The Star of Bethlehem

A Chronology of the Life of Jesus

by

Henry Everitt
The Christmas Story

How much do we really know about it?
Luke 2
8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.
10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.
12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,
14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."
15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."
16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.
Assumptions?

- Jesus was born on December 25, 1 BC
- The main reason Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem was to register for a Roman census
- Three kings, named Gaspar, Melchoir, and Balthasar, followed a star to the stable where he lay
- Jesus lived in Bethlehem as a child for several years
Why Question the Birthdate of Jesus?

• What time of year was Jesus really born?
  ● Biblical clue:

  The Shepherds and the Angels

Luke 2:8
And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

...Angels appear to shepherds, shepherds visit baby Jesus ... 

● Shepherds only do this during foaling season (spring).

Hugo van der Goes
The Adoration of the Shepherds
Clues about Jesus’ *Real* Birthdate

The Biblical Stories of the Birth of Jesus
Luke 2
1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

3 And everyone went to his own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
No Help from Census

- Censuses of Caesar Augustus
  - Many taken
  - No record of this census
  - Slow process, so no urgency
    - Why rush to Bethlehem with a pregnant wife?

- Governor of Syria
  - Quirinius inaugurated in 6 AD
  - Quintillius inaugurated in 6 BC
First Clues: *Luke 2*

- **Trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem**
  - Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth of Galilee
    - Joseph traveled ~90 miles with Mary to register in Bethlehem
  - Jesus was born in Bethlehem
    - Bethlehem is near Jerusalem
    - "There was no room for them in the inn." *Why?*
More Clues: The Magi

- Who were they?
  - From the east: Parthia
    - Not kings but "wise men": Astronomers, Astrologers, and Numerologists
    - Not unusual for Magi to pay homage to kings
  - They knew the Jews
    - Babylonian conquest: Aware of Jewish Messianic prophesy
    - May have had Jewish advisors
More Clues: *The Magi*

**Distances**
- Parthia is ~ 500 miles from Jerusalem
- Travel time by camel
  - 10-20 miles per day
  - 25-50 days each way
After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'[Micah 5:2]"

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."
Magi in Jerusalem

- **The Magi**
  - The star had meaning for them
    - Because of "**his star**", they came to worship "the one who has been born king of the Jews"
  - The Magi traveled toward Israel, **away from the star!**
    - Star in the east
    - Israel is west of Parthia

Filippino Lippi, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1496
Magi in Jerusalem

**The Magi**
- Went first to Jerusalem
  - Asked Herod where to go
  - Herod's priests and advisors quoted prophesy (Micah 5:2)
  - Birth of Messiah in Bethlehem

**Herod**
- Hadn’t noticed the star
  - No Jewish astrologers

Leonardo da Vinci
*The Adoration of the Magi*
1496
The Magnificent Visit of the Three Wise Men

Matthew 2

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
The Magi in Bethlehem

• **The Magi**
  - Traveled short distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem at night
    - Bethlehem is 1-2 hours south of Jerusalem by foot

• **The Star**
  - The star finally led the Magi, if only briefly
    - They observed the star “went ahead” of them, over Bethlehem
    - They were "overjoyed" at this agreement between observation and prophesy.

Unknown
The Adoration of the Magi
1030-1040
Clues about the Star

**The Star**

- The star “appeared” (2:7)
- It appeared in the east (2:2)
- The “star” moved through the stars from east to south (2:2,9)
  - Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem
- The star “stood over” Bethlehem (2:9)
Clues about the Star

- **The Star**
  - Jesus was in a house (2:11), not a stable
    - Some time had passed since birth.
    - Mary & Joseph still in Bethlehem
    - Star was present throughout the Magi’s journey.

Leonaert Bramer
*The Adoration of the Magi*
1634
What was the Star?

- **It probably was not**
  - A star
    - Don’t “appear” or move
  - A planetary conjunction
    - Doesn’t move much or “stand over”
  - A nova or a supernova
    - Don’t move or “stand over”

Peter Paul Rubens
*The Adoration of the Magi*
1617-18
What was the Star?

