

Lesson 10 – In What Year Was Jesus Born?

Background

Luke 2:6–7 (ESV)

⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ 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.

Why is this unsolved?

The date of birth of Jesus is not stated in the gospels or in any historical reference, and the historical evidence is too incomplete to allow a definitive dating.

Wouldn't it be year One?

If our calendar is broken up into B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (*anno Domini*, the year of our Lord) doesn't that mean Jesus was born in year one (since we don't count year zero)? Starting the calendar with the birth of Christ didn't come about until the 6th Century, when a monk named Dionysius attempted to calculate when Christ was born. He used Scripture and the historical information available to him and calculated that Jesus was born in the 753rd year of the Roman Empire. So that year was redubbed "AD 1" and we kept adding on from there. However, information would eventually come to light which showed that he possibly made some errors.

What evidence is available from the Gospels and Historical References?

Luke 2:1–2 (ESV)

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

² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

- *Caesar Augustus reigned from approximately 27 BC to AD 14. Known censuses in proximity to Augustus' reign occurred around 28 BC, 8 BC, and AD 14. Given the size of the Roman Empire, the task of registering its people would have taken years; consequently, Luke could be pointing to the census of 8 BC.*
- *Quirinius was a legate or emissary of Augustus Caesar. According to Josephus, he served in this capacity from AD 6 to 9 and conducted a census in about AD 6. However, it is possible that Josephus was wrong about the date, that this is an error in translation, that the census took this long, or that he may have served on two separate occasions.*

Luke 3:1a (ESV – Beginning of John’s Ministry)

¹ In the **fifteenth year** of the reign of **Tiberius Caesar**...

Tiberius was the successor of Augustus and likely reigned from AD 14 to AD 37. This would place the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius to be approximately AD 29.

Luke 3:21–23a (ESV – Jesus’ Baptism / Beginning of Jesus’ Ministry)

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

²³ Jesus, when he began his ministry, was **about thirty years of age**...

*Jesus likely began his ministry shortly after John, and possibly in the same year. If Jesus began his ministry in AD 29, then that would place his birth in **2 BC** (remember that there was no year zero either direction). However, also remember that Luke says, “**about thirty years of age**,” so it is possible that Jesus was slightly older or slightly younger.*

Matthew 2:1a, 16, 19 (ESV)

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king...

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

- Jesus must have been **born prior to the death of Herod the Great**
- The Jewish historian **Flavius Josephus** tells us that Herod the Great died shortly **after an eclipse of the moon** (*Antiquities, Book XVII, Chapter VI, paragraph 4*), but **prior to Passover** (*Wars, Book II, Chapter I, paragraph 3*). Today we know that there was a partial eclipse on **March 13th, 4 BC** and a total eclipse on **January 10th, 1 BC**.
- Historians are quite divided between **4 BC** and **1 BC** as the time of the death of Herod the Great. Regardless of which of these dates is accurate, Jesus would likely have been born 1 to 2 years (or more) prior to Herod’s death.

What Really Matters

Romans 5:6 (ESV)

⁶ 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).

Josephus

Antiquities, Book XVII, Chapter VI, 4th paragraph

4. But the people, on account of Herod's barbarous temper, and for fear he should be so cruel as to inflict punishment on them, said, "What was done, was done without their approbation: and that it seemed to them that the actors might well be punished for what they had done." But as for Herod he dealt more mildly with others [of the assembly:] but he deprived Matthias of the High Priesthood, as in part an occasion of this action; and made Joazar, who was Matthias's wife's brother, High Priest in his stead.¹⁴ Now it happened that during the time of the High Priesthood of this Matthias, there was another person made High Priest for a single day; that very day which the Jews observed as a fast. The occasion was this: This Matthias the High Priest, on the night before that day, when the fast was to be celebrated, seemed, in a dream, (4) to have conversation with his wife: and because he could not officiate himself on that account, Joseph, the son of Ellemus, his kinsman, assisted him in that sacred office. 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.** (5)

