

When was Jesus born?

And Other Commonly Asked Christmas Questions

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When was Jesus born?

Jesus was born near the end of the reign of Herod the Great. Matthew's Gospel is very specific about this. "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying..." (RSV Matthew 2:1). In narrating the events following Jesus' birth, Matthew includes the notice of the death of Herod: "But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.'" (Matthew 2:19-20) Luke's Gospel also places the birth story in the historical context of Herod the Great. "In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." (RSV Luke 1:5) The birth of Jesus was about a year and three months after the angel's visit to Zechariah and the conception of John the Baptist.

Herod died in late March of 4 B.C. Therefore, Jesus was born before late March of 4 B.C. We are able to date the death of Herod because the historian Josephus' account of the last days of Herod's life mentions an eclipse. Modern astronomy can date that event. The eclipse mentioned by Josephus occurred on March 13, 4 B.C. Herod died a week or so later.¹ So then, Jesus was born sometime before the death of Herod.

But I thought our dating system was based upon the birth of Jesus? Why is the birth of Jesus before A.D. 1? (The abbreviation A.D. stands for *anno domini*, a Latin expression meaning "the year of our Lord.")

Our system of dating is based upon the calculations of a monk, Dionysius, who lived into the early A.D. 500s. Dionysius started with the traditional Roman dating scheme in which the founding of Rome is the beginning of the system. Dates were usually expressed as the "year of Caesar." (See Luke 3:1 for an example of this.) So, to date the birth of Jesus, Dionysius needed to determine the year of Herod's death in terms of the year of the reign of Augustus Caesar. He made a mistake in his calculation. He placed the death of Herod four years later in the reign of Caesar than it actually occurred. As a result our B.C./A.D. dating system is "off" by about four years. Our A.D. 1 is really about four years after the actual birth of Jesus and the death of Herod.

How exact can we be in dating the birth of Jesus relative to the death of Herod?

When we consider all the evidence from Matthew and Luke, significant information from the historian Josephus about events at the end of Herod's life,² and modern astronomical dating of celestial events, we can say with confidence that Jesus was born in the winter months of 5-4 B.C., not long before the death of Herod in late March of 4 B.C.

What about the star? Was there really a star?

Modern astronomy has confirmed that there was what appeared to be a new star in the heavens. This phenomenon was a conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn that, to the naked eye, appeared to form of new star. This conjunction occurred four times over a ten month period: May 7 B.C., September 7 B.C., December 7 B.C., and February 6 B.C. The final occurrence in February of 6 B.C. was especially bright because Mars also joined the conjunction. This conjunction of planets only occurs every 805 years. This information is now widely known. Many planetariums do a special presentation on the star at Christmas time.³

So then, was Jesus born at one of these events? Is that why he is often said to have been born as early as 7 B.C.?

The assumption is often made that Jesus was born at one of the “appearances” of this new star. But this is a mistaken notion. If the birth of Jesus did occur at one of these events, then his birth would have occurred sometime in the ten month period between May of 7 B.C. and February of 6 B.C. The problem is not with the dates of the star but the assumption that the birth took place at such an event. It is more consistent with ancient perspectives that the star was understood to precede the birth and heralded it. In fact, it was common for ancients to regard such an astronomical event as a precursor to some major human event that occurred in the months or years that followed the astronomical event. So, for example, Tacitus mentions two comets, A.D. 60 and 64, which Nero perceived as portending the end of his reign. He engaged in violent actions to thwart what was thought to be the meaning of the comets. His reign ended at his death in A.D. 68.

Information in both Luke and Matthew indicate that the birth of Jesus was closer to Herod’s death and not at the times of the star’s appearance. The first appearance of the star was two years and ten months before the death of Herod (May 7 B.C. to March 4 B.C.). The significance of this time span will become clear later.