• Most likely a comet with a tail
  ● Comet moving away from sun after perihelion
    • First seen in east, morning sky
  ● Moved through stars from east to south, typically 1-2 months
    • Babylon to Jerusalem ~1-2 months
    • Jerusalem to Bethlehem ~2 hrs
  ● Do you see what I see?

Giotto di Bondone
The Adoration of The Magi
1301
What year was Jesus born?

In other words, was there a comet between 6 BC - 4 BC ?*

* 6 BC: Quintillius becomes governor of Syria.
4 BC: Herod dies
Which Comet was it?

- **Chinese Astronomy Records**
  - Comet in 5 BC
  - Appeared in constellation Capricorn
  - Seen for > 70 days
Which Comet was it?

- **Chinese Astronomy Records**
  - Appeared in “second month”
    - March 9 - April 6
    - In March/April, Capricorn rises in the east before dawn

March Pre-Dawn Sky
Why did the Magi “follow” the comet?

James Jacques Joseph Tissot
The Wise Men Journeying to Bethlehem
1836-1902
Why Follow this Comet?

- Basic Babylonian Astrology
  - Planets
    - Saturn = Divine Father
    - Jupiter = Son of Divine Father
    - Mars = Powerful or mighty one
  - Comets = Change
    - Change = uncertainty & fear
    - Comets in East = Change imminent
  - Constellations
    - Capricorn = House of Saturn
    - Pisces = The Jews
Why Follow this Comet?

• Babylonian Magi practiced Numerology
  ● Rarity
  ● Patterns
  ● Threes
Why Follow this Comet?

- 7 BC: Triple Conjunction
  - Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces
    - Happens once every ~900 years
    - Divine King to be born in Israel
Why Follow this Comet?

- 6 BC: Three-way Conjunction
  - Mars, Jupiter, Saturn in Pisces
    - Happens once every ~800 years
    - A mighty king would be born in Israel
Why Follow this Comet?

- **5 BC**
  - Comet appeared
  - Comet Appeared in Capricorn
    - Capricorn in East in Spring
    - Third sign: Imminent, important birth
    - Consistent with OT prophesy regarding the Messiah
More Proof?

The Escape to Egypt

Matthew 2
13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt,

15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."[Hosea 11:1]

16 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.
More Proof?

• **Further Evidence**
  - Herod asks for "the exact time the star appeared" (Matt. 2:7)
    - Herod orders the execution of all first born sons < 2 yrs old (Matt. 2:16)
    - Herod's orders based on "the time he had learned from the Magi"
  - What about the “Slaughter of the Innocents?”
    - Bethlehem was a small town
      - ~1000 residents, ~20 boys under age of 2
Jesus was born in Spring of 5 BC
Can we know Jesus’ exact birthdate?

James Jacques Joseph Tissot
*The Adoration of the Shepards*
1836-1902
Jesus’ Birthday

- **Earliest Birth Date**
  - Assume Jesus was born around the time the comet appeared
  - Comet appeared during Chinese “Second Month”
  - March 9 - April 6, 5 BC

- **What about the Latest Birth Date?**
Why did Mary and Joseph stay in Bethlehem?

Jesus Presented in the Temple

Luke 2
21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" [Exodus 13:2,12]),

24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [Lev. 12:8]

... Story of Simeon and Anna ...

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.
Why did Mary and Joseph stay in Bethlehem?

- **To fulfill Jewish law**
  - Jesus circumcised
    - 8 days old
  - Mary
    - Unclean for 40 days
  - After Mary purified
    - Jesus presented to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem
Possible Birth Dates

• Latest Birthdate
  ● Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem less than 3 months
    • Arrived at time of birth
    • Stayed at least 40 days after birth
    • They would have left soon after Law requirements fulfilled
      – They left right after Magi visited
Possible Birth Dates

- **Latest Birthdate**
  - Comet still visible when Magi arrived in Bethlehem
    - Comet lasted >70 days
    - Latest possible Magi visit: April 6 + 70 days = June 15
  - Latest birthdate of Jesus
    - June 15 - 40 days = May 4, 5 BC
Possible Birth Dates

• Jesus was born
  ● Spring, 5 BC
  ● Between March 9 and May 4
    • Magi may have begun trip before Jesus was born!

