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**A Chronology of the Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ**  
**with Emphasis upon Epiphany and the Nativity**

**1. Introduction**

The ecclesiastical calendar of the church commemorates many important events in the life and ministry of Christ. In some cases, dates assigned have a strong claim to historical accuracy based upon the witness of scripture. Examples in this category include Good Friday and Paschal Sunday, which are all but universally acknowledged as historically correct. In other cases, the witness of scripture is more attenuated and seemingly silent; dates seem to rest largely upon tradition. The primary examples in this category include the Annunciation, Nativity, and Epiphany. For most of church history this was no problem: dates connected with these events were accepted in good faith as having been handed down by tradition from earlier fathers. However, with the rise of the more rationalistic Historical-Critical method and its near cousin, the History of Religions theory, “reception by tradition” fell into academic disrepute: the age of science rejected the traditions of faith. Today, the origin of the Christmas date in particular is sought almost exclusively outside of scripture, typically in paganism or other extra-biblical sources. The purpose of this article is to rehabilitate the historical, faith-based position of the church by providing a chronology, based upon scripture, of the major events in the life and ministry of Christ, with an emphasis upon Epiphany and the Nativity. As it happens, the traditional dates of these events turn out to have a greater claim to scriptural and historical authenticity than is popularly supposed, such that scripture and tradition offer a far superior explanation of their origin than other prevailing theories.

**2. History of Religions and Calculation Theories Dispelled**

The two main theories in academic circles for the origin of the Christmas date are the “History of Religions Theory” and the “Calculation Theory.” The former has it that the Christmas date was

surreptitiously appropriated by church officials in the middle of the fourth century in order to “Christianize” the pagan winter solstice or, more specifically, the festival *Sol Invictus*. The basis for this charge is the *Chronograph of 354*, an illuminated codex manuscript commissioned by a wealthy Roman senator named Valentinus. The codex is divided into seventeen sections, including a calendar (sect. VI), Paschal tables for the years AD 312-411 (sect. IX), a section entitled *Depositio episcoporum* (“Burial of bishops”) (sect. XI), and a section named *Depositio martirum* (“Burial of martyrs”) (sect. XII). The *Depositio episcoporum* consists of a short list containing the date, name, and place of burial of Roman bishops set in calendrical order from December 25<sup>th</sup> to December 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>1</sup> The *Depositio martirum* consists of a similar list denoting the date and location of the burial of martyrs. Like the *Depositio episcoporum*, this section is arranged beginning with December 25<sup>th</sup> and the birth of Christ:

VIII kal. Ian. Natus Christus in Betleem Judeae

It is generally agreed that the *Depositio episcoporum* originally dates to AD 336, but was updated to AD 354 for inclusion in the codex by adding the deaths of the two most recent bishops.<sup>2</sup> Because it is arranged from December 25<sup>th</sup> to December 24<sup>th</sup>, it is apparent that the nativity of Christ marked the beginning of the ecclesiastical year in Rome at least as early as AD 336. The calendar in section VI for the same date (VIII kal. Ian.) has the following abbreviated entry: N INVICTI CM XXX.

- N = Natalis (“birthday/nativity”).
- INVICTI = “Of the Unconquered one.”
- CM = Circenses Missus (“games ordered”).
- XXX = 30.

Thus, for the birthday of the “unconquered one” that year, thirty games were ordered. It is widely believed that this is in reference to quadrennial games instituted in AD 274 by the emperor Aurelian who worshipped the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*). On the strength of the shared date of December 25<sup>th</sup>, it is inferred by advocates of the History of Religions Theory that Christians surreptitiously appropriated the date for Christ’s birthday to offset this allegedly popular pagan holiday. However, the basic assumption underlying this argument is without support; *viz.*, the games mentioned in the *Chronograph of 354* celebrated December 25<sup>th</sup> probably are *not* those instituted by Aurelian.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the first entry is for VI kal. Ianuarias (Dec. 27<sup>th</sup>), but the consensus of scholarship is that the ecclesiastical year began Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> as evidenced by the birth of Christ in the section following. See R. W. Burgess, “The Chronograph of 354: Its Manuscripts, Contents, and History” in *Journal of Late Antiquity* 5.2 (Fall, 2013) 345-396.

