

## Lesson 2 – What Time of Year was Jesus Born?

### Background

The birth of Christ has become synonymous with Christmas on December 25. Whether you're listening to carols or looking at nativity scene imagery, the idea that Christmas is the date of the birthday of Jesus is everywhere. But is this popular belief true to history?

### Why is this unsolved?

The nativity accounts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke do not mention a date or time of year for the birth of Jesus and these details are also not included in any historical reference.

### What evidence do we have in scripture?

#### *Shepherds Were in the Fields Watching Their Flocks at the Time of Jesus' Birth:*

##### **Luke 2:7–9 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

*One argument is that shepherds would not have been in the fields at night during December, and therefore Jesus must have been born in summer or early fall. This argument states that because Judea is cold and rainy in December, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night (See commentary from Adam Clarke in attached notes).*

#### *Jesus' Parents Came to Bethlehem to Register in a Roman Census*

##### **Luke 2:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

*Another argument says that because temperatures often dropped below freezing, and roads were in poor conditions due to rain, the census would not have been taken in winter.*

### *Zechariah's Priestly Service*

#### **Luke 1:5, 8, 23-24, 26-27, 31(ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named **Zechariah**, of the **division of Abijah** ... <sup>8</sup> Now while he was **serving as priest** before God when **his division was on duty** ... <sup>23</sup> And when his **time of service was ended**, he went to his home. <sup>24</sup> After these days his wife **Elizabeth conceived**, and for **five months** she kept herself hidden ... <sup>26</sup> In the **sixth month** the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to **a virgin** ... And the virgin's name was **Mary** ... <sup>31</sup> And behold, **you will conceive** in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name **Jesus**.

- The priesthood had 24 divisions which ministered yearly in the temple (**1Chr 24:6-19**).
- The order of Abijah was the eighth priestly division and possibly served during the 10<sup>th</sup> week of the priestly cycle (See attached article for more details on this calculation).
- The start of the 10<sup>th</sup> week coincided with the second Sabbath in the month of Sivan, which runs from mid-May to mid-June.
- Soon after Zechariah returned from his priestly duties, Elizabeth became pregnant with John the Baptist. Possibly in the month of **June**.
- In the **sixth month** of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel visited Mary and she became pregnant with Jesus soon thereafter. This would be the month of **December**.
- **Nine months** from conception would put the time of Jesus' birth in the **September**.

### **Where did December 25<sup>th</sup> come from?**

Romans honored their god Saturn (agriculture) with a festival that began on December 17 and ended on December 25, which was the date of the winter-solstice on the Roman calendar. After Constantine I converted to Christianity in 312 and sanctioned Christianity, church leaders made efforts to appropriate the winter-solstice holidays and thereby achieve a more seamless conversion to Christianity for the emperor's subjects.

- Some who dismiss December 25<sup>th</sup> as a possibility for the date of Jesus' birth still think that the date could hold a significance in the story of the Christ as...
  - The date of his conception (Mt 1:18).
  - The date the magi visited Jesus at the house in Bethlehem (Mt 2:8-12).

### **What Really Matters**

#### **Romans 5:6 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, **at the right time** Christ died for the ungodly.

*In order for Jesus to die at the right time, he had to have been born at the right time. It was according to God's plan from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-6).*

## Shepherds in the Field at Night

**Luke 2:8 - abiding in the fields**—staying there, probably in huts or tents.

**watch ... by night**—or, night watches, taking their turn of watching. From about passover time in April until autumn, the flocks pastured constantly in the open fields, the shepherds lodging there all that time. (From this it seems plain that the period of the year usually assigned to our Lord's birth is too late)<sup>1</sup>

**Luke 2:8 - Keeping watch - by night** - Or, as in the margin, keeping the watches of the night, i.e. each one keeping a watch (which ordinarily consisted of three hours) in his turn. The reason why they watched them in the field appears to have been, either to preserve the sheep from beasts of prey, such as wolves, foxes, etc., or from freebooting banditti, with which all the land of Judea was at that time much infested. It was a custom among the Jews to send out their sheep to the deserts, about the passover, and bring them home at the commencement of the first rain: during the time they were out, the shepherds watched them night and day. As the passover occurred in the spring, and the first rain began early in the month of Marchesvan, which answers to part of our October and November, we find that the sheep were kept out in the open country during the whole of the summer. And as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could he have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact, which casts considerable light upon this disputed point. See the quotations from the Talmudists in Lightfoot.