Herod's death is recounted in Chapter 8

Wars, Book II, Chapter I, Paragraph 3

3. At these clamours Archelaus was provoked, but restrained himself from taking vengeance on the authors, on account of the haste he was in of going to Rome, as fearing lest, upon his making war on the multitude, such an action might detain him at home. Accordingly he made trial to quiet the innovators by persuasion, rather than by force, and sent his general in a private way to them, and by him exhorted them to be quiet. But the seditious threw stones at him, and drove him away as he came into the temple, and before he could say any thing to them. The like treatment they shewed to others, who came to them after him, many of which were sent by Archelaus in order to reduce them to sobriety, and these answered still on all occasions after a passionate manner; and it openly appeared that they would not be quiet, if their numbers were but considerable. **And indeed, at the feast of unleavened bread, which was now at hand, and is by the Jews called the Passover,** and used to be celebrated with a great number of sacrifices, an innumerable multitude of the people came out of the country to worship: some of these stood in the temple bewailing the rabbins [that had been put to death], and procured their sustenance by begging, in order to support their sedition. At this Archelaus was affrighted, and privately sent a tribune, with his cohort of soldiers, upon them, before the disease should spread over the whole multitude, and gave orders that they should constrain those that began the tumult by force to be quiet. At these the whole multitude were irritated, and threw stones at many of the soldiers, and killed them: but the tribune fled away wounded, and had much ado to escape so. After which they betook themselves to their sacrifices, as if they had done no mischief; nor did it appear to Archelaus that the multitude could be restrained without bloodshed; so he sent his whole army upon them, the footmen in great multitudes by the way of the city, and the horsemen by the way of the plain, who, falling upon

them on the sudden, as they were offering their sacrifices, destroyed about three thousand of them; but the rest of the multitude were dispersed upon the adjoining mountains; these were followed by Archelaus's heralds, who commanded every one to retire to their own homes, whither they all went, and left the festival.

What Really Matters?

Ephesians 1:3–6 (ESV)

³ 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, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

<https://strangenotions.com/what-year-was-jesus-born-the-answer-may-surprise-you/>
(Accessed May 19, 2019)

What Year Was Jesus Born? The Answer May Surprise You

Written by [Jimmy Akin](#)

What year was Jesus born? The answer may surprise you.

You might think that Jesus was born in the Year Zero—between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1. You often hear that Jesus was born around 6-7 B.C. The evidence from the Bible and the Church Fathers, however, support a different year.

Here's what the evidence says . . .

Not in Year Zero

There is a good reason why Jesus wasn't born in Year Zero: there wasn't one. The sequence of years before Christ ends at 1 B.C. and the A.D. series picks up the very next year with A.D. 1. This is a bit surprising to us, since we're used to working with number lines that have a zero on them, but zero [wasn't a concept on the intellectual scene](#) when our way of reckoning years was developed.

If it helps, you can think about it this way: suppose you have a child and you want to date events relative to that child's birth. The first year *before* the child was born would be 1 B.C. (Before the Child), and the first year after his birth (that is, the year ending with his first birthday) would be the first year *of* the child. If the child happens to be the Lord, that would be the first *year of the Lord*, which in Latin is *Anno Domini*, from which we get A.D. Thus there is no Year Zero between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1.

(By the way, please note that the "A.D." goes *before* the number. "A.D. 2013" = "The Year of the Lord 2013," which is an intelligible phrase. If you write "2013 A.D." that would be "2013 the Year of the Lord," which is gibberish.)

So what year *was* Jesus born?

1 B.C.?

The guy who developed the way we reckon years was a 6th-century monk named [Dionysius Exiguus](#) ("Dennis the Short"). He apparently thought Christ was born in 1 B.C. (actually, it's a bit more complex than that, but we'll keep this simple).

Today most think this date is a little too late and that the evidence supports a date a few years earlier.

6-7 B.C.?

For a little more than a century, the idea has been popular that Jesus was born in 6-7 B.C. The reasoning goes like this: Jesus was born late in the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C. Furthermore, the wise men saw the star rise in the east two years before they came to visit

Jerusalem, where they met Herod. Back up two years from 4 B.C. and you get 6 B.C. Back up another year in case Herod didn't die immediately after they visited, and you get 7 B.C.

So: 6 or 7 B.C.

The problem, as we saw in a previous post, is that the arguments that Herod died in 4 B.C. are [exceptionally weak](#).

3-4 B.C.?

Let's take the same logic as above and plug in the more likely date of Herod's death.