<sup>2</sup> Burgess, *The Chronograph of 354*, p. 379.

Roman tradition records worship of Sol from as early as the Sabine kings. Ritual calendars posted in Rome after adoption of the Julian calendar denote public sacrifices to Sol on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and December 11<sup>th</sup>. Of these, only August 28<sup>th</sup> still appears in the calendar of 354.<sup>3</sup> Two additional places in the Chronograph also denote games held in honor of Sol: October 19-22 and December 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup> However, the games held December 25<sup>th</sup> are clearly differentiated by Julius the Apostate in his oration to Sol from the quadrennial games instituted by Aurelian. Hijmans notes:

For festivals of Sol there are three key passages in that hymn:

1. near the beginning, in c. 3 he exhorts his reader to celebrate the annual festival of Sol as it is celebrated in the ruling city;
  2. in c. 41, he draws a contrast between the quadrennial games for Sol (τετραετηρικούς ἀγῶνας) which he characterizes as relatively new, and this annual festival which he ascribes to Numa.
  3. in c. 42-3, lastly, he states that this annual festival in honour of the rebirth of the sun takes place immediately after the Saturnalia and he gives a convoluted and quite fictitious explanation for why it is held a few days *after* the solstice rather than on the solstice itself. He refers to this latter festival as a περιφανέστατον ἀγῶνα.
- Clearly Julian is speaking of two different festivals to Sol, the one purportedly old, annual, and celebrated after the Saturnalia and before the new year; the other instituted fairly recently and celebrated every four years.<sup>5</sup>

But if the *annual* celebration was held December 25<sup>th</sup> following the solstice,<sup>6</sup> then the *quadrennial* games must belong to some other date. Since that leaves only the games held October 19-22, it is obviously these Aurelian instituted, not those of December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Julian's claim that the annual festival held December 25<sup>th</sup> dates back to Numa is dismissed by Hijmans as a piece of fiction intended to give an ancient provenance to what was apparently a relatively new festival. In his words, "the notion that Mithraists celebrated December 25<sup>th</sup> in some fashion is a modern invention for which there simply is no evidence."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Hijmans even goes so far as to speculate that December 25<sup>th</sup> was adopted by pagan authorities in response to Christian celebration of Christ's birth that date.<sup>8</sup> The upshot is that, although there is evidence for the Christmas date in Rome as

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas: A contribution to the modern construct of late antique solar syncretism," in *Hermann Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie*, eds. Michel Espagne and Pascale Rabault-F Feuerhahn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), 147, 148.

<sup>4</sup> Aug. 28 - SOLIS·ET·LVNAE·CM·XXIII; Oct. 19 - LVDI·SOLIS, Oct. 20 - LVDI / DIES·AEGYPTIACVS, Oct. 21 - LVDI, Oct. 22 - SOLIS·CM·XXXVI; Dec. 25 - N·INVICTI·CM·XXX

<sup>5</sup> Steven Hijmans, *ibid*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> December 25<sup>th</sup> occurred after the solstice because, by AD 362 when Julian the Apostate composed his oration to Sol, an error in the Julian calendar regarding the length of the solar year and spacing of leap years caused the solstice to gradually anticipate the 25<sup>th</sup> by four days. The same phenomenon was noted by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 relative to the vernal equinox. By the time the Gregorian calendar was adopted, the gap had grown to ten days.

<sup>7</sup> Hijmans, *ibid*, 144.

