~molnar/.
2. Unfortunately, Michael Molnar's "theory must be rejected . . . since in Babylonian astrology the occultation of Jupiter by the moon signified the *death* of a great king and *famine* in the West" (see Hermann Hunger and Simo Parpola, "Bedeckungen des Planeten Jupiter durch den Mond," *Archiv fur Orientforschung* 29/30 [1983/84]: 46-49).
3. Simo Parpola, "The Magi and the Star," *Bible Review* 17, no. 6 (December 2001): 16-23, 52, 54.
4. Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p. 127.
5. Ibid.