As we saw in a previous post, the evidence points to him [dying in 1 B.C.](#) So . . . back up two years from that and you get 3 B.C. Back up another year for cushion and you get 4 B.C.

Thus: 3-4 B.C.

That's not an unreasonable estimate, but there are two issues with it:

1. It's got a couple of problematic assumptions.
2. Other evidence, including other evidence from the Bible, suggests it's a little too early.

The problematic assumptions are that the star was first visible in the east at the moment of Jesus' birth and that it was visible for a full two years prior to the magi's arrival.

The first of these assumptions is problematic (among other reasons) because its appearance could be connected with another point in Jesus' life, such as his conception. If that were the case, you'd need to shave nine months off to find the point of his birth. It's also problematic because Matthew doesn't say that the star appeared two years earlier. What he says is that Herod killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem that were *two years old and under*, in accord with the time he learned from the magi. That means that there is some approximating going on here.

Herod would certainly want to make sure the child was dead, and he would err on the side of . . . well, the side of caution *from his perspective*. That is, he would to some degree over-estimate how old the child might be in order to be sure of wiping him out. Thus *all* the boys two and under were killed. That means Jesus was *at most* two years old, but he was likely younger than that.

What may well have happened is Herod may have been told that the star appeared a year ago and he decided to kill all the boys a year on either side of this to make sure of getting the right one.

And then there's the fact that the ancients often counted parts of a year as a full year in their reckoning, so "two years" might mean "one year plus part of a second year."

All this suggests that two years was the *maximum* amount of time earlier that Jesus was born, and likely it was less than that.

Thus . . .

2-3 B.C.?

This date would be indicated if we start with Herod's death in 1 B.C. and then, taking into account the factors named above, backed up only *one* year, suggesting 2 B.C. Then, if we back up another year to allow for the fact Herod didn't die immediately, that would suggest 3 B.C. So, sometime between 2-3 B.C. would be reasonable, based on what we read in Matthew.

Do we have other evidence suggesting this date?

We do, both inside and outside the Bible.

The Gospel of Luke

Although Luke offers some helpful clues about the timing of Jesus' birth, we don't know enough to make full use of them. The date of the enrollment ordered by Augustus is notoriously controversial, for example, and too complex to go into here. However, later indications he gives in his gospel are quite interesting.

He records, for example, that John the Baptist began his ministry in "the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar" (3:1). Tiberius became emperor after Augustus died in August of A.D. 14. Roman historians (e.g., Tacitus, Suetonius), however, tended to skip part years and begin counting an emperor's reign with the first January 1 after they took office. On that reckoning, the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar would correspond to what we call A.D. 29. (Remember, the 15th year is the time *between* the completion of the 14th year and the completion of the 15th year, the same way a child's *first* year is the time *between* his birth and his first birthday.)

Jesus' ministry starts somewhat after John's, but it doesn't appear to be very long. Perhaps only a few weeks or months. If so, Jesus' ministry also likely started in A.D. 29.

That's important, because Luke gives us a second clue: He says Jesus was "about thirty years of age" when he began his ministry ([Lk 3:23](#)). So, if you take A.D. 29 and back up thirty years, when does that land you? You might think in 1 B.C., but remember that there's no Year Zero, so it would actually be 2 B.C. or the end of 3 B.C. if Luke was counting Tiberius's reign from when he became emperor rather than from the next January 1.

Thus: 2-3 B.C. is a reasonable estimate.

That's still only an estimate, though, because Jesus could have been a little less or a little more than thirty.

(For purposes of comparison, note that when Luke describes the age of Jairus's daughter, he says she was "about twelve" ([Lk 8:42](#)). So Luke doesn't seem to go in for rounding things to the nearest 5 years; he tries to be more precise than that. When Luke says Jesus was "about thirty," he's probably not envisioning anything between 25 and 35 but a range narrower than that.)

To confirm our estimate, it would be nice if we had an exact *naming* of the year Jesus was born, and in fact we do . . .

The Fathers Know Best

There is a startling consensus among early Christian sources about the year of Jesus' birth.

