

The Likely Route to Bethlehem; What Time Is It: Four Calendar Systems & We Still Don't Know; the Virgin Birth Occurred in 5 B.C. Reckoned on the Death of Herod the Great

As we observed earlier in our study, it is not known what route the couple took on their trip to Bethlehem. In all probability Joseph chose to avoid going through the hill country of Samaria by taking the less stressful path down the valley of Jezreel to the Jordan River and then following its valley down to Jericho where he would turn eastward over to Jerusalem, and, finally, the last six miles south to Bethlehem. All told the journey covered about ninety miles.

There were two main east-west routes in Palestine, each following an ideal water grade. One left the Mediterranean at Joppa and moved northwest to the pass between Mt. Gerizim \ger'-i-zīm\ and Mt. Ebal \ē'-bal\, where Shechem \shē'-kem\ was located. It then continued down a valley to the Jordan River which it crossed at Adam.

The other key east-west road left the Mediterranean at Acco and went southeast through the plains of Acre, Esdraelon \es-drā-ē'-lon\, and Jezreel \jez'-rē-el\ to the Jordan River at Beth-shan \beth-shan'.

A minor north-south road followed up each side of the Jordan valley from Jericho to Capernaum \ka-per'-nā-um\.¹

Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem on what is traditionally believed to be the afternoon of 25 December in the year of our Lord 1. However, the date, although debatable, may be accurate, but the year 1 is off by five.

V. Christmas Time?

In Galatians 4:4, the Apostle Paul writes that “when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” The fullness of time certainly occurred at the point of our Savior's birth, but when, exactly, that time was has been distorted by miscalculations within several timekeeping systems.

To confirm the inaccuracy of the assumed date of A.D. 1 as the year of the Lord's birth and the first Christmas we need to take a look at three calendric systems (1) the Roman Republican, (2) the Julian, and (3) the Gregorian.

1. **The Roman Republican Calendar.** This calendar was introduced by Tarquinius Priscus (616–579 B.C.), traditionally the fifth king of Rome. It was based on the original Roman calendar supposedly drawn up by Romulus and whose numbering system began with his traditional founding of Rome in 754 B.C. However, Priscus counted from 1 forward while we count backward.

Priscus wanted the year to begin in January since it contained the festival of the god of all beginnings. The Republican calendar contained only 355 days, basically a lunar calendar, short by 10¼ days of a 365¼-day tropical year.

To prevent the calendar from becoming out of step with the seasons an intercalary month was inserted between February 23 and 24 consisting of 28 days and added once every two years. Other smaller intercalations were added periodically to bring the calendar up to an average of 366¼ days every four years.

¹ James L. Kelso, “Travel,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 5:800.



The Roman Republican calendar was lunar based and became increasingly out of phase with the seasons as time passed. By about 50 B.C. the vernal equinox that should have fallen late in March fell on the Ides of May. The behavior of the calendar's format made it necessary to establish a fixed rule of intercalation in order to put an end to the haphazard insertion of months.

The great difficulty facing any reformer was that there seemed to be no way of effecting a change that would still allow the months to remain in step with the phases of the moon and the year with the seasons.

It was this calendar, with updates made by Augustus that was in effect at the time of our Lord's birth.

2. **The Julian Calendar.** In the mid-1st century B.C. [c. 46 B.C.] Julius Caesar invited Sosigenes \sō-sij'-a-nēz), an Alexandrian astronomer, to advise him about reforming the calendar, and Sosigenes decided that the only practical step was to abandon the lunar calendar altogether. Months must be arranged on a seasonal basis, and the tropical or solar year used.

The figure of 365¼ days was accepted for the tropical year, and to achieve this Caesar directed that a calendar year of 365 days be adopted and that an extra day be intercalated between February 23 and 24 every fourth year.

Those who managed the calendar misinterpreted the edict and inserted the intercalation too frequently. The error arose because of the Roman practice of inclusive numbering, so that an intercalation once every fourth year meant to them intercalating every three years. This error continued undetected for 36 years, during which period 12 days instead of nine were added.

Caesar Augustus made a correction by omitting intercalary days between 8 B.C. and A.D. 4. In consequence it was not until 48 years after 45 B.C. that the Julian calendar came into proper operation, a fact that is important in chronology but is often forgotten.

3. **The Gregorian Calendar.** The Julian calendar year of 365¼ days was too long, since the correct value for the tropical year is 365.242199 days. This error of 11 minutes 14 seconds per year amounted to almost one and a half days in two centuries, and seven days in 1,000 years. Once again the calendar became increasingly out of phase with the seasons.

In February 1582, Pope Gregory XIII issued a bull to bring the vernal equinox back to March 21. It declared that the day following the Feast of St. Francis (October 5) was to become October 15, thus omitting ten days. Since a year is not quite 365¼ days but rather 11 minutes and 14 seconds short of that, a complete day added every four years eventually would throw the calendar off by 3.12 days every four-hundred years. To adjust for this, every centennial year not divisible by 400 would not be a leap year. Thus, 1700, 1800, and 1900 were not leap years but the year 2000 was.²

² Colin A. Ronan, "Calendar: Roman Republican, Julian, Gregorian," *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979), 3:598, 601–602.



