

Dating the Birth of Christ

Explanation

The year of the Savior's birth was a matter of controversy in ancient times and remains so today. If the date was known to the friends and associates of Jesus, that knowledge appears to have been lost. By the sixth century the question had become sufficiently pressing to prompt Pope John I to commission a leading scholar of the day, the Scythian monk, Dionysius Exiguus, to determine the year of Christ's birth. Dionysius' researches led him to conclude that Jesus was born in the Roman year 753. By papal decree the Roman dating system was abandoned and the year 753 was renumbered as A.D. 1. That present year of 1278 became the year A.D. 525.

Whether Dionysius was correct in his calculation remains a matter of some dispute, particularly as certain events mentioned in connection with Christ's birth can now be accurately dated through Roman epigraphic and historical records known in modern times, for example, the death of Herod in the year 749 (4 B.C.). Chart 8-4 lists the events for which dates are known or can be conjectured.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has not taken an official position on the issue of the year of Christ's birth. Bruce R. McConkie, an apostle, offered what for the present appears to be the most definitive word on the question: "We do not believe it is possible with the present state of our knowledge—including that which is known both in and out of the church—to state with finality when the natal day of the Lord Jesus actually occurred" (*Mortal Messiah*, [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81], 1:349 n. 2).

References

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In the Roman year 1278 (A.D. 525), Pope John I commissioned the Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus to discover through research the year Christ was born. Dionysius concluded the birth occurred in the year 753. New names were then assigned to the years so that 753 became A.D. 1. By examining events related to Jesus' early life, it can be determined whether Dionysius was correct in his dating.

HEROD

Matthew (2:1) and Luke (1:5) place the birth of Christ during the reign of Herod, king of Judea. Both contemporary inscriptions and historical writings date the death of Herod to the Roman year 749 (4 B.C.).

THE WISE MEN AND THE STAR

Matthew's account (2:1–12) has the Wise Men come to Judea to find the king whose birth was heralded by the astral portent of a "star." A triple planetary conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 7/6 B.C., or a supernova in 5 B.C. may account for the astronomical wonder looked for by the Wise Men.

CENSUS OF AUGUSTUS

Luke (2:1–3) reports that Augustus Caesar decreed the world to be "taxed" (census to be taken) when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius's governorship began in A.D. 6. Augustus initiated censuses in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14. It is possible that Luke confused Quirinius with Quinctilius, governor of Syria from 7–4 B.C., and that Augustus's 8 B.C. census began or continued in eastern provinces into 7 or 6 B.C.

SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS

Matthew (2:1–23) reports that Herod slew all the children in Bethlehem under *two* years of age and that Christ was not brought back from Egypt to Judea until after the death of Herod. The account suggests some time, perhaps as much as two years, passed between the birth of Christ and the death of Herod.