Here is a table adapted from Jack Finegan's excellent [*Handbook of Biblical Chronology*](#) (p. 291) giving the dates proposed by different sources:

The Alogoi	4 B.C. or A.D. 9
Cassiodorus Senator	3 B.C.
St. Irenaeus of Lyon	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
St. Clement of Alexandria	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Tertullian of Carthage	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Julius Africanus	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
St. Hippolytus of Rome	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
"Hippolytus of Thebes"	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Origen of Alexandria	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Eusebius of Caesarea	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Epiphanius of Salamis	3 B.C. or 2 B.C.
Orosius	2 B.C.
Dionysius Exiguus	1 B.C.
The Chronographer of the Year 354	A.D. 1

As you can see, except for a few outliers (including our influential friend, Dionysius Exiguus), there is strong support for Jesus being born in either 3 or 2 B.C.

Note that some of the sources in this table are *quite* ancient. Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Julius Africanus, and Hippolytus of Rome all wrote in the late 100s or early 200s.

We thus have strong indication—from a careful reading of Matthew, from Luke, and from the Church Fathers—that Jesus was born in 3 or 2 B.C.

<https://strangenotions.com/the-100-year-old-mistake-about-the-birth-of-jesus/>
(Accessed May 21, 2019)

The 100-Year Old Mistake About the Birth of Jesus

Written by [Jimmy Akin](#)

You know how people often say that Jesus was born in 4 B.C., 6 B.C., 7 B.C., or a time earlier still? The calculations that lead to these dates are all based on a proposal that was made just over a hundred years ago.

But now scholars are challenging this proposal, because it looks like it's wrong. And it's been distorting our understanding of when Jesus was born for over a hundred years.

Here's the story. . . .

When Herod Died

The Gospel of Matthew records that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. Luke doesn't say it explicitly, but he does indicate that the birth of John the Baptist was foretold during Herod's reign. If Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great then he must have been born before Herod died. (He wasn't a zombie king.)

Here's where the problematic proposal comes in: In the late 1800s, a German scholar named **Emil Schurer** proposed that Herod died earlier than previously thought.

Specifically, he claimed that Herod died in 4 B.C. This view caught on among scholars, and so now **it's common for people to date the birth of Jesus no later than 4 B.C.**

If a scholar takes seriously the account of the slaughter of the holy innocents then, since Herod killed all the baby boys two years old and under, that would push Jesus' birth up to two years earlier, landing us in 6 B.C.

And it could have happened even before that.

So that's why people often date Jesus' birth in this way, even though it is *not* when the Church Fathers indicated Jesus was born.

Why 4 B.C.?

Why do advocates of the Schurer view hold that Herod died in 4 B.C.? Here are several reasons:

1. Based on statements in the Jewish historian Josephus, Herod was first appointed king in 40 B.C. and then reigned for 36 years (so, he died in 4 B.C.).
2. Again based on Josephus, after Herod was appointed king, he conquered Jerusalem in 37 B.C. and reigned for 33 years (again, dying in 4 B.C.).
3. Again based on Josephus, Herod died between a lunar eclipse and Passover. In 4 B.C., there was a partial lunar eclipse 29 days before Passover.
4. We have various lines of evidence suggesting that Herod's sons took office in 4 B.C.

Sounds like a solid case, right?

Not exactly. It's shot through with problems.

Let's take a brief look at each of the four arguments . . .

1. When Herod Was Appointed King

Since the B.C./A.D. system of dates hadn't been invented yet, Josephus used ancient methods of dating that we no longer use.

One method was dating events in terms of which Olympiad they took place in. An Olympiad was a four-year period based on when the Olympic Games took place. (Yes, the ancients were *huge* sports fans.) Each Olympiad began in midyear and ran for four years.

Josephus says that Herod was appointed king during the 184th Olympiad, which ran from July 1, 44 B.C. to June 30, 40 B.C.

He also says that he was appointed during the consulship of Calvinus and Pollio. Consuls were Roman officials who reigned during specific years, and it was common to date events by the consuls who were in office at the time.

Calvinus and Pollio began their consulship after October 2, 40 B.C. That's in the 185th Olympiad.

See the problem?

The 184th Olympiad ended *before* Calvinus and Pollio were consuls. Josephus has given us *an impossible date*. He *must* be wrong on this one.

2. When Herod Conquered Jerusalem

Josephus says that Herod conquered Jerusalem in the 185th Olympiad during the consulship of Marcus Agrippa and Caninius Gallus. That *does* point to 37 B.C.

