

## **WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?**

The subject of ancient chronology is confessedly a very difficult one. Of many early and important events there are no reliable dates; of others, different authors assign widely different periods. As we search backward, the further we go the less reliable is the history, until – outside of the Scriptures – we finally reach the fabulous age, where all is myth and imagination.

There are a number of reasons for this condition of things.

1. Chronology was, apparently, very little used in the earlier ages.

2. Different eras in starting points were used by different authors, and by the same author at different times.

3. Several ways of reckoning time were used.

4. Printing being unknown, and original documents unattainable, much was written from tradition and conjecture.

5. We do not in many cases have the first or actual record, but only second or third-handed and often conflicting statements.

6. Where the original records exist, as in Egyptian hieroglyphics or Babylonian bricks, we are still dependent on meagre and conjectural translations.

The Bible, so far as it gives chronology, seems to be the only reliable source, but of course it is reliable, in the fullest sense, only to those who have faith in it.

Between one and two hundred different systems of chronology have been formed; most of them, too, by men of learning and research; so that it is not wise to become dogmatic over the date of ancient events which rest on profane, and therefore possibly

unreliable history. Much less does it become a professed Christian to attempt to undermine the Scriptures by combatting them with data which are acknowledged to be only approximate.

The date of the birth of Christ is one which has been in dispute. In the 6th century it was proposed that Christians should use that date as an epoch from which to reckon time. As it was still less than 500 years from the days of the apostles, the date should have been placed with tolerable accuracy.

In the beginning of the seventh century an event occurred which led to doubt concerning the accepted date. In December, 1603, a conjunction of the planets Saturn and Jupiter took place, and, about a year after, a new and bright star appeared, which shone above a year and then disappeared. The conjunction was not strange, as it occurs regularly every few years, but the new and evanescent star was rather unusual. To a famous astronomer then living, it occurred that if such an event had happened just before the birth of Jesus, it would have been noticed by a people that believed in astrology, and that IF the men who came from the East, seeking for the King of the Jews, had been of this class they might have thought something unusual was going to occur, and IF a new star happened to appear at that time also (a very unlikely thing) they might have supposed it to be – etc., etc.

How such a star could travel before them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and then stand still over the place where the babe was, does not appear; nor why such a star should appear at each and every recurrence of the meeting of the two planets; but it so happened that one of the conjunctions was found to have taken place in B.C. 4, and the conclusion was jumped at that PERHAPS a new star also appeared at that time and acted in the very unstarlike manner suggested. Believers have been and still are anxious to have the events noted in Scripture verified by external evidence, but an

attempt to prove more than is warranted may do more harm than good.

Canon Farrar, in his "Life of Christ," has the following to say on the subject, after explaining the argument: "The appearance and disappearance of new stars is a phenomenon by no means so rare as to admit of any possible doubt. The fact that St. Matthew speaks of such a star within two or three years [note the indefiniteness] at the utmost of a time when we know that there was this remarkable planetary conjunction, and the fact that there was such a star 1,600 years afterwards, at the time of a similar conjunction can only be regarded as a curious coincidence...We are, in fact, driven to the conclusion, that the astronomical researches which have proved the reality of this remarkable conjunction are only valuable as showing the possibility that it may have prepared the Magi for the early occurrence of some great event. And this confident expectation may have led to their journey to Palestine on the subsequent appearance of an evanescent star."

We accept the conclusion so far, but must believe that the star was purely supernatural, prepared for the occasion and circumstances; and, therefore, not dependent on the planetary conjunction. If so, it might have occurred the same year or a dozen years afterward, and astronomy could not help us place it.

That the conjunction did more than Farrar suggests is, we believe, accepted by no scholar, excepting, perhaps, those who, professing Christianity, deny the supernatural.

Some, who could not accept the star theory supposed that the movements of the planets themselves might have led the Magi, but this theory requires more faith [?] than to accept the miraculous appearance of a star, or, what the Magi supposed was a star.

While these notions prevailed, and the early date (B.C. 4) was accepted, historical events and dates were bent to harmonize, and other events were hunted up in support of the theory. Among the latter was an eclipse of the moon, said by Josephus to have occurred a short time before the death of Herod the Great – the monster who, as a drop in the ocean of his atrocities, slew the babes at Bethlehem.

All we know of the eclipse is as follows: Herod had placed a large golden eagle over the gate of the temple. Two illustrious Jews, named Matthias and Judas, persuaded the young men to pull it down. They did so, and some were arrested and executed. To make the matter clear, Josephus relates that there was another Matthias who was at that time high priest, but was not directly concerned in the sedition. He then says: "But Herod deprived this Matthias of the high priesthood, and burnt the other Matthias, who had raised the sedition, with his companions, alive, and that very night there was an eclipse of the moon."