The time in which Christ was born has been considered a subject of great importance among Christians. However, the matter has been considered of no moment by Him who inspired the evangelists; as not one hint is dropped on the subject, by which it might be possible even to guess nearly to the time, except the chronological fact mentioned above. A late writer makes the following remark: "The first Christians placed the baptism of Christ about the beginning of the fifteenth year of Tiberius; and thence reckoning back thirty years, they placed his birth in the forty-third year of the Julian period, the forty-second of Augustus, and the twenty-eighth after the victory at Actium. This opinion obtained till a.d. 527, when Dionysius Exiguus invented the vulgar account. Learned and pious men have trifled egregiously on this subject, making that of importance which the Holy Spirit, by his silence, has plainly informed them is of none. Fabricius gives a catalogue of no less than 136 different opinions concerning the Year of Christ's birth: and as to his birth Day, that has been placed by Christian sects and learned men in every month in the year. The Egyptians placed it in January - Wagenseil, in February - Bochart, in March - some, mentioned by Clemens Alexandrinus, in April - others, in May - Epiphanius speaks of some who placed it in June - and of others who supposed it to have been in July -

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<sup>1</sup> Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). [\*Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible\*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 98–99). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Wagenseil, who was not sure of February, fixed it probably in August - Lightfoot, on the 15th of September - Scaliger, Casaubon, and Calvisius, in October - others, in November - but the Latin Church, supreme in power, and infallible in judgment, placed it on the 25th of December, the very day on which the ancient Romans celebrated the feast of their goddess Bruma." See more in Robinson's Notes on Claude's Essay, vol. i. p. 275, etc. Pope Julius I. was the person who made this alteration, and it appears to have been done for this reason: the sun now began his return towards the northern tropic, ending the winter, lengthening the short days, and introducing the spring. All this was probably deemed emblematical of the rising of the Sun of righteousness on the darkness of this world, and causing the day-spring from on high to visit mankind.<sup>2</sup>

## Priestly Divisions

### 1 Chronicles 24:6–19 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup> And the scribe Shemaiah, the son of Nethanel, a Levite, recorded them in the presence of the king and the princes and Zadok the priest and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar and the heads of the fathers' houses of the priests and of the Levites, one father's house being chosen for Eleazar and one chosen for Ithamar.

<sup>7</sup> The first lot fell to Jehoiarib, the second to Jedaiah, <sup>8</sup> the third to Harim, the fourth to Seorim, <sup>9</sup> the fifth to Malchijah, the sixth to Mijamin, <sup>10</sup> the seventh to Hakkoz, the eighth to Abijah, <sup>11</sup> the ninth to Jeshua, the tenth to Shecaniah, <sup>12</sup> the eleventh to Eliashib, the twelfth to Jakim, <sup>13</sup> the thirteenth to Huppah, the fourteenth to Jeshebeab, <sup>14</sup> the fifteenth to Bilgah, the sixteenth to Immer, <sup>15</sup> the seventeenth to Hezir, the eighteenth to Happizzez, <sup>16</sup> the nineteenth to Pethahiah, the twentieth to Jehezkel, <sup>17</sup> the twenty-first to Jachin, the twenty-second to Gamul, <sup>18</sup> the twenty-third to Delaiah, the twenty-fourth to Maaziah. <sup>19</sup> These had as their appointed duty in their service to come into the house of the LORD according to the procedure established for them by Aaron their father, as the LORD God of Israel had commanded him.

## December 25

### Matthew 1:18 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

### Matthew 2:8–12 (ESV)

<sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they

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<sup>2</sup> Clarke, Adam. "Commentary on [Luke 2:8](#)". "The Adam Clarke Commentary". <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/acc/luke-2.html>. 1832.

rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

## What Really Matters?

### **Ephesians 1:3–6 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup> even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, <sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

<https://pursiful.com/2006/12/18/when-was-jesus-born-zechariahs-priestly-service/>

(Retrieved March 12, 2019)

## When Was Jesus Born? Zechariah's Priestly Service

In theory, if one could pinpoint the day on which Zechariah and Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist, one could extrapolate an approximate date of Jesus' birth. Elizabeth was "in her sixth month" of pregnancy when the angel Gabriel came to Mary. Therefore, approximately fifteen months after Elizabeth conceived, Jesus was born.