But Josephus also says that Herod conquered Jerusalem exactly 27 years--*to the day*--after it fell to the Roman general Pompey. But Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., and 27 years later would be 36 B.C., not 37 B.C.

Furthermore, he says that the government of the Hasmoneans (who ruled Jerusalem prior to Herod conquering the city) for 126 years. According to 1 Maccabees *and Josephus himself*, they began ruling in 162 B.C., which would put the date of Herod's conquest in 36 B.C. (162 -126 =36).

So Josephus, again, gives contradictory information about when Herod conquered Jerusalem, indicating in some places that it was in 37 and in others that it was 36.

3. When the Lunar Eclipse Was

There was, indeed, a partial lunar eclipse in 4 B.C., which took place 29 days before Passover.

However, this was not the only lunar eclipse in the period. There was another lunar eclipse in 1 B.C., which was 89 days before Passover.

Now here's the thing:

1) Since there is more than one eclipse in this period, you can't cite the 4 B.C. eclipse as evidence supporting a 4 B.C. date in particular. You have to consider other eclipses in the right time frame and see which best fits the evidence.

2) The lunar eclipse in 4 B.C. was only partial, but the lunar eclipse in 1 B.C. was full. Josephus doesn't say it was a partial lunar eclipse. He says it was a lunar eclipse, and a full eclipse fits that description better.

3) The 4 B.C. span of 29 days between the eclipse and Passover is too short. Josephus doesn't just say that Herod died between the eclipse and Passover. He also names a bunch of things Herod did during that period, including trips that required travel time.

As contemporary biblical chronologer Andrew E. Steinmann points out:

"[A]ll of the events that happened between these two [the lunar eclipse and Passover] would have taken a minimum of 41 days had each one of them taken place as quickly as possible. A more reasonable estimate is between 60 and 90 days" (*From Abraham to Paul*, 231)

Thus, again, the 1 B.C. lunar eclipse--89 days before Passover--better fits what Josephus describes.

4. When Herod's Sons Began to Reign

It is true that we have multiple lines of evidence indicating that Herod's sons began to reign in 4 B.C.

That's doesn't mean Herod died then.

It was very common for aging rulers to take their successors as co-rulers during the latter part of their reign. This both took some of the pressure off the aging ruler and helped ensure a smooth succession when he died by lessening the chance of a power struggle after his death (people were already used to the new ruler, who was already in office).

That means that when you have ask whether a particular ruler's assumption of office was as co-ruler or as sole ruler. It could have been either one, so this argument does not prove that Herod died in 4 B.C.

Furthermore, we have evidence that Herod *did* start giving his sons governing authority before his death.

I'm trying to keep this post as short as possible though, so . . .

The Case for 4 B.C. Is Exceptionally Weak

All four of the main arguments proposed are problematic:

1. The first argument names an impossible date (one that did not exist) for the beginning of Herod's reign.
2. Josephus contradicts himself about when Herod conquered Jerusalem.
3. There is another lunar eclipse that fits what Josephus says even better.
4. We have evidence that Herod began giving his sons rulership roles before he died.

And there is much more that could be said (as there always is with biblical chronology). My favorite resources on this question are Jack Finegan's outstanding [*Handbook of Biblical Chronology \(2nd ed.\)*](#) and Andrew Steinmann's informative [*From Abraham to Paul*](#). Both of those are hard to get and/or expensive, though.

Fortunately, if you'd like to tear into the evidence in mind-numbing depth, you can also read [this paper by Steinmann](#) for free.

<https://reasonabletheology.org/year-jesus-actually-born/>
(Accessed May 19, 2019)

What Year Was Jesus Actually Born?

“What year was Jesus born? What kind of question is that!?”

By [Clayton Kraby](#)

If our calendar is broken up into B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (*anno Domini*, the year of our Lord) doesn't that mean Jesus was born in year one (since we don't count year zero)?

Actually, the issue is a bit more complex than that.

Starting the calendar with the birth of Christ didn't come about until the 6th Century, when a monk named Dionysius did his best to calculate when Christ was born.

He used Scripture and the historical information available to him and calculated that Jesus was born in the 753rd year of the Roman Empire. So that year was redubbed “A.D. 1” and we kept adding on from there.