<sup>8</sup> "We cannot pursue this issue here, but one can speculate that the supposedly ancient festival of Sol was 'rediscovered' by pagan authorities in response to the appropriation of the winter solstice by Christianity. We could

early as AD 336, there is *no evidence* of a festival to Sol December 25<sup>th</sup> earlier than the *Chronograph of 354*. According to Hijmans:

As the Christian celebration of Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> can be attested in Rome by AD 336, at which point it may already have been well-established, and the celebration of Sol on that day cannot be attested before AD 354/362 and had not yet entered the calendar in the late 320s, it is impossible to postulate that Christmas arose in reaction to some solar festival. There is quite simply not one iota of explicit evidence for a major festival of Sol on December 25<sup>th</sup> prior to the establishment of Christmas, nor is there any circumstantial evidence that there was likely to have been one.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the debate ultimately turns upon a question of chronological priority, whether Christians or pagans celebrated December 25<sup>th</sup> first. On the strength of the *Chronograph of 354*, it turns out that the evidence weighs completely in favor of Christians — *exactly the opposite of what we have been told for almost one hundred fifty years!* And as the *Chronograph of 354* is the sole basis for the charge that Christians adopted December 25<sup>th</sup> in response to Aurelian’s quadrennial games, the History of Religions theory obviously must be dismissed as a viable explanation for the origin of the Christmas date. And this question of priority applies with equal force to the Calculation Theory.

The Calculation Theory is allegedly based upon rabbinic notions of “integral age,” which had it that the great patriarchs and prophets of Israel died on the same day as their birth. This two-prong approach was supposedly modified and expanded by early Christian paschal-computists and chronographers to a three-prong approach, including the passion, annunciation, and nativity.<sup>10</sup> Central to the argument is the assumption that the date of the passion served first to establish the date of the annunciation, which in turn served as the basis from which to “calculate” the date of the nativity. Because the so-called “short” chronology had it that Jesus died March 25<sup>th</sup>, the incarnation (per the theory) must therefore also have been March 25<sup>th</sup>, and the nativity nine months later December 25<sup>th</sup>:

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then surmise that Julian more or less faithfully repeats the fabricated ‘proof’ that they presented to support this ‘rediscovery’” (Hijmans, *ibid*, 350).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 348. See also Steven Hijmans, “Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas” in *Mouseion*, Series III, Vol. 3 (2003), 377-398.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, there is no evidence patristic writers were aware that a rabbinic notion of integral age existed. No patristic writer ever cites or even alludes to rabbinic tradition in connection with the conception, birth, or death of Christ. If such evidence exists, advocates of the Calculation Theory have not produced it.

Since it was established early on that Jesus died 25 March...early Christians would have been tempted to reinterpret 25 March as the day of conception, whereby they could then arrive at 25 December as the day of the nativity.<sup>11</sup>

At bottom, this argument assumes that the March 25<sup>th</sup> passion preceded all other dates in the triad, and served as the basis from which the others were calculated. However, there is no certain evidence this was the case. The earliest occurrences of the March 25<sup>th</sup> passion are Tertullian (AD 160-220)<sup>12</sup> and his contemporary, Julius Africanus (AD 160-240). Africanus places the crucifixion on “Luna” (Nisan) 13, which Hebrew date converters give as March 25<sup>th</sup> in the Julian calendar for AD 31, the year of Christ’s passion according to Africanus.<sup>13</sup> March 25<sup>th</sup> is also the calendar date given by the *Excerpta Latina Barbari* for Christ’s crucifixion, which has been shown elsewhere to be Africanus’ the work.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is in Africanus here that we find the earliest occurrence of the 3/25, 12/25, 3/25 triad. Hence, there is good reason to suppose the triad finds its source and originates with him. But as all three dates occur simultaneously in Africanus, it is impossible to say which proceeded or gave rise to the others. The dead-lock can be broken only by going behind Africanus’ writings to his source, which turns out to be an early version of the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* that expressly states Jesus was born December 25<sup>th</sup>. This version of the *Protoevangelium* appears also to be reflected in a writing attributed to Evodius that provides many important insights into the original shape of this pseudepigraphal legend before it settled into the form we presently possess. The *Protoevangelium* is usually dated to the latter half of the second century. But as the version relied upon by Africanus and the piece attributed to Evodius is earlier than this, it may date to the first half of the second century, if not before.<sup>15</sup> If so, the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity would predate the births of both Tertullian and Africanus, our earliest sources of the March 25<sup>th</sup> passion.