### The Course of Abijah

The timing of John's conception is tied to the annunciation to Zechariah while he was serving at the temple (Lk 1). Presumably, within a week or two of his return from Jerusalem, John was conceived. The key, therefore, is to narrow down the dates on which Zechariah would have been serving at the temple. This is a cottage industry among biblical chronologists, but unfortunately the results are more evocative than conclusive because the data are subject to varied interpretations.

What is known for sure is that the priests were divided into twenty-four courses, serving for one week at a time from Sabbath to Sabbath (2 Ch 23:8; 24:7-19; Josephus *Ant.* 7:14:7). In addition, there were three weeks of the year when all of the courses were on duty: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Dt 16:16). Twenty-four divisions each serving two weeks per year, plus the three additional weeks, makes up the fifty-one weeks of a standard Jewish year. (About every third year, an intercalary month was added to the Jewish year to bring it back into alignment with the solar year.) The questions are myriad:

- Did the priests serve the same two weeks every year, perhaps counting from the start of the year? If so, did they calculate the beginning of the year from Nisan or from Tishrei?
- Did the priestly rotation proceed strictly in accordance with the numbering of weeks, without reference to the calendar dates?
- What happened in leap years? Did the priestly rotation simply continue apace, or was there some kind of special arrangement?
- Did the rotation schedule change at any point or was it consistent across the decades and centuries?

Keeping these questions in mind, what are some possibilities? We know from Josephus that the first division, the division of Jehoiarib, was on duty when Jerusalem was besieged during the first week of April, AD 70 (Nisan 1-8, AM 3830). When then would the division of Abijah (the eighth division) have been serving ca. 4 BC? If the courses served in the same weeks of every year, this would have the Abijah division coming on duty

- Passover week: beginning the second Sabbath in Nisan (March-April).
- Pentecost week: beginning the first Sabbath in Sivan (May-June).

- The tenth week of the year: beginning the second Sabbath in Sivan (May-June). (Abijah was the eighth course; the two pilgrimage festivals throws the rotation off by two weeks, resulting in the tenth week.)
- The thirty-fourth week of the year: beginning the second Sabbath in Tishrei (September-October). (Twenty-four weeks later) This places the course of Abijah on duty on the Day of Atonement, Tishrei 10.
- Tabernacles week: beginning the third Sabbath in Tishrei (September-October).

Assuming John was conceived within the week after Zechariah returned from his temple service, the May-June date would yield a date for the birth of Jesus in the fall; if the September-October date is preferred, the result is Jesus being born in winter. In other words, either of the prevailing theories can be supported by this method of calculation!

If, however, the divisions drifted through the year to keep strict time with the count of weeks—and if this week count was not interrupted by leap years—then we can calculate backward from Jehoiarib's service the first week of April in AD 70.

If we bracket out for the moment the three weeks of the year when all twenty-four courses were on duty, we find by this approach that the course of Abijah would have come on duty during only one week that would yield a Christmas date within our established parameters. A week of service for the course of Abijah would have begun on June 23, 4 BC (Sivan 27, AM 3757).

Assuming John was conceived around July 1-7, this gives a date of the Annunciation around December 30-January 5, 3 BC and a date for the birth of Christ around September 22-28, 3 BC, during the feast of Tabernacles. It should also be noted that the date of the Annunciation by this reckoning falls very close to January 6, the feast of the Epiphany, which in ancient times may have marked the celebration not of the birth of Christ *per se*, but the fact of the incarnation.

### The Day of Atonement?

Taking another approach, some early fathers such as John Chrysostom asserted that Zechariah heard the angelic annunciation on the Day of Atonement. This assertion is suspect from the outset because it seems to be based on an erroneous claim in *Protevangelium of James* that Zechariah was in fact the Jewish high priest! Even so, we have seen above that a date on or near the Day of Atonement is a possibility if the course rotation was tied to a fixed beginning point (i.e., the first of Nisan) every year. At any event, all the priestly courses would have been serving the following week during the feast of Tabernacles. With that in mind, let us proceed.

In 4 BC, the Day of Atonement (Tishrei 10) fell on Monday, October 1. The following week was Tabernacles, so Zechariah could not return home to Elizabeth for another two Sabbaths, leaving Jerusalem perhaps Sunday, October 14. This means that even if we cannot prove that Zechariah was serving during the first week of October of 4 BC, he definitely would have been serving—along with the other twenty-three courses—during the second week of October, and would not have gotten home until after that.