As we said, there is information in Luke that indicates that the birth of Jesus was not in 7-6 B.C. at the time of the star’s appearance. Luke specifically dates the ministry of John the Baptist to the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, A.D. 27/28.⁴

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, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness; and he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:1-3)

John’s ministry was brief. His criticism of Herod the tetrarch (one of Herod the Great’s sons) landed him in prison. But during his brief ministry John both proclaimed a greater one who was to come and baptized that coming one, Jesus.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli... (Luke 3:21-23)

So then, John's preaching was in the 15th year of Tiberius when Jesus also was baptized. Luke tells us that Jesus was about 30. This is an expression that means he was not exactly 30 but was close to that age. He was 31, 32, or maybe 33. If we do the math, 32 years before the 15th year of Tiberius is 5-4 B.C. So if Jesus was born in 7 B.C., he would have been, not about 30 in A.D. 27/28, but rather in his mid-30s (35 or so).

So then, the internal dating scheme in Luke indicates the year before Herod's death as the time of Jesus' birth. A birth in 7 or early 6 B.C. is too early for the information in Luke. Likewise, in Matthew, the birth of Jesus is not at the appearing of the star (7- early 6 B.C.), but at the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem some time later. It is clear from Matthew's narrative that the appearance of the star and the visit of the magi to Jerusalem are separated in time. But the visit of the magi and the birth of Jesus were at about the same time. When the magi came to Herod's attention, he held a private conference with them to determine when the star had appeared: "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared." (NIV Matthew 2:7) So then, Herod discovered from the magi what we now know through astronomy, that this star appeared in May 7 B.C., September 7 B.C., December 7 B.C., and February 6 B.C. (to use our dating system).

To say the obvious, the visit of the magi was at least after February of 6 B.C. But how much later was it? Again we have information in Matthew's gospel that allows us to draw a reasonable conclusion. Based on the report of the magi, and after discovering they had tricked him, Herod ordered the deaths of all the children in the vicinity of Bethlehem who might possibly be a rival for the succession to Herod's throne. (Herod is an old man at this time.) Herod murdered all the children who are two years old and younger.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. (NIV Matthew 2:16)

The implication of the decree is that Herod learned from the Magi that the star had first appeared more than two years prior but not three years prior to the magi's visit to Jerusalem. The phrase in Greek rendered as "two years old and under" describes children who are counted as two years old (that is, not yet three) and younger. This suggests that the star appeared about two years, but less than three years prior to the magi's visit. Now, if we begin with the first appearance of the star in May of 7 B.C., then the visit of the magi was in the last year of Herod's life. That is to say, the magi arrived in Jerusalem sometime after May of 5 B.C. (exactly two years from the first appearance of the star). Thus, the decree to kill the children two and younger indicates that the star appeared some two years prior to the killing, and since we know when the star appeared, we also know that the killing of the children took place in the last months of the life of Herod. This fits the mood and actions of Herod in this period.

In the later part of Herod's final year, he was in a murderous and vengeful mood. His body was wracked with illness. His mental temperament was beyond being suspicious to the extent of being paranoid. He changed his will and executed his oldest son just five days before his own death. He ordered members of the leading families of Jerusalem detained in the Hippodrome with orders for their execution at his death. Jerusalem would not mourn for him but they would at least mourn at his death! The decision to kill the children in Bethlehem is in keeping with the attitude and actions of Herod in the last months of his life.

So then, it is a reasonable assumption that the visit of the magi occurred in the final year of Herod's life – and most likely in the final months. Matthew's narrative suggests this because the events of the magi's visit, the flight to Egypt, the killings in Bethlehem and the death of Herod follow in quick succession without any narrative markers of the passing of an extended period of time. (When we put this information together with the information from Luke we will be able to confirm that the events from the magi's visit to the death of Herod occurred over a period of time of a few months at most.)

But wasn't Jesus about two or three when the magi arrive?

This is a very commonly held opinion. It is based on the assumptions that Jesus was born at one of the appearances of the star (May 7 B.C to February 6 B.C.). If the magi arrived some time later, then Jesus was no longer an infant but a toddler. Some have suggested that this must be the case because Matthew refers to Jesus as a child not an infant. But the Greek word for child, just like the English word, can refer to a new born or to a toddler. Luke calls baby John (the Baptist) when he was but eight days old a child. "On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah..." (NIV Luke 1:59). And again, Luke describes Jesus on the night of his birth both as a baby and as a child. And he is called a child again at his presentation at the temple.

