

Retrospective on Dating the Virgin Birth and the Star of Bethlehem

In 2009 we undertook a study of the birth of Jesus which is chronicled in Matthew 2:1–12. From that passage we undertook research to confirm from biblical and secular sources the date of the birth of Jesus and in so doing were able to determine the date the Parthian Magi's visited the Christ Child in Bethlehem.

Tonight's lesson will briefly review the key piece of research that nails down the year of the Lord's birth.

Most of the major reference works that address the Lord's birth cite the years of c. 5 and 4 B.C. The reasons are that Josephus indicates that the birth of our Lord occurred before two documentable events: (1) a lunar eclipse which occurred shortly before the death of Herod and (2) the Jewish celebration of Passover which occurred shortly thereafter.

The ancients were very precise in keeping track of lunar and solar eclipses. This makes it possible through research to investigate the birth of Messiah.

In an attempt to narrow down the date of the Lord's birth among the possible choices, researchers discovered a short but critical quote by Josephus:

Philip, Herod's brother, departed this life, in the twentieth year of the reign of Tiberius.¹

Tiberius was the Roman Emperor that succeeded Augustus who died in the year A.D. 14.

Following the above excerpt that cites the "twentieth year of the reign of Tiberius," the following footnote is referenced at the bottom of the page:

¹ *The Antiquities of the Jews in The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.d.), 538 (book 18, chap. 4, par. 6).

This calculation, from all Josephus's Greek copies, is exactly right; for since Herod died about September, in the fourth year before the Christian era, and Tiberius began, as is well known, August 19, A.D. 14, it is evident that the thirty-seventh year of Philip, reckoned from his father's death, was the twentieth of Tiberius, or near the end of A.D. 33 (the very year of our Savior's death also,) or, however, in the beginning of the year A.D. 34.²

This footnote chooses 4 B.C. as the death year of Herod. All other dates mentioned are calculated from A.D. 1 and are therefore correct.

The reason this calculation is obviously wrong is because it places the birth year of our Lord in either 5 or 4 B.C.

Highly respected work on biblical chronology has been done by Jack Finegan (1908–2000), former professor of New Testament History and Archaeology at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. The first edition of his *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* was published in 1964 by Princeton University Press.

Over the course of the next thirty-five years Finegan continued to update his research, culminating with a revised edition, published in 1998, by Hendrickson Publishers of Peabody, Massachusetts. One revision critical to our study addresses the death of Herod which itself is a major clue in identifying the time of the Messiah's birth. Here is that important discovery by Finegan:

The widely accepted dating of the death of Herod the Great (is) 4 (or possibly 5) B.C. W. E. Filmer raised a serious question about the 4 B.C. date and proposed a date in 1 B.C. instead, and in 1978 and 1996 Ernest L. Martin advanced detailed arguments for the same date of 1 B.C. The subject of the date of Herod's death was thus brought to the front again, and much discussion has ensued.³ (p. 298)

The breakthrough for Filmer and Martin was from research done in the manuscripts of Flavius Josephus' *The Antiquities of the Jews*:

² Ibid.

³ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 298.

Josephus tells us that an eclipse of the moon took place shortly before Herod died, and that the Jewish Passover came not long after his death. If the death of Herod is placed in 4 B.C. the eclipse in question can be identified with a partial lunar eclipse on March 12/13, allowing twenty-nine days until the Passover on April 11. Or if the death of Herod is placed in 5 B.C. the eclipse can be identified with a total lunar eclipse on September 15/16, allowing some seven months until Passover on April 17, 5 B.C.

If the death of Herod was in 1 B.C.—the year we are now exploring as probable for the death of Herod—the relevant eclipse of the moon was a total eclipse on the night of January 9/10, and the full paschal moon of Nisan 14 was on April 8, [7 on the Gentile calendar] twelve and a half weeks later. (p. 299)