Let us assume that John was conceived within one week of Zechariah's return. This would therefore have been October 14-20 (regardless of the precise date of the angelic visitation), with the Annunciation following some twenty-six weeks later around April 14-20, 3 BC. (The angel told Mary that Elizabeth was "in her sixth month." There is therefore a couple week's leeway to play with here.)

Finally, the birth of Jesus would come thirty-eight weeks after that or around January 5-11, 2 BC. ([Normal human gestation period](#) is considered to be 38 weeks from conception.) It should be noted that this is the *only* documentary evidence for the date of Zechariah's service in the temple. All other possibilities are based purely on speculative back-counting. Chrysostom's testimony, whatever its worth as factual history, conforms rather closely to early testimony for birth of Christ on January 6 (although Chrysostom himself argued for a December 25 nativity).

As tantalizing as this line of speculation is, without some firmer answers about how the courses were scheduled we are left with no strong conclusions. Some calculations favor a fall date for Jesus' birth, others favor a winter date.



<https://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/articles/when-was-jesus-really-born.aspx>  
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## **When Was Jesus Really Born?**

Biblical evidence shows Jesus most likely wasn't born on December 25.

By Lesli White

The Christmas story has become synonymous with the date, December 25. Whether you're listening to carols or looking at nativity scene imagery, the idea that Christmas is His birthday is everywhere. But what has become popular belief isn't exactly true to history.

The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke are the only two accounts of Jesus' birth in the New Testament, and both gospels show different angles of the story. Luke begins in Nazareth and Matthew focuses solely on events in Bethlehem. Both aren't particularly detailed in terms of a calendar date, which makes determining Jesus' birthday quite tough. The writers of the gospels rarely tell you when things happened and the time of year.

The Bible does not specify a date or a month when Jesus was born. There are many different theories as to why Christmas is celebrated on December 25. A very early Christian tradition said that the day when Mary was told that she would have a very special baby, Jesus (called the Annunciation) was on March 25 – and it's still celebrated on the day. Nine months after that date is December 25. Others believe Christmas is celebrated on this day because it was already popular in ancient religious celebrations as the birthday of the sun. The Winter Solstice and the ancient festival day celebrating the return of the sun 'Saturnalia' and 'Dies Natalis Solis Invicti' took place in December around this date. While December 25 was popularized as the date for Christmas, it was not because Jesus was born on that day. If you take a close look at Scripture, it indicates that this is an unlikely date for Christ's birth. Although it's not impossible, it seems unlikely that Jesus was really born on December 25. Here are several key reasons.

### ***We Know That Shepherds Were in the Fields Watching Their Flocks at the Time of Jesus' Birth***

Scripture tells us that, "[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" (Luke 2:7-8). But shepherds were not in the fields during December. Luke's account suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. In December, Judea is cold and rainy, so it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night. The weather would not have permitted shepherds watching over their flocks in the field at night.

### ***Jesus' Parents Came to Bethlehem to Register in a Roman Census***

The census or enrollment which according to Luke 2:1 was the occasion of the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, is connected with a decree of Augustus, embracing the Greek-Roman world. Luke carefully distinguishes the census at the time of Jesus' birth as "first," in a series of enrollments connected wither with Quirinius or with the imperial policy inaugurated by the decree of Augustus. Because temperatures often dropped below

freezing and roads were in poor conditions, the census was not taken in winter. This time of year didn't permit it.

### *Winter Would Be a Difficult Time for Mary to Travel*

Mary was traveling the long distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem which was about 70 miles. Winter would likely be an especially difficult time for a pregnant Mary to travel such a long distance. The world of Mary and Joseph was a difficult and dangerous place, one whose harsh conditions were not fully chronicled in the Gospel accounts of their travails. Writers of the gospels of Matthew and Luke "are so laconic about the [Nativity] event because they assume the reader would know what it was like," said James F. Strange, a New Testament and biblical archaeology professor at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "We have no idea how difficult it was." Strange estimates that Joseph and Mary likely would have traveled only 10 miles a day because of Mary's impending delivery.