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the **baby**, who was lying in the manger.¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this **child**... (NIV Luke 2:16f)

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the **child** Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God... (NIV Luke 2:27f)

In other words, that Matthew calls Jesus a "child" tells us nothing about how old he was. The child the magi saw could have been an infant child. This is within the natural range of the Greek words.⁵ In fact, as we will see, the narrative requires us to believe that this was the case. We know that Jesus was an infant when the magi arrived, not because of the word "child," but because Matthew tells us this by the grammatical construction of his sentence.

Now **when** Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem... (KJV Matthew 2:1)

In the King James Version, the birth of Jesus is the scene for the arrival of the magi. The implication of this translation is that the magi arrive at about the time of his birth. The RSV and NKJV use a similar construction. “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...” So then, if you are reading the KJV, NKJV or the RSV, you readily think that magi arrived at just about the time Jesus was born. What complicates this is that most of the more recent translations use “after” rather than “when.” The NIV, for example, says “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...” In English, “after” could mean a long time after. Maybe two or three years after the birth occurred. But it could also mean soon after. What is correct?

The Greek text does not use either a word meaning “when” or a word meaning “after.” Greek rarely uses the same sort of construction as we find in the English translations. But the grammar of the Greek and the consistent usage of Matthew (his style of writing) indicate that he intended to communicate the notion that the birth of Jesus was the scene into which the magi came. So there is no doubt in the original language text that the magi arrive when or soon after Jesus’ birth. The thought of a year or two delay between the birth and the arrival of the magi is not possible in the Greek text.⁶ So then, the magi arrived in the last year of Herod’s life and most likely arrived in the last months. So too, Jesus was born in the last year and most likely the last months of Herod’s life. This places the birth of Jesus in 5 B.C. or the very beginning of 4 B.C.

But does this really fit the story in Matthew?

Yes it does. As we said above, the narration in Matthew gives no indications of lengthy time spans in the story beginning with the arrival of the magi and ending with the death of Herod and the family’s return from Egypt. The birth of Jesus is the setting of the arrival of the magi. The magi’s report comes to Herod and he summons the chief priests and scribes to discover where the child was to be born. The same day, he summons the magi and that evening sends them to Bethlehem (the trip had to be in the evening since they saw a star). Probably that night, the magi are warned in a dream and leave the next day. Matthew gives no indication of a delay. Likewise, the narrative suggests that the next night Joseph is warned in a dream and begins the flight to Egypt. This is the natural reading of the text. It leaves the impression that the events from the magi’s arrival to the flight to Egypt happen in quick succession. Similarly, as we shall see later, the trip back from Egypt was speedily accomplished.

But wasn’t Jesus in Egypt for several years?

No. We have already shown that the magi arrived and Jesus was born in the last year of Herod’s life. And since the family returned upon the death of Herod, they came back to the land of Israel in the spring of 4 B.C. The trip to and from Egypt occurred within the same chronological year as the birth, the magi’s visit, and the flight to Egypt. In particular, we can very closely date the return from Egypt with the date of Herod’s death.

Herod died in late March of 4 B.C. Just prior to his death, Herod had his oldest son, Antipater (who had been designated as the heir to Herod’s kingdom and throne), executed. Herod changed his will and designated another son, Archelaus, to succeed him as king. Two other sons received

lesser domains as well. Upon Herod's death, Archelaus was greeted as "king" by Herod's troops and was regarded as the successor to his father's throne. But the will of Herod had to be approved by Caesar. Archelaus' brothers contested the will. Troubles broke out in Jerusalem. And so, Archelaus left Jerusalem before Passover in April of 4 B.C. He traveled to the coast and then on to Rome to secure his inheritance. Caesar approved of Herod's will but denied to Archelaus the title "king" which his father had borne. When he returned from Rome, he was not a king, but only an "ethnarch."

This historical information recorded by Josephus is important because it allows us to date the return of the family from Egypt.

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there **until** the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son." ... But **when** Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that **Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod**, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. (ESV Matthew 2:14-15, 19-22)

We begin by noting that Matthew says explicitly that Joseph remained in Egypt until the death of Herod. There can be no doubt that the family returned soon after Herod died. At the death of Herod, again the angel appeared in a dream to Joseph ordering him to return. Again, we cannot reasonably imagine that Joseph delayed any longer than practical necessity required.