In the last period of Herod's life, between the eclipse shortly before he died and the Passover soon after his death, Josephus narrates many events. These are the following: (1) on the night of the eclipse Herod had two rabbis burned alive for involvement in the destruction of his golden eagle at the temple gate; (2) with his health worsening he traveled from Jericho to the hot baths of Callirrhoe \ka-lir'-ra-wē \ near the northeast end of the Dead Sea, (3) when numerous baths and additional immersion in a vat of warm oil failed to bring relief he returned to Jericho; (4) at Jericho, knowing that death was near and being well aware that most of the Jewish people hated him, he sent officers into all areas of his kingdom to bring prominent Jewish elders to Jericho where he had them shut up in the hippodrome with instructions that upon his demise they be executed; (5) receiving a letter from Augustus allowing him to either exile or execute his son Antipater, Herod sent his bodyguards to do the latter; (6) he then altered his will and designated Archelaus to have Judea, Samaria, and Idumea; Antipas to be tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Philip to be tetrarch of Gaulanitis and related regions; and (7) on the fifth day after having Antipater killed, he died. It is plain that it would have been difficult for all this to transpire within the twenty-nine days between the eclipse of March 12/13 and the Passover of April 11 in the year 4 B.C. The seven months in 5 B.C. would of course be more than sufficient, but that date is not otherwise strongly supported. In 1 B.C. the time would be adequate and not excessive, and this fact is an additional reason for preferring the 1 B.C. date for the death of Herod the Great.⁴ (p. 300)

What piece of information led these men to move the sequence of events that included Herod's death from 4 B.C. forward to 1 B.C.? Here is the evidence excerpted again from Finegan:

⁴ Ibid., 298–300.

As cited above, the currently known text of Josephus's *Antiquities* (18.106) states that Philip died in the twentieth year of Tiberius after ruling for thirty-seven years. This points to Philip's ascension at the death of Herod in 4 B.C. (4 years B.C. + 33 years A.D. = 37 years). But Filmer suspected that a figure had been dropped out and that the text should probably read the twenty-second rather than the twentieth year of Tiberius (A.D. 35/36). In fact, however, already in the nineteenth century Florian Riess reported that the Franciscan monk Molkenbuhr claimed to have seen a 1517 Parisian copy of Josephus and an 1841 Venetian copy in each of which the text read the "twenty-second year of Tiberius."

In 1995 David W. Beyer reported to the Society of Biblical Literature his personal examination in the British Museum of forty-six editions of Josephus's *Antiquities* published before 1700 among which twenty-seven texts, all but three published before 1544, read "twenty-second year of Tiberius," while not a single edition published prior to 1544 read "twentieth year of Tiberius." Likewise in the Library of Congress five more editions read the "twenty-second year." While none prior to 1544 records the "twentieth year." It was also found that the oldest versions of the text give variant lengths of reign for Philip of 32 and 36 years. But if we allow for a full thirty-seven-year reign, then "the twenty-second year of Tiberius" points to 1 B.C. as the year of death of Herod. This is therefore the date which is accepted in the present book.⁵

This adjustment in the timing of Herod's death enables us to go to the skies in 3 and 2 B.C. and examine the activity of the planets and stars in the two constellations of Leo and Virgo. When we do this, we discover the keys to identifying the Star of Bethlehem.

Our study will reveal that the "star" is just the first chapter in a celestial drama played out in the skies. By means of signs silently broadcast by the stars and planets, the discerning Magi were able to perceive not only the birth of the Messiah but also Mary's pregnancy both of which would introduce the ultimate resolution of the angelic conflict. For the details, we consult our final resource:

⁵ A reference to the 1998 revised edition of Finegan's *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*.

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His research into the identity of the star of Bethlehem led him to the resources we have consulted and the discovery of events that not only reveal Mary's virgin pregnancy and the virgin birth of Messiah but also His crucifixion. The testimony of the celestial Carousel tells the story of the Lord's ultimate victory over Lucifer and the establishment of His millennial kingdom. Our emphasis is centered on the events related to the Star of Bethlehem.

As we have noted, Finegan supported the erroneous belief that Jesus was born around 4 B.C. in the first edition of his book, published in 1964. The major source that supported the 4 B.C. death of Herod were latter reprints of Flavius Josephus's *The Antiquity of the Jews*, which we have just noted.

Larson's analysis capitalizes on two things: (1) Jack Finegan's 1998 revision of his *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* in which he places the death of Herod in 1 B.C. and (2) the availability of a computer program⁶ that enables users to drill back into the 3rd, 2d, and 1st, centuries B.C. and 1st century A.D. to view events previously ignored.

What the skies report must be analyzed with reference to the parameters dictated by Matthew's account in Matthew 2:1-12. I observed ten restrictions that passage requires in our analysis while Larson noted nine.

- (1) The Magi were not initially led to the Messiah by the star since they had to inquire of Herod of the Lord's whereabouts (v. 2a).

