

When was Jesus Born?

James R. Hughes, 2016-06-19

The most commonly accepted, proposed, dates for the crucifixion of Jesus are April 7th, 30 AD and April 3rd, 33 AD. The crucifixion had to be:

- During the High Priesthood of Caiaphas (Mt 26.3-4; Jn 11.49-53). Caiaphas was high priest from ~18 AD to ~36 AD.^{1,2}
- During the governorship of Pontius Pilate (Mt 27.24-26; Mk 15.15; Lk 23.24; Jn 19.15-16). He was governor of Judea from 26 AD to 36 AD.³
- After the beginning of 29 AD, since John the Baptist began his ministry in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar (Lk 3.1-2).^{4,5}
- On a Friday (Mt 27.62; Mk 15.42; Lk 23.54; Jn 19.42) before the Saturday Sabbath began (Mt 28.1; Mk 16.2; Lk 24.1; Jn 20.1).
- On a Friday at the time of the Passover (Mt 26.2; Mk 14.1; Lk 22.1; Jn 18.39), which began at sundown on the Friday (Jn 18.28-29a).

Two possible dates between 29 AD and 36 AD qualify:

- Friday, April 7th, 30 AD was in the midst of Passover week.⁶
- Friday, April 3rd, 33 AD, was the date for the Passover sacrifice.⁷

Luke informs us that Jesus was “about thirty years of age” when he began his ministry (Lk 3.23). It is generally believed that his ministry was slightly over three years in duration (including a Passover at the beginning and end; Jn 2.13; 6.4; 11.55). If we accept the proposed date for the crucifixion of 30 AD, and subtract 33, then Jesus would have been born in 4 BC (there was no year 0). If his ministry began when he was thirty years old, this corresponds with the Levitical requirement that a priest begin his work in the tent of meeting at the age of thirty (e.g., Num 4.1).

However, Luke also informs us that John the Baptist began his ministry “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar” (Lk 3.1). Tiberius became emperor in 14 AD. The fifteenth year of his reign would have begun in 28 AD. Therefore, John began his ministry at some point in 28 AD. Jesus began his ministry some time after John began his. If we assume that Jesus began his ministry in 29 AD, and his ministry was between three and four years in duration, then he could have been crucified in 33 AD. If Jesus began his ministry in 29 AD, and if he was born in early 4 BC (before Herod died; see below), then he was one year-old in 3 BC, four years-old in 1 AD, and thirty-two years old in 29 AD, when he began his ministry. An age of thirty-two fits within the parameter which Luke provides, i.e., that, Jesus was “*about* thirty years of age” when he began his ministry. Jesus would have been about thirty-six years old, when he was crucified in 33 AD.

Herod is generally believed to have died at the end of March or early in April, in 4 BC⁸:

¹ C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), p. 249.

² A. C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 181.

³ A. C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 833.

⁴ C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), p. 1594.

⁵ A. C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 1004.

⁶ <http://www.cgsf.org/dbeattie/calendar/?roman=30>

⁷ <http://www.cgsf.org/dbeattie/calendar/?roman=33>

⁸ The 4 BC date was presented by Emil Schurer, *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Division 1, Vol 1. (Edinburgh & T Clark, 1890) pp. 462-467;

https://books.google.ca/books?id=BRynO3W9FPcC&pg=PA392&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=3#v=onepage&q&f=false. The 4 BC date has been questioned by authors such as: W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great,"

- Josephus states that a lunar eclipse occurred not long before Herod's death,⁹ and that he died before Passover that year.¹⁰ A lunar eclipse would have been visible in Palestine on March 13th, 4 BC.¹¹
- Archelaus, one of Herod's sons who succeeded him, was banished in 6 AD, the tenth year of his reign, giving a date of 4 BC, as the start of his reign as ethnarch.¹²
- Herod Antipas, another of Herod's sons, was deposed in the summer of 39 AD. The last coins minted during his reign are from his 43rd year. Working backwards, gives a date of 4 BC for his accession.¹³
- Philip the Tetrach, another of Herod's sons, died in the 38th year of his reign in 34 AD. Working backwards, gives a date of 4 BC for the start of his reign.¹⁴

A possible outline of rapidly unfolding events surrounding the death of Herod, the birth of Jesus, and the early infancy of Jesus, could be as follows:

- The Magi visited Herod prior to his death to determine where the Christ was to be born (Mt 2.1, 2) and then they went to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus (Mt 2.11) a few days after his birth. Then they went back to their homeland by a different route (Mt 2.12).
- Jesus was probably circumcised in Bethlehem on the 8th day after his birth (Lk 2.21).¹⁵
- After his circumcision, Jesus was taken to Egypt by Joseph and Mary (Mt 2.13-14). It probably took Joseph and Mary around 10¹⁶ days to reach Egypt. They would have travelled slowly in light of Mary's postpartum condition, and because she was nursing baby Jesus. They may have been in Egypt a day or two before the angel announced to them that Herod had died. Thus, 12 days could have elapsed from the time they had left Bethlehem.
- As Joseph and Mary were travelling to Egypt Herod was waiting for the Magi to return. It is possible that it was a week or two after the birth of Jesus that Herod realized that the Magi were not going to return (Mt 2.16) and he issued the command to have the infants in Bethlehem slaughtered. Herod had infants up to two years old slaughtered to include the time from when the Magi had first seen the star (Mt 2.7, 16).¹⁷ The star first appeared some time *before* Jesus was to be born, not on the night of his birth, so that the Magi had time to travel to Judea and arrive in Jerusalem before his birth, and in Bethlehem around the time of his birth. Herod probably also allowed additional time to ensure that the massacre of the infants would be certain to include the baby Jesus.
- After Herod died (Mt 2.15), Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth (Mt 2.19-23). Then, on the 40th

Journal of Theological Studies (1966) XVII (2): 283-298 and Ernest L Martin, *The birth of Christ recalculated* (Scientific & historical series), 2nd edition (Pasadena, CA, Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980), which placed the date for the death of Herod in January, 1 BC, and the birth of Jesus up to two years prior to that date. However, others have countered the proposed recalculation, defending the date of 4 BC for the death of Herod.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, book 17; chapter 6; paragraph 4; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/ant-17.htm>

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, book 17; chapter 9; paragraph 2; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/ant-17.htm>

¹¹ Douglas Johnson, "And They Went Eight Stades toward Herodeion," in J. Finegan, J. Vardaman, and E. M. Yamauchi, *Chronos, kairos, Christos: Nativity and chronological studies presented to Jack Finegan*, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 96.

¹² Douglas Johnson, "And They Went Eight Stades toward Herodeion," in J. Finegan, J. Vardaman, and E. M. Yamauchi, *Chronos, kairos, Christos: Nativity and chronological studies presented to Jack Finegan*, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 94.

¹³ Harold W. Hoehner, "The Date of the Death of Herod the Great," in J. Finegan, J. Vardaman, and E. M. Yamauchi, *Chronos, kairos, Christos: Nativity and chronological studies presented to Jack Finegan*, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 106.

¹⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, "The Date of the Death of Herod the Great," in J. Finegan, J. Vardaman, and E. M. Yamauchi, *Chronos, kairos, Christos: Nativity and chronological studies presented to Jack Finegan*, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 107.

¹⁵ However, he could have been circumcised while his parents were fleeing with him to Egypt.

¹⁶ We do not know how far into Egypt they went. Donkeys move at a walking pace of a little over 7 kms/hr. So they could have travelled 45kms in six hours; taking time to rest, they could have comfortably covered 45kms in 8-10 hours. If they travelled 45 kms/day, they would have covered 450kms in 10 days, which would have put them past Suez and well into the Nile delta. However, they probably rested on the Sabbath. Also they may have travelled only 300kms. Regardless, it would have been very feasible to walk from Bethlehem to parts of Egypt in 10 days.

¹⁷ Johannes Kepler suggested that the star was the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7-6 BC. Two years later would have been 4 BC. However, how that conjunction could have led the Magi, two years later, to the exact place where Jesus was residing (Mt 2.9) is difficult to explain. It is probably better to postulate that God worked a miracle and provided a unique celestial sign which the Magi observed and concluded was the sign of the Jewish Messiah.

day after his birth, Jesus was presented in Jerusalem at the temple (Lk 2.22-38), where Mary completed her time of purification, according to the Law of Moses (Lev 12.2-4). After Jesus was presented at the temple, his parents returned to Nazareth in Galilee (Lk 2.39).