However, information would eventually come to light which showed that the well-intentioned monk made some errors. By analyzing new information related to the chronological markers provided in Scripture, scholars were able to see that Jesus was born a few years later than initially thought.

What year was Jesus born? Here's why many scholars say Jesus was born between 5 and 6 B.C.

Although the Gospel writers did not focus primarily on preserving a precise chronological history of Jesus' life and ministry, we can still approximate some key dates by comparing historical markers with passages of Scripture.

Calculating the Year Jesus Was Born

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. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

[Luke 2:1-5](#)

This familiar passage from the Gospel of Luke states that these events took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. While there is some scholarly debate on the matter, many date Quirinius' declaration of the census in 8 B.C. and believe that it would have taken a couple of years for the decree to be executed.

Additionally, we know from [Matthew 2:1-23](#) that [Herod](#) sought to have the child spoken of by the Magi killed. Jesus' family fled to Egypt and lived there until Herod died. So we know that Jesus had to be born before the death of Herod, and historical evidence suggests that he died in 4 B.C.

This means that Jesus would have been born after 8 B.C. and before 4 B.C. **Therefore, a birth date of 5 or 6 B.C. can be determined.**^[1]

Checking the Math

Clearly, Jesus being born in any year *Before Christ* (B.C.) is earlier than what we would expect. Can this be right? Is there some way to double check the math?

Thankfully, there is. We can see how this date for Jesus' birth fits with other chronological markers in Scripture. For example, does this number work out when taking into consideration Jesus' ministry and crucifixion?

John the Baptist Begins His Ministry

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:1-2

Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus

This passage speaks about when John the Baptist began his ministry as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord.'"As underlined above, it references the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, which began when he became co-emperor with Augustus in A.D. 11.^[2]

That would place the 15th year of his reign at A.D. 26, which helps us understand when John began his ministry. From here, we can look to Scripture for an indication of how long Jesus' earthly ministry lasted before His crucifixion.

Jesus' Earthly Ministry & Death

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age...

Luke 3:23

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was roughly 30 when He began His ministry. John's Gospel mentions at least three Passovers during the ministry of Christ ([John 2:23](#); [6:4](#); [12:1](#)).

This indicates that His earthly ministry lasted *at least* two years. It very likely lasted almost three full years.^[3]

So if Jesus' ministry began when He was baptized by John around A.D. 26 and lasted for roughly three years before He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, we can estimate that Jesus' death and resurrection occurred around A.D. 29-30.

Taking [Luke 3:23](#) into account, Jesus would have been between 34 and 36 when he died.

If Jesus was 34-36 at his death in A.D. 29-30, this would put his birth at around between 5 and 6 B.C.

Whoah, Woah, Woah. Wasn't Jesus 33 when He died?

Many, if not most of us, have heard sermons which state that Jesus was 33 when He died. The problem is that Scripture does not tell us that explicitly. It is a conclusion reached primarily by the estimate that Jesus' ministry lasted *about* three years and that Jesus was *about* 30 years old when he began His ministry ([Luke 3:23](#)).

Keep in mind two things: First, estimates by scholars are fallible and Scripture is not. The above logic could be off or adjusted if archeological findings provided new information. Second, it would not be inaccurate for Luke to say that Jesus was "about 30 years old" if He was really 31 or even 33. We use such language all the time, and the fact that Scripture uses "about" in this instance allows for a few years in either direction.

Does anyone else agree with these dates?

The above information comes largely from Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black's book [The New Testament: Its Background and Message](#) and their conclusions seem sound.

Other scholars have reached the similar conclusions. Dr. Harold Hoerner of Dallas Theological Seminary argues in [Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ](#) that Jesus was born around 4 or 5 B.C. and was 37-38 years old at His death (here's a [short summary](#)).

Andreas Köstenberger and Justin Taylor suggest in [The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived](#) that Jesus was between 33 and 35 when He began His ministry and 36-38 when He was crucified.

Conclusion

So there you have it. While there is not perfect agreement among Biblical scholars on this issue, many are confident that we can date the birth of Jesus Christ between the year 4 and 6 A.D. Other information from Scripture and history fits this time frame.