⁶ The Starry Night Pro, 6.3 version, was used in my research for this series. © 2007 by Imaginova Corp. All rights reserved.

- (2) The Magi classified it as the King of the Jew's "star" (v. 2a).
- (3) The Magi *saw* the "star" originally while in Parthia, therefore it was a visual phenomenon (v. 2b).
- (4) They saw the "star" as it rose in the east (v. 2b).
- (5) The Magi informed Herod of the time they observed the star. Matthew 2:16 enables us to infer that the sighting was somewhat less than two years prior to their arrival in Jerusalem (v. 7 cf. v. 16)
- (6) The "star" appeared to the Magi a second time (v. 9b).
- (7) The text of verse 9 agrees with the statement in verse 2 that the original observance was in the east (v. 9c).
- (8) The sightings in verses 2 and 9 were of the same "star" (v. 9c).
- (9) The "star" goes before them on their trip to Bethlehem indicating that its location is then to the south (v. 9d).
- (10) The "star" is said to "stand over the place where the Child was (v. 9e).⁷

Rick Larson's list summarizes details related to the "star" in light of Matthew 2:1-12:

- (1) It signified birth.
- (2) It signified kingship.
- (3) It had a connection with the Jewish nation.
- (4) It rose in the east, like other "stars".
- (5) It appeared at a precise time.
- (6) Herod didn't know when it appeared.
- (7) It endured over time.
- (8) It was ahead of the Magi as they went south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.
- (9) It stopped over Bethlehem.⁸

⁷ Joe Griffin, "The Mystery of the Star," chap. 16 in *The Concept of Freedom by the Founding Fathers: Intermezzo* (St. Charles: Joe Griffin Media Ministries, 2009), 201.

⁸ Rick Larson, "Setting the Stage," in *The Star of Bethlehem*, <http://bethlehemstar.net/stage/stage/htm>.

It might also be noted that Larson refers to the Magi as being from Persia however the Persian Empire was conquered by the Parthians:

Mithradates I \mith-ra-dā-tēz\ became the founder of the Parthian Empire (c. 170–138). He had to fight hard with the Greeks of Bactria \bak'-trē-a\; at last he was able to conquer a great part of eastern Iran. Soon after the death of Antiochus IV \an-tī'-a-kas\ (163) he conquered Media; and about 141 he invaded Babylonia. He and his son Phraates II \frā-ā'-tēz\ defeated the attempts of Demetrius II da-mē'-trē-as\ (139) and Antiochus VII (129) to regain the eastern provinces, and extend the Arsacid \ar'-sa-sid\ dominion to the Euphrates.⁹

At the time of the Lord's birth the Parthian Empire was the dominant power east of the Euphrates River, the boundary established by a treaty with Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus following Mark Antony's defeat at the hands of the Parthians. The victory was more the result of attrition than battlefield prowess, but the retreat by Antony brought a period of peace between the two powers that extended from 36 B.C. to A.D. 58 which included the period of the Lord's incarnation.¹⁰

Larson also refers to the Magi as "Persians" riding camels rather than Parthians riding horses, but recognizes that due to various Diasporas, the makeup of the Magi no doubt included a large number of Jews.

In Larson's article "The Starry Dance," he describes several celestial events that resulted in the Magi concluding that the King of the Jews had been born. It will be helpful if these events are both discussed and illustrated prior to viewing the DVD presentation of his research.

An important concept must be understood before we move forward and it is summarized by Paul as he quotes the Lord from Isaiah 6:9–10:

⁹ Eduard Meyer, "Parthia," in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13th ed., (New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1926), 20:871.

¹⁰ A detailed description of the battles between the Romans and the Parthians in 36 B.C. is found in Plutarch's "Antony" in *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans in Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 14:748–779.

Acts 28:26 - 'Go to this people and say, "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive."'

This was also a popular critique that the Lord directed toward those that did not understand His message or His Person throughout the Gospels, for example:

John 12:40 - "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them."

The source of both quotes is from:

Isaiah 6:9 - 'Keep listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.'

Herod was not a Jew but an Idumean Arab. He had no interest in the spiritual life of Israel and the Jews who were the leaders of that spiritual life were more involved with ritual rather than the reality they portrayed. Both had eyes to see but could not see things spiritual or literal. What appeared to be a normal night sky to them was filled with "signs" that forecast and reported the birth of the Messiah.