This places the return from Egypt at the end of March or the beginning of April 4 B.C. The correctness of this is confirmed by another detail in the narrative. When Joseph arrived in the land of Israel, he learned that "Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod." The verb translated "reigning" is the verb form of the noun for king. In Greek, kings reign, lords lord, and so forth. The only time that Archelaus was regarded as reigning (being a king) was the few short weeks after Herod's death and before Passover of 4 B.C. By Passover, Archelaus was no longer reigning. He had left Judea for Rome. He was no threat. And when he returned, he was not a king but only an ethnarch. So if Joseph returned to the land of Israel and heard that Archelaus was reigning as king, it had to have been the last week of March or the first weeks of April 4 B.C.

This provides us with two very important pieces of information. First, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were back in the land before Passover of 4 B.C. (the only time when Archelaus was regarded as king). The trip back was relatively brief. We must rid ourselves of the notion that the trips to and from Egypt were long, arduous caravan treks. It's good romance but bad history. The trip back from Egypt was so sufficiently brief that it occurred in the very short time when Archelaus was reigning as king in Judea (two or three weeks!).

So then, Herod died in late March of 4 B.C. and baby Jesus was back in the land of Israel before Passover in April of 4 B.C. If the magi arrived in Jerusalem and Jesus was born in the last year of

Herod's life, and the return from Egypt was immediately upon his death, the events of Jesus birth in Matthew took place in less than a year's time. As we pursue our study further, we will be able to say that those events took place within a few months time.

How long was the interval from the birth of Jesus to the death of Herod and the return from Egypt?

We have already seen that the time from the death of Herod to the return from Egypt was brief, a period of at most a few weeks. When we consider the narration of events in Matthew leading up to the flight to Egypt, Matthew presents the events as occurring in quick succession. He gives no indication of any extended length of time. We have already discovered that the time from the death of Herod to the return from Egypt was brief.

This only leaves us to determine the length of time from the flight to Egypt to the death of Herod. In other words, how long were Joseph and his family in Egypt? The brevity of the rest of the story certainly does not suggest that the time in Egypt was extended. This impression derived from the Matthew narrative is confirmed by the Luke narrative.

Do Matthew and Luke fit together chronologically?

Both narratives begin at the same point in time and locale, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Both narratives end at the same time and locale, the settlement in Nazareth of Galilee. Noticing this is crucial because while the Matthew narrative only suggests the entire span of time was brief, Luke indicates this clearly. No one doubts that the birth of Jesus is the same event in both Matthew and Luke. However, some interpreters (see Augustine, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, for example) suggest that the flight to Egypt, the stay there, the death of Herod, and the return to Israel happened after the temple visit narrated in Luke. This is implausible as a literary interpretation of Luke. Luke is very specific that the timing of the move to Nazareth was at the completing of the duties required by the Law of Moses that have just been described. According to Luke after the temple visit, Joseph, Mary and Jesus went to Nazareth. This parallels Matthew where upon the return to Israel, Joseph hearing that Archelaus was king and being warned in dream, took his family to Nazareth.

ESV Matthew 2:20 - 3:1 ²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, **and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.** ²³ **And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth,** that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

ESV Luke 2:22-24, 39 ²² And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ...³⁹ **And when they had performed**

everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

It is implausible, either literarily or historically, that these are descriptions of separate events. The birth of Jesus and the relocation to Nazareth are the two book ends of the story, so to speak. The narratives leave no doubt that the circumcision of Jesus (Luke), the visit of the magi, the flight to Egypt, the killing of the children, the death of Herod, the return to Israel (Matthew), and finally the presentation at the temple (Luke), took place between the birth of Jesus and the settlement in Nazareth.

But is there enough time for all these events to have occurred?

The answer is yes. What is often forgotten is that the requirements of the law impose a minimum of forty one days from the birth of a son to the expiration of the uncleanness of the mother. (Leviticus 12:1-4) A fair reading of Luke does not require that we understand him to say that on the earliest day possible, Mary and Jesus went to the temple. But he does clearly indicate that the passage of time is in that ballpark. "And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord..." A more wooden translation of the Greek text would be, "And when⁷ the days of their cleansing were completed according to the law of the Lord, they brought him into Jerusalem to present him to the Lord."