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<sup>11</sup> C. Philip E. Nothaft, “Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: In Defense of the ‘Calculation Theory,’” 94 *Questions Liturgiques* (2013) 262; cf. Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 1991) 79-155; Louis Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien* (1<sup>st</sup> edition, Thorin, 1889; 2nd edition, Fontemoing, 1920) 275-279.

<sup>12</sup> “And the suffering of this extermination was perfected within the times of lxx hebdomads, under Tiberius Caesar, in the consulate of Rubellius Geminus and Fufius Geminus, in the month of March at the times of the Passover on the eighth day before the calends of April, on the first day of unleavened bread, on which they slew the lamb at even, just as had been enjoined by Moses.” Tertullian, “An Answer to the Jews,” 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), republished by Henrickson 1994; Vol. 3, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Chronographiae*, F93; Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origin of the Christian Era* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 389-421 advocating the date of AD 31 for the passion; [www.rosettacalendar.com](http://www.rosettacalendar.com); accessed 3/23/19.

<sup>14</sup> Kurt Simmons, “Revisiting the Fathers: An Examination of the Christmas Date in Several Early Patristic Writers,” in 98 *Questions Liturgiques* (2017), 143-180.

<sup>15</sup> Simmons, “Revisiting the Fathers,” in 98 *Questions Liturgiques* (2017), 161-174.

The conclusion that the March 25<sup>th</sup> annunciation antedated the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity is also historically insupportable. Hippolytus, the younger contemporary of Africanus, subscribed to the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity as may be seen in his *Commentary on Daniel* and the *Chronicon*. However, Hippolytus placed Christ's conception (γένεσις) on Passover, April 2<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>16</sup> That Hippolytus accepted the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity while rejecting the March 25<sup>th</sup> conception, indicates that the former had an entirely separate provenance and was established and accepted within the Christian community before the latter attained broad consensus.

However, this is not to say that the Calculation Theory is entirely without merit. That early computists and chronographers made at least some calculations of the sort described seems indisputable and may be granted. In fact, we can see the process in motion as early writers tended to place the annunciation first in Passover *season*,<sup>17</sup> then on Passover *itself*, and finally on *March 25<sup>th</sup>*. However, since the date most early writers assigned for Jesus' birth was the forty-second year of Augustus (2 BC), and Passover was *not* on March 25<sup>th</sup> that year, writers like Hippolytus who placed Christ's conception on Passover naturally resisted adopting March 25<sup>th</sup> for the date of the annunciation. Typologically, it could be argued that Jesus was conceived on Passover day, but historically there was no basis to assign that date to March 25<sup>th</sup>. For these writers, Passover was the important and controlling factor in searching for a date to assign the annunciation, not a highly artificial date in the Julian calendar. However, with time the symbolism associated with the equinox and solstice and the perfect symmetry thus achieved apparently persuaded men to abandon dates with greater historical and scriptural grounding in favor of the triad of Julian dates ostensibly pioneered and proposed by Africanus. Passover and the paschal season thus gave way to the symmetrically more attractive date of March 25<sup>th</sup>. However, it was the *already existing* December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity that almost certainly prompted the change and made it esthetically attractive and gave it form. Susan Roll's comments regarding Engberding bear repeating on this score:

Engberding concedes that the calculations involved most likely represent an attempt to justify the celebration of Christ's birth on a date already established by tradition or by other means, and believed to be historically accurate already in 336, the date of the source material for the Chronograph...[The December 25 birthdate] was not established due to calculations which pointed irrefutably to this date, but rather that the calculations were

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<sup>16</sup> Hippolytus' *Commentary on Daniel* 4.23.3; Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' Canon and Chronicon," 69 *Vigiliae Christianae* (2015), pp. 542-563. For the text of Schmidt's translation of both the *Chronicon* and *Commentary on Daniel* see, "Hippolytus of Rome: Commentary on Daniel and 'Chronicon'" in *Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics*, Vol. 67 (2017, Gorgias Press).