One would think that after all these corrections the keepers of the calendars would have discovered what time it was. They were much closer to accuracy before than after the result of an idea conceived in A.D. 525 by Pope John I. He commissioned a monk named Dionysius Exiguus \dī-ah-nish'-ē-as eg-zig'-ya-was\ (c.500–c.560), a mathematician and astronomer, to develop a calendar making the birth of Christ the starting point of modern chronology. The end result converted timekeeping in the Western world away from the Julian calendar over to what became known as the Dionysian calendar.

This task required Dionysius to do research to pinpoint the date on the Roman Republican calendar that Jesus was born. Remember that Romulus's calendar began with year one at the founding of Rome.

When Dionysius developed his Christian calendar in A.D. 525, he erroneously established its initial year coincident with the Republican calendar's year 754 B.C. But biblical testimony and historical evidence contradict this calculation.

Matthew 2:1 states that Jesus was born "in the days of Herod the king"; and Luke 1:15 likewise places the annunciation to Zechariah and to Mary "in the days of Herod, king of Judea." Both references presuppose that Herod was still living when John and Jesus were born; therefore the date of the death of Herod is the crucial chronological point. A date of 4 B.C. for the death of Herod was established by Emil Schürer in his *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* (1887–1898) with arguments that have long been accepted and are recapitulated in the new version of that work by [Geza] Vermes and [Fergus] Millar. (p. 292)

If Herod died in 4 B.C. this was in the year 750 from the founding of Rome (A.U.C.³) and if Jesus was born two years before that (in A.U.C. 748 = 6 B.C.) then there is the familiar anomaly of saying that he was born several years "before Christ." The explanation is of course that Dionysius Exiguus chose to place the birth of Christ in A.U.C. 753 and to make A.U.C. 754 the first year (A.D. 1) in the new Christian era. (p. 296)

If one reads Josephus's portrait of Herod in his last years (*Antiquities* 16 and 17) and then studies Matthew 2, one will be overwhelmed by the identical personality profiles that emerge of Herod, who, in his younger years, had every right to the epithet "the Great." Compare the infant massacre at Bethlehem with other Herodian atrocities and it correlates convincingly. Particularly in his last days, Herod was anxious to nip any potential sedition in the bud. Bethlehem, too, lay just northwest of the Herodium, the fortress-palace ... where he was arranging his own tomb. There, lease of all, then, would he tolerate any sedition in the name of an infant "king of the Jews."⁴

As to the bearing on chronology of Herod's slaughter of male children of Bethlehem "who were two years old or under" (Matthew 2:16), this suggests that what the wise men told Herod made him think that Jesus was already anything up to two years old, thus was born up to two years before. That time was obviously somewhat prior to Herod's death, and if that death was early in the year 4 B.C., the two years or less would point back to 6 or 5 B.C.

³ A.U.C. [*L ab urbe condita*] from the year of the founding of the city (of Rome).

⁴ Paul L. Maier, "Herod and the Infants of Bethlehem," paper at Nativity Conference II: 1992, San Francisco, November 21, 1992.



That the magi came when Jesus was two years old was an opinion held by some of the early Christian writers. Passages found in Origen, Eusebius, and Epiphanius lep-i-fā'-nē-as\ state that Jesus was two years old when the wise men came and when he was taken to Egypt, that he remained in Egypt for two years and was four years old when he returned from there.⁵ (p. 297)

From this research we are able to conclude that Jesus was born in late 5 B.C. The actual date is still up for debate. Some of these arguments are summarized in this excerpt by Paul Maier:

The early Christian Church seems to have observed the birth of Christ on January 6 in the East, and on December 25 in the West, but both practices began too late—the 300s A.D.—to warrant attaching any precision to these dates.

The Romans of the time not only celebrated their Saturnalia festival at the close of December, but they also thought that December 25 marked the date of the winter solstice (instead of December 21), when they observed the pagan feast of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquerable Sun, which was just in the act of turning about to aim northward once again. Christianity sought to replace these pagan festivals with a Christian celebration honoring the “sun of righteousness,” a common epithet for Jesus as Messiah. Yet Christmas, even with its Christian name, has never been able to shake off the secular root of this end-of-the-year festival. But all this should not obscure the fact that, according to the best reckoning, Jesus may indeed have been born in the fall or winter of 5 B.C. (p. 29)

But the final paradox, certainly, is that something as imprecisely datable as the birth of Christ later served as the technical anchor date for the calendar used almost everywhere in the world today, which we find quite precise indeed.⁶ (pp. 30–31)

The culture of the United States is based on Christianity and with it the traditions that have been established over its 2000-year history. That Progressives have mounted an all-out assault on both is a clear indication for those with a biblical worldview that Lucifer has in his sights the complete destruction of this client nation by means of a long march through its institutions and Christmas is one of its major targets.

⁵ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 292; 296–297.

⁶ Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1991), 29–31.