But even allowing that there was no delay at all (not a very plausible supposition), the events in Matthew can easily fit into the time frame of the forty one days required by the Law of Moses and mentioned by Luke. Remember, we have already seen the evidence that the trip from Egypt to Israel was accomplished in a brief time. The notion of a long trek across the desert trip is romantic but unrealistic. It is unrealistic because it would prolong the time of travel in Herod's kingdom and would have required considerable preparation. Rather, a short overland trip to the coast and then by ship south to Egypt is far more historically plausible. A look at the map will immediately suggest a plausible route, namely west from the Judean hills to Ascalon, a coastal city which was not a part of Herod's kingdom, and then south by ship to Egypt. Such a trip may have been to a significant city in Egypt or just to a fishing village along the coast.

What is the basis for saying the period between Jesus' birth and his presentation at the temple was 40 days?

This is the time required by the Law of the Lord.

NIV Leviticus 12:1-4 The LORD said to Moses, ² "Say to the Israelites: 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. ³ On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. ⁴ Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.

So can we fit Matthew's details into the time frame given by Luke?

All the events in Matthew could easily fit into the minimum time frame in Luke (42 days).

- Birth of Jesus (Day 1)
- Magi arrive in Jerusalem (Day 3)
- Jesus circumcised (Day 8)
- Conferences with Herod, on to Bethlehem (Day 8)
- Magi leave, flight at night (9)
- Trip to Egypt (Days 10-20)
- Stay in Egypt, angel appears (Days 21-30)
- Return from Egypt (Days 31-41)
- Visit to the temple (Day 42)

The schedule in the above details is just a hypothesis. But it shows that a trip to and from Egypt can fit within the time scale of Luke. If the trip was to the coast and by ship (and Joseph had the resources from the magi to pay for such a trip⁸), then a trip of ten days is more than the necessary time needed for such travel. The events in Matthew chronologically fit inside the book ends of birth and temple visit in Luke.

Conclusion:

Jesus was born not too long before the death of Herod in late March of 4 B.C. Assuming the time from the birth of Jesus till his presentation at the temple may have been more than 41 days but not a great amount of time longer, then the birth of Jesus would have occurred in the winter months of 5-4 B.C. Late in December is about as far back as the date can be pushed without doing violence to the time indication in Luke. As it turns out, both the traditional dates for Christ's birth, December 25 or January 6, fall within the time frame we have determined. We are not saying these dates are exact, but they are plausible. In our estimation, a date in late January or early February is a little more likely since such a date barely stretches the minimum of 41 days implied by Luke.

How would the magi have known the meaning of the star?

The magi were a class of astrologers and diviners in the Persian Empire. We encounter them in the story of Daniel in the Old Testament. In fact, Daniel was instrumental in saving this class from destruction at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. In the East, there was a large Jewish population due to the Babylonian captivity. Only a remnant of those taken captive returned to the land of Israel in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, so there was a large population of Jews in the area from which the magi came. They had a historical connection to the Jews through Daniel. Most likely, as in Daniel's day, some of the magi class were themselves Jews. And whether Jews or not, they shared a common language – Aramaic.

It is historically implausible that some of the class of the magi would not have known of the prophecy in Numbers 24:17. Remember, the star appeared four times over a ten month period. It would have occasioned much discussion and debate among astrologers. What is hard to believe is that no one would have made the connection to the prophecy in the Book of Numbers.

^{RSV} **Numbers 24:17** I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not nigh: a star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab, and break down all the sons of Sheth.

The prophecy clearly connects the arrival of a king (the word picture of a scepter) with a star. Furthermore, it was the custom of the Jews to both read the scripture in Hebrew in the synagogue, and to give an Aramaic rendering of the text (since Hebrew was no longer widely spoken). These Aramaic renderings of the Hebrew Bible were initially a matter of oral custom, but eventually were written down. The earliest of these written targums (as they are called), the Targum Onkelos, dates from the first century A.D. in written form. It is generally held to contain the oral tradition that predates the New Testament. In that targum, the Hebrew words for star and scepter are rendered by the Aramaic words for king and messiah (anointed one). Given this information, it is to be expected that some of the magi seeing the star phenomenon would have thought it to be the sign of this future king of the Jews.

