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When Was Jesus Born? By Brian Watson

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.

It is Christmas, one of the most beloved holidays of all, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. The incarnation, when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), is a stunning historical event. It is amazing to think that God would become man, that he would be conceived in a virgin's womb, born in the most humble of circumstances, all to rescue sinful human beings and join them to himself. Without Christmas, there would be no Good Friday and no Easter.

Yet for all we know about the importance of what happened at Christmas, we don't actually know *when* Jesus was born. Now, if you assumed that Jesus was born exactly 2013 years ago, on the morning of December 25, that is understandable. We do celebrate Christmas every year on the same day, and the calendar says it is 2013 A.D., or *Anno Domini*, "the year of the Lord," which means that even the way we reckon time reflects the reality of Jesus' birth. The problem is that Jesus wasn't born on December 25, 1 B.C., or in the year A.D. 1 (there is no "year zero").

Before I explain what we do know about the timing of Jesus' birth, let me explain why I'm writing about this issue. It has become somewhat popular to cast doubt on the Bible. A current series on the History Channel, "Bible Secrets Revealed," seems intended to make people doubt the historical reliability of the Bible. On another network, the Smithsonian Channel, an episode, titled "Mystery Files: Birth of Christ," casts doubt on the birth of Jesus by focusing on chronological issues in Luke's Gospel. The show mentions that Luke has "conflicting versions of events."

What are we to make of all this? Is Luke's Gospel historically reliable? When was Jesus born?

To help us understand these issues, it is worth quoting theologian Gerald Bray at length:

The fact that Jesus was born so many years before the supposedly "correct" date of A.D. 1 has nothing to do with the Bible. It is

the result of a series of chronological errors made by Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century Roman monk, who tried to calculate the birth of Jesus by counting back through the Roman emperors, but who managed to miss some in the process. He therefore came up short and was never corrected. As for the date, December 25 was chosen as a date for celebrating Christ's birth in order to replace the Roman festival of Saturnalia, which was held at the that time of the year. Christmas Day is the first time that it is possible to measure the return of daylight in the northern hemisphere following the winter solstice, and so it was thought to be an appropriate symbol of Christ, the light of the world. He cannot have been born on that day, however, because the shepherds who were watching their flocks would not have been out in the fields in mid-winter. Jesus must have been born sometime between March and November, but we can say no more than that. The important thing is that he was born on a particular day, and as December 25 is now the universally accepted date, there seems to be little point in trying to change it for the sake of an unattainable "accuracy."¹

There are two things worth noting in that passage. It explains why our calendar says 2013 even though Jesus was likely born 2016-2018 years ago (more on that later). It also explains why we celebrate Christmas on December 25, even though Jesus was surely not born on that date. Additionally, Bray correctly observes that what matters is not the date, but the fact that Jesus was born and we celebrate his birth.

Bray says that December 25 was chosen because it coincided with the Roman festival of Saturnalia. This was a

pagan celebration of Saturn, the Roman god, who was also identified as Cronus, father of Zeus. The feast, which began on December 17, featured sacrifices at the temple of Saturn and a public banquet.² Another feast, that of Sol Invictus, the "unconquerable sun," was held on December 25. By the fourth century, worship of this sun god was combined with the worship of Mithra, a god born out of a rock who "battled first with the sun and then with a primeval bull, thought to be the first act of creation."³ According to Craig Blomberg, a New Testament scholar, "Christians took advantage of this 'day off' to protest against Mithraism by worshiping the birth of Jesus instead. After the Roman empire became officially Christian in the fourth century, this date turned into the legal holiday we know as Christmas."⁴ One Roman calendar (the "Philocalian Calendar"), compiled in 354, states that Christmas was celebrated on December 25 in Rome in the year 336. This is the earliest record we have of a December 25 Christmas. In later years, Christmas was celebrated on this date throughout the Roman empire.

It is important to note that pagan cults like Mithraism emerged in the second century, well after the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament. The fact that Christians decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus on the day of a pagan festival had nothing to do with exactly when Jesus was born. Rather, they had the day off, and they decided that instead of participating in pagan rituals, they would worship the true God instead. This seems to have been a bit of a counter-cultural protest.