Although faith is certainly the "evidence of things unseen" ([Heb. 11:1](#)) there is great value in seeing that we can trust the historicity of the Christian Gospel and the life of Christ through various sources outside of Scripture. Properly understanding the historical background of early Christianity allows us to gain a better understanding of the New Testament writings and provides a basis for truth for presenting Christ to an increasingly skeptical generation.

For example, corroboration for information recorded in the New Testament can be found in the writings of ancient historians such as Josephus, [Tacitus](#), and [Pliny the Younger's letter to Emperor Trajan](#). These three sources corroborate information regarding Christ's crucifixion, the spread of Christianity, and the practice of singing hymns worshipping Jesus.

In the end, our understanding of certain aspects of Biblical events and people can be informed by examining extra-Biblical information. In doing so, we always want to adjust our assumptions and conclusions according to the truth of Scripture and not the other way around.

[1] Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, [The New Testament: Its Background and Message](#) (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers), 95.

[2] Ibid., 97. **Note:** Tiberius became Emperor in A.D. 14, but it is considered likely that Luke was dating from the time he became co-emperor in A.D. 11.

[3] Ibid., 96

[4] Ibid., 86

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[9] Ibid. *Note: There is some debate concerning possible Christian additions within the writings of Josephus, as mentioned by Lea and Black on this page.*

[10] Josh McDowell, [*The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 60.

<https://carm.org/was-luke-wrong-about-the-census-of-quirinius>

(Accessed May 21, 2019)

Was Luke wrong about the census of Quirinius?

by [Luke Wayne](#)

12/21/18

A common argument among critics of the New Testament is that Luke commits a historical error regarding the census connected with a Roman official named Quirinius. In both gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, it is agreed that Jesus was born in the time of Herod the Great ([Luke 1:5](#), [Matthew 2:1](#)). Most scholars today would place Herod's death in the year 4 BC. This, critics tell us, present a problem with what is said in Luke 2:

"Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria," ([Luke 2:1-2](#)).

The problem here is that, according to the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, Quirinius did not become governor of Syria and conduct the census until 6 AD, placing these events far too late to be the date of Jesus' birth. Thus, the critic claims, Luke is obviously in error here and the gospels cannot be considered inerrant. The reality, however, is a little more complicated than the critic generally realizes, and there is actually no reason to doubt Luke's accuracy.

Inadequate Historical Data

The critic shows up with a quote from Josephus in hand and immediately assumes that he has proven Luke wrong, but is that really the case? Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the critic was rightly interpreting both Luke and Josephus, at worst what would they be proving? Only that Luke and Josephus disagree. But I'm not aware of anyone who thinks that Josephus is an infallible, inerrant source. Neither Christians nor skeptics think so. So why assume that Josephus must automatically be the one who got it right? Sure, Josephus is generally a fairly reliable ancient historian (at least in the big picture, if not always in the details), but he certainly made his share of errors. And Luke is an extraordinarily accurate ancient historian as well. As one modern scholar explained:

"For accuracy of detail, and for evocation of atmosphere, Luke stands, in fact, with Thucydides. The Acts of the Apostles is not shoddy product of pious imagining, but a trustworthy record."[1](#)

Thus, even for someone who does not accept the inspiration of the Holy Spirit behind the words of Scripture, there is simply no reason to assume that if Luke and Josephus disagree, Josephus must be right and Luke must be wrong. The fact of the matter is, even on a cursory reading, we have just two sources that *seem* to disagree with each other, and very little additional historical data to fill in the blanks. As Historian Darrel Bock explains:

"The fragmentary nature of our sources also reveal the care with which we should reconstruct history from our sources. The biblical materials are often prematurely judged to be erroneous, when we really cannot be sure because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence we possess.

Our historical pursuit of Jesus, in terms of setting him into the larger frame of history, involves judgments about how the evidence is to be put together. Where the evidence is not complete, we should be circumspect about declaring that there is an error in the biblical source, even if the exact solution to the problem surrounding the text is not entirely clear."²

Thus, even without further consideration of the sources, there is simply no reason to assume that Luke is wrong based on the data we have. Perhaps Josephus is wrong. Or perhaps they are both accurately describing similar but different events. Or perhaps there is further information yet to be discovered which could reconcile the seemingly conflicting dates. The point is, there is presently inadequate historical data to make the claim that Luke is wrong on this matter.

