



Blackfoot Church of Christ

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When Was Christ Born?

By Kenny Chumbley

The practice of dating history in relationship to Christ's birth (BC: Before Christ; AD: Anno Domino"—Latin for "in the year of our Lord") traces to a Scythian monk by the name of Dionysius Exiguus ("Denis the Little"). Dionysius didn't agree with the Alexandrian system of dating, which used as its base, the reign of the Emperor Diocletian (a persecutor of Christians). Instead he believed the birth of Christ, which he calculated to have occurred in 754 AUC — Ab Urbe Condita, "from the foundation of the city," i.e., Rome - should be the hinge of history. 754 AUC then, became 1 AD.

Since the time of Dionysius, however, serious questions have been raised about the accuracy of this dating. The historical information in the Gospels and extra-Biblical sources concerning the time of Christ's birth is extremely meager. Matthew marks it as occurring "in the days of Herod the king." While Luke cites contemporary Gentile authorities (Caesar Augustus and Cyrenius, Lk.2:1-2. About the only extra-Biblical writer who adds anything to the discussion is Joshephus, who mentions an eclipse of the moon that occurred shortly before Herod's death. Astronomers know a lunar eclipse was visible in Palestine on March 13, 4 BC, and many historians have assumed this was the eclipse Joshephus referenced. Since it would appear Jesus was born approximately two years prior to Herod's death (see Matt.2:16), it is not uncommon for scholars to date the

nativity ca. 5-7 BC (see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 11-25).

The problem with this dating is that it places Christ's birth far too early to accommodate other NT chronological references. Luke, for instance, dates the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Lk.3:1). The solid consensus of historians is that Tiberius began his reign in 14 AD (though he may have held a co-regency during the last two years of Augustus' reign). The 15th year of Tiberius, therefore, would have been ca. 29 AD. To these calculations, add Luke's note that Jesus at the time of his baptism, was "about 30 years of age" (3:23). Subtracting 30 from 29 leaves a birthdate for Christ, ca. 1 BC.

Now it happened that a lunar eclipse was visible in Palestine on Jan.10, 1 BC. If this is the eclipse Josephus meant, we are forced, again due to the implication of Matt.2:16, to affix the birth of Christ, ca.2-3 BC. (We should remember that Herod likely allowed a wide-margin in the Bethlehem massacre: Jesus may well have been less than a year old when the wise men visited). If Luke's reference to the 15th year of Tiberius included a co-regency with Augustus – meaning Christ was 30 years old ca. 27-28 AD – then a birthdate of 3 -2 BC would fit all the known historical data (see Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ recalculated*, 26-31).

All that can definitely be said about the year of Christ's birth is that the Holy Spirit was more interested in establishing its fact than in giving us the date. (Emphasis mine – t.t.). And since we don't even know for certain the precise year of Jesus' birth, it is amazing anyone would think we know the day He was born. At one time or another every month of the year has been championed as the month of Christ's birth. According to Hoehner (op. cit. 25), the earliest mention of December 25 as the birthday of Christ goes back to Hippolytus, ca.165-236 AD. Dec. 25 is also identified as the date of Christ's birth in a calendar representing liturgical practice at Rome in 336 AD. While a very old tradition, then, indicates a mid-winter birth, there is no way, scripturally or historically, to confirm the traditional date as the actual date of the incarnation. In fact, several historians suggest that the traditional date is the result of pagan influence. William Manchester, in *A World Lit Only By Fire*, offers this explanation of Dec.25

as the date chosen by the medieval church to celebrate Christ's birth: "Pagan holidays still enjoyed wide popularity; therefore, the Church expropriated them. Pentecost supplanted the Floralia. All Soul's Day replaced a festival for the dead, the feast of purification of Isis and the Roman Lupercalia were transformed into the Feast of the Nativity. The Saturnalia, when even slaves had enjoyed a great liberty, became Christmas: the resurrection Attis, Easter" (12).

Some Observations By Ross Ward

As Christmas season is upon us, many are celebrating the birth of Jesus our savior. Reading through the article above we realize there is much ambiguity in secular history about the actual date of Christ's Birth, this date is also absent from the inspired biblical text. One of the first questions one might ask is, why? Certainly that is an appropriate question to ask. Scripture teaches that we are to do all things by the authority of God. Col 3:17, "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus," In another place we are instructed to speak according to what God has revealed, 1 Pet 4:11, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God;" When we consider these things, we should proceed with great caution this time of year. In scripture, we do not find any place Christians celebrated Jesus's birth, but what we do find is the celebration of his death. Jesus himself instituted the Lords Supper on the last night with his disciples during the Jew's Passover meal. Paul gives an inspired account in I Cor 11:23-29. In vs. 26 Paul states, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come". This reveals that Christ wants us to commemorate his death and in the New Testament we find Christians commemorated it each Sunday, Acts 20:7. We can certainly state that his death is the most important event to us as Christians. It is when salvation was purchased by our Savior. Thus we commemorate this event each week, lest we forget that Jesus died so we can live.

Prayer Requests & Announcements

- They are adjusting April's medications and diet, keep her in your prayers
- Laura Mattock surgery for cancer was postponed till January 22
- Pat Stockwell, Kass's mom, is undergoing test and treatments for a blood clot
- Brenda is having surgery on her ankle in January for a problem with a tendon
- Jack Mitchell (Tom's brother) had a knee replaced this past week and will undergo rehabilitation over the next several weeks.
- Many are traveling over the Christmas Holidays:
 - Ross Debbie and Rachel are in AR returning on Jan 1st or 2nd
 - Chad, Kass & kids are in NJ returning this week.
- The Christians in the Philippines.

For prayer requests, call or text

Chad @ (208) 221-2587 or Ross @ (208) 680-6590

Assignments

<u>Today</u> Bible Study – David Porter Song Leader – Ben Palmer Lord's Table – David Porter Sermon – Tom Mitchell	<u>Wednesday</u> Bible Study – TBA Song Leader – Tom Mitchell Invitation – TBA
<u>Next Sunday</u> Bible Study – Chad Mitchell Song Leader – Tom Mitchell Lord's Table – David Porter Sermon – Ben Palmer	<u>Next Wednesday</u> Bible Study – Chad Mitchell Song Leader – Ben Palmer Invitation – Ross Ward

Blackfoot Church of Christ
370 North Shilling Ave.
Blackfoot, Idaho 83221

Meeting Times:

Sunday Morning Classes 10:00AM
Sunday Morning Worship 11:00AM
Wednesday Evening 7:30PM



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