<sup>17</sup>As Jesus is conceived in the sixth month after the conception of John, and John is conceived near the feast of Atonement, the annunciation will have occurred, per the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, near Passover.

devised after the date was already established and instead served to act as arguments for God's perfect plan of salvation, the underlying rationale for the patristic-era interest in number symbolism. In other words, first the birthdate came into being and was widely accepted, then somewhat later, perhaps in tandem with popular liturgical celebrations of that date and perhaps not yet, was the rationale for the date consciously constructed and defended.<sup>18</sup>

In short, there simply is no evidence that either the March 25<sup>th</sup> passion or annunciation was known or current in the church earlier than the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity, and much evidence against it. What evidence we possess gives the Christmas date priority (*Protoevangelium Jacobi*, Evodius, Hippolytus) and the March 25<sup>th</sup> passion and annunciation occurring and attaining acceptance only later (Tertullian, Africanus).

### 3. December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 6<sup>th</sup>

A word about the dates of December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 6<sup>th</sup> is in order. These dates are encountered very early in patristic writers. About 200 AD, Clement Alexandria placed the birth of Christ on January 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Bainton has shown that Epiphany was observed by the church January 6<sup>th</sup> from the beginning of the second century, almost one hundred years before Clement.<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, the December 25<sup>th</sup> nativity also occurs very early, probably dating to the beginning of the second century, if not before. Thus, both dates appear in history about the same time. We have already noticed that theories about the origin of the Christmas date are hopelessly at odds with historical evidence. Theories regarding the origin for the date of Epiphany are similarly lacking.

One theory has it that the date of January 6<sup>th</sup> was borrowed from the myth of Dionysus who assertedly turned water into wine that date.<sup>21</sup> But this may be roundly rejected. Although there was a festival for Dionysus January 6<sup>th</sup>, Pliny is clear that the asserted "miracle" of Dionysus itself occurred the

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<sup>18</sup> Susan K. Roll, "The Origins of Christmas: The State of the Question" in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2000), pp. 185-186; cf. Hieronymus Enberding, "Der 25. Dezember als Tag der Feier der Geburt des Herrn," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 2 (1952) 25-43.

<sup>19</sup> Clement Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.21.

<sup>20</sup> "One is, therefore, forced to the conclusion that Epiphany as a Christian festival antedates the schisms and hence goes back to the beginning of the second century" (Roland H. Bainton, "Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1923), XLII, 105).

<sup>21</sup> "The date, January 6, was chosen because in Egypt and throughout the oriental world it had been from time immemorial the feast of the 'Epiphany of Dionysus,' the god of returning light and life" (Benjamin W. Bacon, "After Six Days: A Clue for Gospel Critics" in *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. VIII, 2 (1915), 94-121); cf. Bainton, "Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1923), XLII, 105.

*Nones* of January, which is the fifth, not sixth, of the month.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Dionysus, whom the Romans called “Bacchus,” was the god of dissipation and riot whose cult engaged in vile and unspeakable debauchery. So shocking were its crimes that the Roman senate (fearing also its secret meetings and conspiracies as a danger to public safety and the state) proscribed the sect and punished its adherents with imprisonment and death.<sup>23</sup> That early Christians should borrow *anything* from so polluted a cult, let alone that John should have crafted his Gospel based upon the asserted miracle of Dionysus, is unworthy serious consideration.

Early Christians were well aware that the myths and rites of pagans bore superficial similarity to Christian traditions at various points. The sheer number of pagan superstitions and the finite nature of human activity made such coincidences inevitable. Epiphanius reports this very thing regarding “Aeon,” an Alexandrian deity which seems to be a compound of Dionysus, Kronos, Apollo, and Osiris, and was purportedly born to the virgin “Kore” the night of January 5<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup> That this pagan deity, which had obvious connections with Dionysus, was given a virgin birth makes possible that the shared date of January 6<sup>th</sup> in church tradition, together with the virgin birth of Christ, caused or enabled hostile parties to associate Christianity with Dionysus and Bacchus, and gave rise to the calumny that Christians engaged in sordid sexual crimes in their assemblies, and therefore should be proscribed.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it may be that suppression of the Bacchanalian cult reported by Livy provided the legal precedent for imperial persecution of the church beginning with Nero.<sup>26</sup> Prior to Nero, Christianity was protected by the *religio licita*, which

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<sup>22</sup> “Also in the Isle of Andros there is a Fountain in the Temple of Father Bacchus, which upon the Nones of January always runneth with Water that tasteth like Wine; as Mulianus verily believeth ; who was a Man that had been thrice Consul.” Pliny, *Natural Hist.* 2.103. The Kalends, Nones, and Ides of January were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> of the month, respectively (<https://www.thoughtco.com/roman-calendar-terminology-111519>; accessed 6/8/2019).