Possible Explanations

Because of the fragmentary data on Quirinius' census surviving today, it is impossible to say with certainty how or if Luke and Josephus can be reconciled on this matter, but several possibilities exist:

1. The first and most obvious possibility is that Josephus got the date of the census wrong and Luke got it right. This is not mere wishful thinking on the part of Christians wanting to believe Luke. As we have noted, Luke is a first-rate ancient historian. Further, a minority of scholars, using the modern discipline of "source criticism" (attempting to reconstruct and evaluate the earlier sources used by ancient writers) have presented an intriguing albeit somewhat speculative case that Josephus mistakenly (or intentionally for literary reasons) projected an earlier event (the tax rebellion of Judas the Galilean) into this slightly later period (after Herod's death) where it better fit the flow and purpose of his narrative.³
2. Conversely, some scholars have suggested that *translators* of Luke have rendered the passage wrong. For example, some argue that the word translated as "first" in [Luke 2:2](#) should actually be translated as "before" in this context. If this is correct, Luke would actually be saying that Jesus was born *before* the famous census conducted under Quirinius.⁴ Thus, there would be no conflict between Luke and Josephus. This theory is not without its difficulties and as yet no reputable translators have sided with it, but it is not impossible.
3. Others suggest the Quirinius may have been governor of Syria on more than one occasion. There is a famous inscription in honor of a man who was "twice governor of Syria." The portion of the inscription that bore the man's name has been lost, but some scholars have suggested that it may refer to Quirinius.⁵ This can hardly be proven and, since the inscription was found in the hometown of another known governor of Syria, Quinctilius Varus, he seems the more likely candidate.⁶ Still, it does demonstrate that officials did at least sometimes serve the same post more than once. If it is true that Quirinius served more than once, he may have overseen more than one census. In fact, Luke's terminology of referring to the "first" census under Quirinius can be taken to imply that there was a second. Thus, again, there would be no conflict between Luke and Josephus. Both could be right.

4. Still another possibility is that the census of Judea was begun during Herod's reign, when Jesus was born, but was not completed until Quirinius' reign in 6 AD. The census thus became tied to Quirinius' name, which is why Luke would reference it the way he does.⁷ The political complexities in Judah during that time and Jewish resistance to Roman taxation provide us plenty of reasons why the census might have been stalled, interrupted, or otherwise delayed so as to stretch out over this period. It would also make sense out of why the early Christian writer, Tertullian, attributed the census to an earlier governor of Syria, Sentius Saturninus.⁸ Perhaps Luke, Josephus, and Tertullian are all describing the same complicated census in three different ways.

At this point in time, we lack the necessary data to say for sure which (if any) of these explanations is correct. Further archaeological discoveries may one day help us resolve the issue more precisely. The point here is simply that the data, as we now have it, can be explained a number of plausible ways that don't require the knee-jerk assumption that any difficulty must mean that Luke is wrong. Indeed, it is worth noting that the earliest Christian writers, who were closest to the time of the events and had access to documents that have since been lost, turned to the census as positive evidence of the Bible's accuracy! Justin Martyr, for example, wrote in the mid-second century:

"And hear what part of earth He was to be born in, as another prophet, Micah, foretold. He spoke thus: 'And thou, Bethlehem, the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah; for out of thee shall come forth a Governor, who shall feed My people.' Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judea," (Justin Martyr, First Apology, Chapter 34).

In other words, if you want proof that Jesus is from Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy, just go look at the census records! You will find his family right there in the register! Thus, while it is difficult to look at the limited surviving records and reconstruct a precise timeline that fits them all, there is little reason to assume that Luke is the one in error here.

- ^{1.} E. M. Blaiklock, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, (Thomas Nelson, 1984) 96
- ^{2.} Darrell Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Baker Academic, 2002) 70
- ^{3.} For a good example of this argument, see John H. Rhoads, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March, 2011) 65-87 https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/54/54-1/JETS_54-1_65-87_Rhoads.pdf (accessed 12/20/18)
- ^{4.} Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 70
- ^{5.} Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton University Press, 1964) 304
- ^{6.} *ibid*
- ^{7.} Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus*, 70
- ^{8.} Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book 4, Chapter 19