Christians also appropriated certain pagan symbols in their celebration of Christmas, giving them a new meaning. "The church thereby offered the

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In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.
Luke 2:1-2 ESV

When Was Jesus Born? (continued)

people a Christian alternative to the pagan festivities and eventually reinterpreted many of their symbols and actions in ways acceptable to Christian faith and practice. For example, Jesus Christ was presented as the Sun of Righteousness (Mal. 4:2), replacing the sun god, Sol Invictus. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, it assimilated into its observances many customs of the pagan winter festivals such as holly, mistletoe, the Christmas tree, and log fires. At the same time new Christmas customs such as the nativity crib and the singing of carols were introduced by Christians.⁵

In reality, it seems that Jesus was probably born in a part of the year when shepherds would be abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8). Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – c. 215) reported that some believed Jesus was born on the twenty-fifth day of Pachon, a month in the Egyptian calendar.⁶ This date would correspond to May 20. This date is possible, but we don't really know if Jesus was born on that day.

What about the year of Jesus' birth? Jesus must have been born, at the latest, in early 4 B.C. We know this because Herod the Great was alive at the time, and he died in that year. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that Herod died after an eclipse and before the Passover. That means he must have died between March 4 and April 11 of that year.⁷ It is likely that Jesus was born sometime earlier, perhaps as early as 6 B.C., because Herod ordered all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger to be killed.

None of this is problematic. If Jesus were born in 5 B.C., it would mean that in the year 28, the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1; he started his reign in A.D. 14), he would be about 32 years old, which harmonizes well with Luke's statement that Jesus was "about thirty" when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23). Only one problem remains: Luke also says that right before Jesus was born, Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be made, and this census was conducted by Quirinius, the governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-2). As far as we know, Quirinius was the governor of Syria in A.D. 6-7 and Josephus tells us there was a census in A.D. 6. (Acts 5:37 states that this census was the reason that Judas the Galilean revolted against

the Roman authorities in Jerusalem.) Some have used this information to claim that Luke's Gospel is wrong. I have heard such claims on the History Channel and National Public Radio.

There are a few possible answers to the issues surrounding the census. First of all, we do know that there were several censuses held in the Roman empire. Augustus decreed three censuses around this time. Some areas had periodic censuses; Egypt had one every 14 years. It is possible that the Roman census was carried out according to Jewish customs, which would require males to return to their ancestral homes. Since Joseph was betrothed to Mary and she was pregnant, perhaps he took her with him so he could be with her for the birth of Jesus. Nothing that we know from history excludes the possibility of a census ordered by Augustus for the whole Roman empire and carried out in Palestine around 6-4 B.C.

The real question concerns Quirinius. Luke 2:2 states, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." This statement implies that the census Luke is referring to is one prior to the census in A.D. 6. The problem is that Quirinius was apparently not the governor of Syria prior to that time. However, this knowledge is uncertain. Also, it is possible that Quirinius was an administrator who was responsible for overseeing the census. Luke could be using "governor" in an anachronistic sense, so that while Quirinius wasn't governor at the time of the census, he became governor later. The Greek of Luke 2:2 literally reads, "This was [the] first census of Quirinius, governor of Syria." Just as we might talk about what President Obama did in the US Senate—"This was the voting record of Obama, President of America"—Luke may be referring to the past actions of Quirinius, who was best known for being governor of Syria.

Another possible solution is that Josephus was wrong and Luke was right. After all, Luke proves himself to be an accurate historian elsewhere in his Gospel as well as in the book of Acts. According to Darrell Bock, "That no other source mentions such a census is not a significant problem, since many ancient sources refer to

events that are not corroborated elsewhere and since Luke is found to be trustworthy in his handling of facts that one can check. Since the details of this census fit into general Roman tax policy, there is no need to question that it could have occurred in the time of Herod."⁸ Additionally, the number and quality of manuscripts of the New Testament far surpasses those of other ancient documents, including the writings of Josephus and Roman historians. We don't know everything that happened in ancient history, but we do know what the New Testament says and we have no reason to doubt it.

In the end, we may never know exactly when Jesus was born. But what we do know of history does not contradict what Luke has reported in his "orderly account" of the life of Jesus (Luke 1:3). There is no reason to doubt the historical reliability of Luke's Gospel. So go, tell it on the mountain, "Jesus Christ is born!"

Notes:

¹ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 564.

² S. E. Porter, "Festivals and Holy Days: Greco-Roman," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 370.

³ Ronald H. Nash, *The Gospel and Greeks*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 134.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 36.

⁵ O. G. Oliver, Jr., "Christmas," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 238-239.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata, or Miscellanies," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 2:333.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 904.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 906.