The time of year that Jesus was born continues to be a huge subject of debate, particularly the month of Jesus' birth. Many biblical scholars believe Scripture points to the fall of the year as the most likely time of Jesus' birth. In 2008, astronomer Dave Reneke argued that Jesus was born in the summer. Reneke told *New Scientist* the Star of Bethlehem may have been Venus and Jupiter coming together to form a bright light in the sky. Using computer models, Reneke determined that this rare event occurred on June 17, in the year 2 B.C. Other researchers have claimed that a similar conjunction, one between Saturn and Jupiter occurred in October of 7 B.B., making Jesus an autumn baby.

Theologians have also suggested that Jesus was born in the spring, based on the biblical narrative that shepherds were watching over their flocks in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth – something they would have done in the spring, not the winter. The Bible nowhere points to Jesus being born in mid-winter. Unfortunately, nobody really knows exactly when Jesus was born.

The main focus of the New Testament writers is not the date of Jesus' birth, but that God the Father has sent His son at just the right time in all of history to accomplish His saving purposes and thus fulfill His promise. The apostle Paul proclaimed, "When the set time had dully come, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship" (Galatians 4:4-5). And we read in the Gospel of Mark, "Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the news of God. 'The time has come,' He said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Matthew 1:14-15).

While it is interesting to know Jesus' birth from a historical perspective, it is theologically irrelevant and holds very little importance when looking at the bigger picture. It is less important that we know when it happened and more important that we know that it happened and why it happened. The Bible is clear on this.

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<https://www.gotquestions.org/was-Jesus-born-in-September.html>

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### Was Jesus actually born in September?

**Answer:** The time of year that Jesus was born is a matter of some debate, but the exact timing of Jesus' birth is nothing to be dogmatic about, given the Bible's lack of detail on the subject. Of course, the traditional date of celebrating Jesus' birth is [December 25](#), but the Bible nowhere points to His being born in mid-winter. One alternative theory is that Jesus was born sometime in September.

Those who propose that Jesus was born in September make their case using the following points: first, at the time of Jesus' birth, there were shepherds in the fields watching their flocks ([Luke 2:8](#)). According to some sources, shepherds were not normally in the fields during December, due to the cold and wet conditions in Judea during that time of year. Therefore, Luke's account suggests that Jesus may have been born in late summer or early fall (i.e., in September). The problem with this argument is that the average low temperature in Bethlehem in December is in the low-to-mid-forties—the same as Jacksonville, Florida.

Second, the idea of a September birth of Jesus includes a consideration of [the census](#) affecting Mary and Joseph ([Luke 2:1–4](#)). Some argue that Roman censuses would not have been taken in winter, as cold temperatures and poor road conditions would have made participation in a census difficult. However, others point out that Roman officials were not all that concerned with the burdens they placed on the citizenry. It was either obey Caesar or else; ease and convenience did not factor into the law-making process.

Third, and most significant, the theory that Jesus was born in September depends on the timing of [John the Baptist's](#) birth. These biblical facts lay the groundwork: John's father, a priest named Zechariah, was taking his turn to serve in the temple when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and announced that Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, would conceive a son ([Luke 1:8–13](#)). After Zechariah returned home, his wife conceived, just as the angel had said ([Luke 1:23–24](#)). Gabriel then visited Mary to announce the miraculous conception of Jesus, and this visit came in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy ([Luke 1:26, 36](#)). Another important detail: Zechariah "belonged to the priestly division of Abijah" ([Luke 1:5](#)).

Using the above information, the calculations are made thus: the priests in the Abijah division served from June 13—19. Assuming that Elizabeth conceived shortly after Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, her sixth month—the month that Gabriel visits Mary—would be December or January. Assuming that Mary conceives shortly after Gabriel's announcement to her, Jesus would have been born nine months later, i.e., August or September.

There is still one problem with using those calculations to arrive at a September birth of Jesus. We just aren't sure exactly when the Abijah division of priests served. The priestly divisions were created by David and instituted during Solomon's reign ([1 Chronicles 24:7–18](#)), but the

[Babylonian exile](#) required a “reset” of the divisions and their rotation ([Ezra 2](#)). Zechariah’s division could have served in mid-June, but other sources calculate Abijah’s course to have ended on October 9 of that same year. An October conception of John would place Jesus’ birth in December or January.

In the final analysis, no one knows in what month Jesus was born. It could have been December. It could have been September or some other month. Usually, supporters of the September date are reacting against the fact that December 25 was an ancient pagan holiday. But it should be noted that the Christian observance of December 25 has nothing to do with paganism today. If anything, Christian practice has “redeemed” the date from paganism and given it a new meaning full of praise to our Savior.