On the other hand, the Magi were trained experts in astronomy. They had learned their profession from their predecessors and each had gained their own experience in reading the luminaries.

The Lord himself informed Adam what He meant in Genesis 1:14 when he referred to the "lights in the expanse of the heaven" as being for "signs" among other things.

Genesis 1:14 God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them be signs to indicate seasons and days and years. (NET)

David was inspired to inform us about the celestial objects' mission to silently communicate to us events of significance in the angelic conflict:

Psalm 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky displays his handiwork.

v. 2 Day after day it speaks out; night after night it reveals his greatness.

v. 3 There is not actual speech or word, nor is its voice literally heard.

v. 4 Yet its voice echoes throughout the earth; its words carry to the distant horizon. In the sky he has pitched a tent for the sun. (NET)

As our study continued, we were able to visually see the development of the celestial display the ancient Parthian Magi observed. They charted the movement of key planets and stars that revealed the events that were taking place on Earth.

We are going to observe these phenomena silently “pour forth speech” and “reveal knowledge” that the trained eye can understand but to those who have no interest the message will go unperceived although the phenomena may be clearly seen.

Among the heavenly bodies that will dominate this last segment of our study are the constellations Leo and Virgo, the planets Jupiter and Venus, and the star Regulus.

There is a significant phenomenon typical of the movement of planets among the fixed stars called “retrogradation” that needs to be defined and explained.

Retrograde motion is the orbital motion of a body in a direction opposite that which is normal to spatial bodies within a given system. “Retrograde” derives from the Latin words *retro*, backwards, and *gradus*, step.

In the Solar system mostly everything rotates in the same sense: all major planets orbit the Sun counterclockwise as seen from the pole star Polaris. Most planets spin in the same sense, including Earth. The same happens with the orbital motions of the Moon, Mars’ moons, and the biggest moons of Jupiter and Saturn around their planets. All these motions are called “direct” or “prograde.”

Rotation in the opposite sense is called *retrograde*. Venus and Uranus spin clockwise, so they have a retrograde rotation. Some small moons orbit clockwise around their planet, and are called *retrograde satellites*. All these are the exception rather than the rule.

When we observe the sky, we expect most objects to appear to move in a particular direction with the passing of time. The apparent motion of most bodies in the sky is from east to west.

Retrograde motion should not be confused with retrogradation. The latter term is used in reference to the motion of the outer planets (Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and so forth). Though these planets appear to move from east to west on a nightly basis in response to the spin of Earth, they are most of the time drifting slowly eastward with respect to the background of stars, which can be observed by noting the position of these planets for several nights in a row. This motion is normal for these planets, so it is called direct motion (not retrograde). However, since Earth completes its orbit in a shorter period of time than these outer planets, we occasionally overtake an outer planet, like a faster car on a multiple-lane highway. When this occurs, the planet we are passing will first appear to stop its eastward drift, and it will then appear to drift back toward the west. This is retrogradation, since the planet seems to be moving in a direction opposite to that which is typical for planets. Finally as Earth swings past the planet in its orbit, it appears to resume its normal west-to-east drift on successive nights.¹¹

With at least a cursory understanding of retrogradation of planets viewed from Platform Earth there are a number of celestial objects that need to be introduced along with some specific events related to them.

The planet Jupiter was named by the Romans in honor of the chief god of their pantheon. However, the ancients had long regarded the solar system's largest planet as king of the planets.

If Jupiter is to qualify as "His star" then it must become involved in a number of events in association with other celestial objects that convince the Magi that the Messiah is about to enter human history.

Such a sequence of events began to occur during the time of the Jewish New Year, Ro'sh ha-Shanah (רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה). It falls on the first and second days of the month Tishri which begins the Days of Penitence, and ends on Tishri 10 with the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur (יוֹם כִּפּוּר).

¹¹ "Retrograde Orbit-Definition," WordIQ.com (http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Retrograde_orbit).

This equates on the Gentile calendar to September 3–13, 3 B.C. At that time Jupiter began to move toward the star Regulus and a conjunction in the constellation of Leo. Whereas Jesus is biblically described as the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah,” Leo is the “sign” of the King of Israel. Jupiter, because of its size, is considered to be the “king planet.” Regulus, Leo’s dominant star with a visual magnitude of 1.35, is ranked as the twenty-first brightest star viewed from earth. Because of this, Regulus is considered by some to be the “king star.”