But what about the final appearance of the star?

It is evident from Matthew's narrative that the final appearance of the star was at least two years after the earlier appearances. It was of a very different sort since it was said to come and stand over the house. The appearance was brief, as the trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is not far (Bethlehem is about 5 miles south of Jerusalem).

The description in Matthew does not fit the appearance of comets or even falling stars (asteroids). It was, therefore, most likely a phenomenon arranged by divine providence for the limited purpose of guiding the magi to that particular house. But the magi saw a light in the sky that they interpreted as a continuation of their earlier sightings.

Is it really plausible that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem just days before she gave birth and arrived perhaps the very day of her being delivered?

Actually, this is a bit hard to swallow. But it is also a myth. Luke is very clear that they were already resident in Bethlehem for some time when the days (note the plural) were completed for her to give birth. Luke uses a form of expression he used elsewhere to describe a person as resident in a given locale. Although Greek expression is a bit stronger than the standard translations, even the translations adequately express the thought of the original that Joseph and Mary were already in Bethlehem before the final days of her pregnancy.

^{NKJ} **Luke 2:6** So it was, that **while** they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered.

But if they were already resident in Bethlehem, how does this fit the story of there being no room in the inn?

This is another common myth. Unfortunately, it is perpetuated by the standard translations. Luke does not use the Greek word for inn. He does not say that there was no room in the inn. What he literally says is that there was no place in the room. Joseph and Mary had some sleeping

arrangements in Bethlehem. They had a rented or perhaps borrowed room. They may even have shared it with others. But that room was no place for the birthing. What was needed was a private locale. So a stable or stall of some sort was prepared for the event. This ruins a lot of sermons about the “no room in the inn,” but it is what the Greek text actually says. And the cows mooing is most likely myth as well. Surely, knowing that the birth was near, the private place of the stable was cleaned and prepared for the birthing and the animals moved elsewhere.

What about the census? Was there really a census?

The taking of a census is well known. We know that Luke was referring to a census that took place near the end of the reign of Herod. But we have no other source to confirm this specific census. Likewise, his reference to Quirinius as governing Syria cannot be confirmed from other documentation. However, our documentation for the period is not exhaustive. It is implausible that Luke either made up the census or mistook the time of Quirinius. His gospel was composed and circulating in the second half of the first century A.D. (On this writer’s dating, before A.D. 60.) But even on the later dating assumption of some, it was still too close in time for there not to have been knowledge of the census and of Quirinius by many people. So a mistake of this kind would have been corrected at first publication. Yet this was a non-issue for the ancients and only arose from the hubris of moderns; that is, first, the presupposition that the biblical narratives are wrong unless proven correct, and second, the assumptions that if we moderns do not know about something in the past, it didn’t happen.

On your dating, Jesus was born in the winter months. How then could there be shepherds at night in the wilds with their flocks?

If you live in the mountains of Pennsylvania, as this writer does, this is a problem. But if one is familiar with the climate and horticulture of Judea, winter is exactly when you would expect shepherds to be out with their flocks. Judea has a Mediterranean climate. The wheat and barley are sown in the fall because the winter rains make the country green. In fact, there is no winter in a Northern European or American sense. Rather, there is the rainy season.

See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. (NIV Song of Solomon 2:11)

OK Jesus was born in the winter of 5-4 B.C. But I was told that the date of Christmas was chosen merely to coincide with an established pagan festival?