• Can we narrow this further?
  ● Why was there no room in the inn?
Possible Birth Dates

- **Possible Birthdate near Passover**
  - All adult males went to Jerusalem at Passover
    - Jerusalem was crowded
    - Bethlehem was also crowded
  - Joseph may have registered for census during Passover
    - *Birth: April 13-27, 5 BC*
- **Other clues**
  - Passover is when God saved his chosen people
  - Jesus, Joseph, and Mary fled to Egypt after birth
  - Jesus was crucified during Passover
Possible Birth Dates

- Can we get an exact date?
- Perhaps, using the Gospel of John
  - John the Baptist calls Jesus “the Lamb of God,” 2-3 years before he is crucified
    - Passover lambs chosen: April 14-15, 5 BC
  - This is also the day in Passover that Jesus died (33 AD)

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Believers: Mary and Joseph

- Traveled to Bethlehem during Passover
  - She was pregnant
  - Mary knew the importance of her baby
  - They knew Bethlehem would be crowded
  - They had not arranged a place to stay

- Followed OT laws and customs
  - Passover
  - Circumcision and Purification
  - Presentation at the Temple

James Jacques Joseph Tissot
The Presentation of Christ at the Temple
1836-1902
Faith

- **Non-Believers: Magi**
  - God spoke to them in a way they could understand
    - Agreement between astrology and OT prophesy
    - He would be a king (gold), a priest (frankincense), and a prophet (myrrh)
  - They traveled 3-5 months, away from star
    - May have left before Jesus born
    - They were “overjoyed” when “star” seen “over” Bethlehem

Matthew 2

11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
The Star of Bethlehem
A Chronology of the Life of Jesus

Henry Everitt

http://www.phy.duke.edu/~everitt

Calendars

- **Current Calendars**
  - Pagan (Roman) basis for our calendar
    - Days of week
    - Months of year
  - Early Christians wanted calendar to be based on birth of Jesus
    - BC and AD: Years before and after Jesus’ birth

- So, how was January 1, 1 AD chosen?
Calendars

• **Origin of December 25 Birthdate**
  - Set (arbitrarily) by Pope Julius I in AD 349
    - Jan. 1 = Date of circumcision of Jesus
    - Dec. 25 = Birth date of Jesus 8 days earlier
  - Reason? *Sol Invictus*
    - Date for Christmas replaced the pagan festival */Sol Invictus*/.
    - Celebrated the passage of the winter solstice & return of sun.
Calendars

• What about 1 AD?
  ● Set by monk Dionysius Exiguus in AD 525
    • Based on the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Luke 3
1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--

2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.

... Ministry of John the Baptist, Baptism of Jesus ...

23 Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.
Calendars

• Year 1
  ● Dionysius Exiguus got it wrong

The Return to Nazareth

Matthew 2
19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."
21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.
  • King Herod died in March, 4 BC

● John the Baptist started ministry in AD 28 or 29
  • Jesus “about 30” (between 27-33) when baptized
  • Jesus born between 6 BC - 4 BC
Chronology: Life of Jesus

- **7 BC**
  - Triple Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn

- **6 BC**
  - Conjunction of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn

- **5 BC**
  - March or April
    - Comet appears
    - Magi depart Babylon
    - Birth of Jesus (April 13-27?)
  - May or June
    - Jesus taken to Jerusalem, Temple
    - Magi visit Herod in Jerusalem
    - Magi visit Jesus in Bethlehem
    - Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt

- **4 BC**
  - Herod dies (March)
  - Jesus returns from Egypt

- **AD 29**
  - Jesus is Baptized

- **AD 33**
  - Jesus is Crucified (April 3)
# Hebrew Calendar, 5BC

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