Now as there occur from one to four eclipses of the moon every year, it is evident that except, under peculiar circumstances, the record of an occurrence proves nothing. Where the time of the year, the time of night, and the amount of obscurity are all given, as has been done in several instances, the record is of the greatest value in fixing dates. In the case under consideration there is nothing of the kind, therefore the record proves absolutely nothing as far as chronology is concerned. Josephus does speak of a fast as having been kept before the event, but what fast or how long before, is not stated.

As it happens there was only one eclipse of the moon in B.C. 4, while in B.C. 1, there were three. The eclipse of B.C. 4 was only partial (six digits, or only half of the moon being hidden) while it is rather remarkable that all three in B.C. 1 were total eclipses, that is,

the entire moon was obscured, and of course for a longer time; causing the event to be much more likely to be noticed.

If the eclipse theory, then, has any weight, it is in favor of B.C. 1.

Of those who follow the early date, some suppose an eclipse that occurred in the fall of B.C. 5 to be the one recorded; others give B.C. 3 and 2 and still later, according to their understanding of Josephus and other historians.

Josephus gives the age of Herod at some important periods in his history, and the date of some of the events but they are not considered trustworthy. Some of them certainly seem to teach that Herod died as early as B.C. 4, but others cannot be reconciled with that date.

For instance, he is said by Josephus to have died at the age of 70. He was made governor of Galilee in B.C. 47. Josephus says (Ant. 14.9:2) that at that time he was 25 years of age. This would place his birth in B.C. 72. (47 + 25). His death at 70 would then be in B.C. 2.

It is well to note that Fausset, in his Bible Cyclopaedia, gives his age when made governor at about 20 years. Chamber's Cyclopaedian and Smith's Bible Dictionary (See article Herod,) give his age at 15, which is certainly too young. The first would bring his death in A.D. 2, and the latter two would thus place his death in A.D. 6.

As to the reliability of Josephus, we quote from Appleton's Cyclopaedia – article Chronology: "Josephus also gives dates, but he is altogether too careless to be taken into account."

We think the most reliable date is obtained in another way, even, if slightly roundabout. The greater the person or the event the more likely are historic facts in regard to them known and recorded.

Herod was but the usurper of the kingdom of Judea, a comparatively insignificant province of Rome. We have a chronology that is based on a greater man and event. The death of Augustus Caesar, the Emperor of Rome, and who made Rome the glory of the world, is what might be called established as occurring in A.D. 14. His successor was Tiberias Caesar. Now Luke tells us, chap. 3, that in the fifteenth year of his reign John the Baptist began to preach. John evidently baptized for six months before Jesus met him at the Jordan. Jesus then was about 30 years of age – the age also of John when he began – **[R562 : page 3]** according to Jewish law and custom. (Num. 4:3.) Fifteen years, added to A.D. 14, bring us to A.D. 29, in the spring of which, evidently, John began his ministry. His work is recorded in Mark 1:5. In the autumn Jesus was baptized; and he had gathered some disciples about him before the Passover of the following spring, as recorded in John 1 and 2. After that, Jesus preached three years; or three and a half years from his baptism; and was crucified on the Passover in A.D. 33, "in the midst of the week," (Dan. 9:27,) aged about thirty-three years and six months.

Look now in the margins of your Bibles at the last chapters of each of the evangelists, and you will find A.D. 33 the correct time, yet if you look at the time of Jesus' baptism you will find them dated two years too early, and at his birth four years too early. The reason is this: The B.C. theory compelled the editors of our translation to assume that Jesus preached for six or seven years – a theory without support, and now entirely discarded.

The marginal dates at the two ends of the first three Gospels do not agree. The B.C. 4 theory has made all the confusion – discard it, and we have harmony. The birth, then, should be placed B.C. 1, the baptism A.D. 29, and the crucifixion where it is, A.D. 33.

W. I. M.

[We hold that the reckoning of time commonly used is substantially correct, as shown above. The difference which we claim as between it and the true date calculated from Jesus' birth is about three months. "Christmas day," which is reckoned the anniversary of Jesus' birth (January 1 representing the date of his circumcision eight days after) is mid-winter, and evidently does not comport well with the account of the shepherds being out with their flocks (Luke 2:8.) It is supposed by some to have been placed December 25 in order to the better take the place of and transform an old heathen festival at that date, into a Christ-commemorating one – at about the time so-called Christianity becoming popular with emperors, was embraced by thousands of the heathen people.

Our method of reckoning the day of Jesus' birth is based upon Scripture, and is as follows: According to the law and custom Jesus could not begin his public ministry until the age of thirty; and we may reasonably suppose that his desire to be about his "Father's business" would induce him to commence his work as soon as he was thirty years old; hence we shall suppose that he was baptized on his birthday. The period of seven years onward from his baptism is distinctly marked in prophecy – the seventieth week, in the midst or middle of which he should die or "be cut off" from life. (Danl. 9:27.)

His death, then, on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month Ab, was on a day just six months from his birthday, which consequently would be about October 2d – about the beginning of the Jewish year – or about three months earlier than A.D. 1 is usually reckoned. – EDITOR.]

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