It is often assumed that the date of December 25 (or the alternate, January 6) was chosen as an accommodation to paganism because that date on the old Roman calendar was the winter solstice and a pagan feast dedicated to the Sun. However, we have direct documentary evidence for why the date of December 25 was chosen. It was selected because it was believed to be the actual date of the birth of Jesus. This information has come to light through the research of Thomas J. Talley in his *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*.⁹ We find in a document entitled *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae*, attributed to Chrysostom, the indication that the date of December 25 was regarded as the actual historical date of Jesus’ birth.¹⁰ The dating scheme in *De solstitia* begins with the assumption that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, finished his priestly duties at the end of the festivals in

the month of Tishri. If Elizabeth conceived in the fall around the time of the fall equinox, then the conception of Jesus 6 months later (see Luke 1:26) puts his conception at about the spring equinox. Nine months later places the birth at the winter solstice. (December 25 was the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar.) Furthermore, our earliest evidence of the date of December 25 is in a list of dates of the death of bishops and martyrs. The date is given as the birth of Jesus with no additional information. It is not connected to any discussion of a Christian festival. So the evidence is that December 25 was thought to be the actual date of Christ's birth.

So, could December 25 be the actual date of Jesus' birth?

Yes, that is plausible. There is no way to be that precise from our available evidence. But it is within the time frame derived from the information from Matthew and Luke. This writer thinks the birth was more likely about a month later, but December 25 is not unreasonable.

The Scripture's recording of the birth of Jesus and events surrounding it fit easily into other known historical information. And there have been surprising confirmations of these matters, such as the discovery of the star. The narratives bear the marks of historicity, not of myth and legend. But they tell of an event beyond ordinary historical causation, the conception of a son who would be the savior by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin. Could such a thing have occurred? If there is a God who made and governs the world, yes it could have occurred. And if there is no God, all that remains is to go into the silent night of eternal meaningless and oblivion.

Endnotes:

¹ Josephus mentions an eclipse of the moon that occurred on March 13 of 4 B.C. in 17:6:4. "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." Matthias and Judas, who had instigated the students to tear down the eagle from the temple, were burnt to death by Herod, and that night there was a lunar eclipse. Hence we can date the event to March 13, 4 B.C. Footnote 8, in *The Antiquities of the Jews* 17:6:3 reads: "This eclipse of the moon (which is the only eclipse of either of the luminaries mentioned by our Josephus in any of his writings) is of the greatest consequence for the determination of the time for the deaths of Herod and Antipater, and for the birth and entire chronology of Jesus Christ. It happened March 13th, in the year of the Julian period 4710, and the 4th year before the Christian era."

² The material relevant to our study can be found in *The Antiquities of the Jews* Book 17 and *The Wars of the Jews* Books 1 and 2.

³ Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable? A Look at the Historical Evidence*, InterVarsity Press, ©1986, pp. 120-123.

⁴ The correctness of identifying A.D. 27/28 as the 15th year of Tiberius is confirmed by other information in the Gospels. We know from John's Gospel that Jesus attended three Passovers after his baptism. This makes the third and final Passover to be A.D. 30. As it turns out, only in A.D. 30 did Passover begin on a Thursday as all the Gospels indicate it did. Information is now readily available about the timing of lunar phases and solar equinoxes from U.S. Naval

Observatory so we can readily determine the beginning of Passover for any year. See <http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/SpringPhenom.html>.

⁵ The Greek word for child is τεκνον and the word for infant is βρεφος.

⁶ The birth of Jesus is expressed by a genitive aorist participle that functions adverbially to specify the circumstance of the magi's arrival. As can be seen by reading Matthew's Gospel in Greek, the action of such an aorist participle is consistently used by Matthew to set the scene for the action of the main verb (also an aorist). The thought is always that the action of the aorist participle has either just occurred or is simultaneous with the action of the main verb. On this grammatical usage, see Burton, *Moods and Tenses*, T&T Clark Ltd., latest impression 1976, pp. 59-70. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan Publishing House, © 1996: "The *aorist* participle is normally, though by no means always, *antecedent* in time to the action of the main verb. But when the aorist participle is related to an *aorist* main verb, the participle will often be contemporaneous (or simultaneous) to the action of the main verb." (II, A, 1, d, c), 1]).

⁷ In this instance, the English word "when" translates the Greek conjunction that means "when" (ὅτε).

⁸ Had they used for their travels the gold given them by the magi, then it is not surprising that the offering at the temple was that required of the poor. See Luke 2:24 and Leviticus 12:8.

⁹ Pueblo Publishing Co, ©1986, pp. 85-155.

¹⁰ See also Augustine, *On the Trinity*, book 4, chapter 5.