<sup>23</sup> “When once the mysteries had assumed this promiscuous character, and men were mingled with women with all the license of nocturnal orgies, there was no crime, no deed of shame, wanting. More uncleanness was wrought by men with men than with women. Whoever would not submit to defilement, or shrank from violating others, was sacrificed as a victim. To regard nothing as impious or criminal was the very sum of their religion” (Livy, *History of Rome*, 39.8-18).

<sup>24</sup> Epiphanius, “Panarion,” (“Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation,”), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, eds. Einar Thomassen, Johannes van Oort, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (Brill, 2013); trans. Frank Williams, 51.22.9-11, Vol. 79, p. 51, 52.

<sup>25</sup> Christians were accused of killing and eating infants, and committing incest with their sisters and mothers in secret orgies. Tertullian specifically mentions Bacchanalianism among the chief accusations leveled against Christians in justification for their persecution: “Yet the very tradition of your fathers, which you still seem so faithfully to defend, and in which you find your principal matter of accusation against the Christians — I mean zeal in the worship of the gods, the point in which antiquity has mainly erred — although you have rebuilt the altars of Serapis, now a Roman deity, and to Bacchus, now become a god of Italy, you offer up your orgies.” Tertullian, *Apology* 1.6, 7; cf. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.27.

<sup>26</sup> The proscription of the Roman senate forbidding anyone to “sell or buy” anything for the purpose of flight (Livy 39:17) is remarkably similar to John’s description in Revelation that none might “buy or sell” save he had the number of the beast (Rev. 13:17), so that we must wonder if this is not a deliberate allusion.

guaranteed peoples of the empire the right to worship according to their ancestral customs.<sup>27</sup> For Christianity to lose this protection would have required legal precedent, which may have been found in Livy. Tacitus indicates that Nero originally persecuted Christians to shift blame from himself for the burning of Rome in AD 64.<sup>28</sup> Since this would not justify persecution of Christians outside of the city of Rome, it seems likely that charges of Bacchanalianism were leveled against Christians from the very start. Such at least appears to have been belief of Justin Martyr who accused the Jews of sending out men from Jerusalem before it was destroyed in AD 70 to slander and calumniate the church with accusations of sordid crimes.<sup>29</sup> If this is correct, it may inferentially testify to the presence of January 6<sup>th</sup> in the church as early as the middle of the first century, and that it served as the basis for Jews to link Christianity to Bacchus as a dangerous and subversive sect. However, one thing is sure: Christians had every reason *not* to adopt or at the least to *abandon* dates and memorial-events exposing them to a charge of engaging in Bacchanalian pollutions. That they retained the dates and commemorations they did despite false accusation and persecution testifies to their belief that any correlation was purely coincidental and that they were not borrowed from their pagan neighbors, but ancient, authentic, and sacred within the church.

In sum, none of the prevailing theories can adequately account for the origin of the dates of December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 6<sup>th</sup> in the church. Every indication is that these dates occur independent of external influence and sources and that they are the proper and peculiar possession of the church, belonging to its tradition from earliest times. However, this does not mean that the dates are necessarily historically accurate. Although they are consistent with scripture, the dates themselves do not occur in scripture. And while simple chronological reconstruction from scripture and contemporary sources place the nativity and wedding at Cana at or near their received dates, academic honesty requires that we acknowledge that the dates themselves may be purely legendary. The truth is we simply do not know how the dates came into the church. However, the fact that the dates *are* agreeable to scripture means that early Christians could have received them by tradition in good faith as very possibly correct. And if the early