I have not been able to document from any source that the *Jews* considered Jupiter the “king planet,” or Regulus the “king star.” Larson gives no attribution for these claims. This does not mean they are not true, but until I can locate two corroborating sources these assertions by Larson weaken his argument.

Nevertheless, Larson suggests that this September 3, 3 B.C. conjunction would have alerted the Magi to something significant on the horizon. Adding to their interest is that this event occurred during the period of the Jewish celebration of New Year and the Day of Atonement.

Rosh Hashanah occurs on the first and second days of Tishri. In Hebrew, Rosh Hashanah means, literally, “head of the year” or “first of the year.” Rosh Hashanah is commonly known as the Jewish New Year.

The name “Rosh Hashanah” is not used in the Bible to discuss this holiday. The Bible refers to the holiday as Yom Ha-Zikaron [יֹם הַזִּכְרוֹן] (the day of remembrance) or Yom Teruah (the day of the sounding of the shofar). The holiday is instituted in Leviticus 23:24-25.

The shofar is a ram's horn which is blown somewhat like a trumpet. One of the most important observances of this holiday is hearing the sounding of the shofar in the synagogue. A total of 100 notes are sounded each day.

You may notice that the Bible speaks of Rosh Hashanah as occurring on the first day of the seventh month. The first month of the Jewish calendar is Nissan, occurring in March and April. Judaism has several different "new years." In Judaism, Nissan 1 is the new year for the purpose of counting the reign of kings and months on the calendar. Tishri 1 (Rosh Hashanah) is the new year for years.^{12 13}

Ten days later is the Day of Atonement:

Yom Kippur is probably the most important holiday of the Jewish year. Yom Kippur occurs on the 10th day of Tishri. The holiday is instituted at Leviticus 23:26 et seq.

The name "Yom Kippur" means "Day of Atonement," a day set aside to atone for the sins of the past year. Yom Kippur atones only for sins between man and God, not for sins against another person. To atone for sins against another person, you must first seek reconciliation with that person, righting the wrongs you committed against them if possible. That must all be done before Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is a complete Sabbath; no work can be performed on that day. Most of the holiday is spent in the synagogue, in prayer. In Orthodox synagogues, services begin early in the morning (8 or 9 AM) and continue until about 3 PM. People then usually go home for an afternoon nap and return around 5 or 6 PM for the afternoon and evening services, which continue until nightfall. The services end at nightfall, with the blowing of the *tekiah gedolah*, a long blast on the shofar.¹⁴

It will be shown later in this study that there is a sequence of "signs" following a schedule associated with the virgin pregnancy and the virgin birth. And the "star" of this procession is not really a star but the planet Jupiter. Jupiter's retrogradation in the coming months will further capture the attention of the Magi. The optical illusion of its back and forth motion in conjunction with Regulus will occur with the Creator's impeccable timing.

¹² "Nisan: 7th month of the civil year or the 1st month of the ecclesiastical year. Tishri: the 1st month of the civil year or the 7th month of the ecclesiastical year" *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v.: "Nisan" and Tishri."

¹³ © 5756–5769 (1995–2008) by Tracey R. Rich. All rights reserved. www.jewfaq.org/holiday2.htm.

¹⁴ Ibid., www.jewfaq.org/holiday4.htm.

As we view the documentary, *The Star of Bethlehem*, we will observe stellar and planetary movements that document the virgin pregnancy occurring on September 3, 3 B.C. and the occurrence of the virgin birth on June 17, 2, B.C. From this we will be able to deduce there was a span of fifteen months between the virgin pregnancy and the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem in late December of 2 B.C.

This means that the Lord was not a toddler, but a baby of six months age at the time of the Magi's arrival. Matthew's use of the word **παιδίον (paidion)**, translated "young Child" in verses 8, 9, 11, 13 (2), 14, 20 (2), and 21 of chapter 2, is appropriate up to seven years of age. Had the Lord been a new-born infant at the time, the word used would have been **βρέφος (brephos)**.

Thus began the saga of the dispensation of the Incarnation. For the continuation of this drama you may access the audio streams of the study by clicking on the link below. It will take you to Lesson 64 where you may resume the study and if you wish continue through Lesson 67.

To go to Lesson 64, click on this link:

<http://www.joegriffin.org/Pages/ClassInfo.aspx?&seriesid=TG09&classnumber=64>

Tomorrow night we will view the documentary *The Star of Bethlehem* with Frederick Larson.