Luke does not record the flight into Egypt. He mentions the circumcision of Jesus (Lk 2.21) and then in the next verse mentions Mary's purification. Therefore, it is theoretically possible that events unfolded more slowly than indicated above, and that Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem from Bethlehem and presented Jesus in the temple on the 40th day after his birth, returned to Bethlehem, and from there fled to Egypt. If that is the case, then Jesus' presentation at the temple had to have been *before* the death of Herod. If Herod died on April 8th (for example) and we work backwards from that date, then Jesus could have been born in January or February of 4 BC. Some suggest that we could push the date back to November or December in 5 BC.¹⁸ However, this scenario, including a date for the birth of Jesus before 4 BC presents a number of challenges:

- The purification of Mary could not have occurred before the family fled to Egypt, since Matthew tells us that they fled to Egypt from Bethlehem (Mt 2.13) and Luke tells us that they returned to Nazareth after Mary's purification (Lk 2.39). Therefore, the flight into Egypt and Jesus' presentation at the Temple had to have occurred within 40 days of his birth, and thus in the early part of 4 BC.
- If Jesus was born in 5 BC (or earlier), then in 29 AD he would have been thirty-three years old. This begins to stretch the statement which Luke makes that Jesus was "about thirty years of age" when he began his ministry. We might have expected that Luke would have said that Jesus was about *thirty-five* years old when he began his ministry. Comparing Luke 8.42, where Luke gives the age of Jairus' daughter as "about twelve", we see that he is precise in his reckoning. We should be surprised if he was less accurate when recording the age of Jesus.
- None of the early Church fathers gives a date for the birth of Jesus before 3 AD. The majority, including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Julius Africanus, and Hippolytus of Rome (all of whom wrote before 300 AD), give 3 BC or 2 BC as the year of Jesus' birth.¹⁹ Eusebius (c. 260/265-339/340 AD) in his *Chronological Canons*, also places the date for Jesus' birth at 3/2 BC.²⁰ For example: Clement (c. 150-215 AD), writing shortly after the assassination of Commodus on December 31, AD 192, states, "[O]ur Lord was born in the twenty-eighth year [of the] reign of Augustus. ... From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days. And there are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, and in the twenty-fifth day of Pachon [Phamenoth]."²¹ By Clement's reckoning, Jesus was born on the 19th of March, in 2 BC,²² in our Gregorian calendar. It is of course possible, due to the use of different calendars (e.g., in Rome, Egypt, and Palestine) and the necessity of converting dates from one to another, that the early Church fathers made mistakes in their calculations.
- A date in December (e.g., the 25th) for the birth of Jesus appears not to have been explicitly documented before the time of Constantine (d. 337 AD).²³ January 6th (or 7th) was the traditional

¹⁸ Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in J. Finegan, J. Vardaman, and E. M. Yamauchi, *Chronos, kairos, Christos: Nativity and chronological studies presented to Jack Finegan*, (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1989), p. 122.

¹⁹ Jack Finegan. *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) p. 291.

²⁰ Jack Finegan. *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) pp. 164, 184.

²¹ Clement of Alexandria. "The Stromata, or Miscellanies", [1.21]. In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)* (Vol. 2). (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), p. 333.

²² http://aegyptologie.online-resourcen.de/Date_Converter/Roman_Emperors

²³ A web site dedicated to demonstrating that Jesus was born on December 25th (<http://www.dec25th.info>) claims that the earliest reference to December 25th as the date for the birth of Christ is made by Theophilus, a bishop of Caesarea in Palestine (115-181

date for the birth of Jesus early in the Christian era, particularly in the East (e.g., in Egypt and Asia Minor). However, the early church likely did not celebrate the birth of Jesus, since the celebration of birthdays was considered to be a pagan practice, as documented by Origen of Alexandria (c. 165-254): “[N]ot one from all the saints is found to have celebrated a festive day or a great feast on the day of his birth. ... Only sinners rejoice over this kind of birthday. For indeed we find in the Old Testament Pharaoh, king of Egypt, celebrating the day of his birth with a festival, and in the New Testament, Herod. However, both of them stained the festival of his birth by shedding human blood. ... But the saints not only do not celebrate a festival of their birth days, but, filled with the Holy Spirit, they curse the day.”²⁴

If the outline of the events during the early infancy of Jesus mentioned above is accurate, we can reach the following conclusions:

- Since Jesus was born before Herod died and Herod died in the spring of 4 BC, and Jesus was presented at the temple within 40 days of his birth (after the death of Herod), then Jesus was born in early 4 BC, not on December 25th (of 4 BC) or in November or December of 5 BC (or of any other year).
- If it took Mary and Joseph 12 days to walk from Egypt to Nazareth and 5 days to walk from Nazareth to Jerusalem, then Herod had to have died at least 17 days before Jesus was presented at the temple. However, they may have had a layover of two days in Nazareth before heading to Jerusalem. Therefore, Herod’s death could have been about 19 days before the presentation of Jesus at the temple.
- This means that Mary and Joseph left Bethlehem about 31²⁵ days before Jesus was presented at the temple, or about 9 days after his birth.
- The Magi arrived in Bethlehem sometime during the 8 days before Joseph and Mary left Bethlehem and visited Jesus in a house where the family were then staying (Mt 2.11), not up to two years *after* Jesus was born—based on an incorrect interpretation of Matthew 2.16.
- Herod probably died a few days after issuing the command for the slaughter of the infants—a direct punishment from God for his wicked action.
- It has been calculated that Passover fell on April 11th in 4 BC.²⁶ If Herod died on April 8th (i.e. before Passover, as Josephus states), Jesus could have been born on the day the Passover lamb was selected (Ex 12.3), on March 19th.²⁷

Luke provides additional information related to the timing of the birth of Jesus. He says, that “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.” (Lk 2.1-5) The references to the world census decreed by Augustus and the tenure of Quirinius as governor of Syria have perplexed commentators and historians. There does not

AD). However, the only document I could find by this Theophilus is a snippet relating to a question about Passover. The site also references Hippolytus on Daniel. However, a standard edition of the writings of Hippolytus [A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), S. D. F. Salmond (Trans.), *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian*, Appendix (Vol. 5), (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886)] does not include the portion of Daniel (4.23) which the site references. The site also mentions the Apostolic Constitutions, and gives a date for them of 70-250 AD. However, this is a mistake; the work should be dated from 375-380 AD. December 25th for the birth of Jesus is probably first mentioned in *The Philocalian Calendar* (in: *Chronography for 354 AD*), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronography_of_354. For December 25th it includes the “Birthday of the unconquered, games ordered, thirty races” (the oldest literary reference to the pagan feast of *Sol Invictus*) and the “Birth of Christ in Bethlehem, Judea.” In the Julian calendar, December 25th marked the winter solstice, after which the amount of daylight began to increase.

²⁴ Origen, *Homily on Leviticus* 8;

https://books.google.com/books?id=Eo9Da7xaBuUC&pg=PA153&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false

²⁵ 10 days to Egypt + 2 days in Egypt + 12 days to Nazareth + 2 days in Nazareth + 5 days to Jerusalem

²⁶ <http://www.cgsf.org/dbeattie/calendar/?roman=4bc>

²⁷ 8 days in Bethlehem + 10 days to Egypt + 2 days in Egypt = 20 days. April 8th – March 19th = 20 days.

appear to be any extra-Biblical evidence to support the statements which Luke makes, which would help us position the birth of Jesus more precisely.²⁸

In a radio address, in October, 1939, Winston Churchill, stated: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key.” We can paraphrase Winston Churchill, “We cannot determine the exact date for the birth of Jesus. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key.” The Gospel accounts provide a considerable amount of information, as also does extra-Biblical history, which has been used in an attempt to derive a precise date for the birth of Jesus—and so far with no definitive success. While God positions the birth of Jesus into its general historical context (e.g., in the days of Augustus Caesar and Herod), he does not provide enough information to allow us to derive a precise date. Even Luke, who writes with historical precision, and collected information about the early life of Jesus directly from Mary, does not disclose the exact date of the birth of Jesus. Therefore, perhaps the key is that God has deliberately kept the date from us so that we would not turn the day into a festival, as has been done with the invention of Christmas, which displeases him (Is 1.12-15; Gal 4.9-11). Ironically, as the celebration of Christmas has become more wide-spread and intense, the observance of the Lord’s Day (the Christian Sabbath) has taken on a diminished importance within the Church—to such an extent that other than for one hour on Sunday mornings, the Lord’s Day is treated as any other day of the week. God does not require or want Christians to observe specific days, once a year, for Christ’s birth or for his death. The day we are to celebrate is the Lord’s Day—the weekly reminder of Christ’s death and resurrection (Lk 24.1-6), which is observed, in particular, through the Lord’s Supper (Acts 20.7).

²⁸ Jared M. Compton, "Once More: Quirinius's Census", *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, 14 (2009), pp. 45-54.