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<sup>27</sup> The *religio licita* ('permitted religion') is a term used to describe the policy of Roman law allowing the various peoples of the empire to keep and observe their own religious customs. Although the emperors sometimes suppressed astrologers and soothsayers who caused disturbances by feigned predictions of alterations in the government, it was the general policy to allow the people of the provinces to maintain their traditional religious observances unless they were disruptive or subversive. Claudius in particular maintained the *Pax Romana* by enforcing the *religio licita*. Josephus records the edict of Claudius protecting religious observance: "All men should be so subject [to the Romans] as to continue in the observation of their own customs, and not be forced to transgress the ancient rules of their own county religion." Josephus, *Antiquities*, 19.5.2, 3; cf. *Ant.*, 19.6.3

<sup>28</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

<sup>29</sup> "At that time you selected and sent out from Jerusalem chosen men through all the land to tell that the godless heresy of the Christians had sprung up, and to publish those things which all they who knew us not speak against us...Accordingly, you displayed great zeal in publishing throughout all the land bitter and dark and unjust things against the only blameless and righteous Light sent by God." Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 1.17; cf. Acts 28:22.

fathers could receive them in good faith by tradition, we may also. Searching the annals of paganism for their source is definitely *not* the way we want to go, particularly when the scriptures speak so eloquently in their defense. In the space that remains, we want to explore the chronology of the Gospels with a view to identifying the agreeableness of these dates with the corpus of the New Testament and related documents. However, because many of the dates are inter-related, we will survey the whole period of the Gospels through Christ's ascension and Pentecost following. This will allow us to set Jesus' life and ministry in its historical context and will provide many other profitable insights.

#### **4. The Annunciation, Conception, and Incarnation**

##### **Passover season, 2 BC**

There is no express testimony in scripture regarding the date of the annunciation, nor is there information in the narrative that identifies the time of year Gabriel appeared to Mary. Nevertheless, several indirect lines of inquiry and deduction allow us to identify its general time and season. The first is the vision of Zachariah which preceded the annunciation by a little less than six months. If the time of Zachariah's ministrations can be identified, the time and season of the annunciation will naturally follow. The second line of inquiry more properly belongs to the nativity, but nevertheless permits us to calculate the time of annunciation. These are: 1) the time and season of Christ's birth as deduced from Luke's statements that Jesus was fully twelve in spring at Passover, but on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday at his fall baptism, so that his birthday necessarily occurred sometime after fall but before spring. To this may then be added two additional lines of inquiry, each commencing with a forty-day period: 2) Jesus' wilderness fast followed by the a) making of his first disciples, b) Epiphany, and the c) first Passover of his ministry; and 3) the presentation of the Christ-child in the temple and the chronology of Herod's final illness.<sup>30</sup> The combined testimony of these witnesses allows us to place the annunciation sometime in Passover season, 2 BC.

##### **4.1 *Luke's Two Statements of Jesus' Age and their Respective Seasons***

Luke tells us that the holy family traveled to Jerusalem each year to keep the feast of Passover. On one such occasion when Jesus was twelve, Luke informs us that the child Jesus remained behind when his family began its journey home, only to be found after three days sitting in the temple, asking and answering questions of the doctors (Luke 2:41-52). Passover is a "moveable" feast that occurred within a thirty-day window commencing with the full moon on or first after the vernal equinox. The window is thirty-days wide because the lunar cycle is twenty-nine and a half days long, establishing the limit within

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<sup>30</sup> These will be examined under our discussion of the nativity.

which the paschal moon can appear. The ancient Romans associated the vernal equinox with March 25<sup>th</sup> and this date was widely employed by the early fathers. The thirty-day window for the paschal moon would therefore theoretically have run from March 25<sup>th</sup> through April 23<sup>rd</sup>, inclusive. Since Luke tells us that Jesus was fully twelve when the above incident took place, his twelfth birthday necessarily occurred sometime prior to Passover that year. However, because Passover is a moveable feast, the specific date cannot be known without first identifying the year of Jesus' birth and when he would therefore have turned twelve. For present purposes, however, it is sufficient merely to note that Passover season ("spring") provides a *terminus ad quem* before which Christ's birthday will have occurred. A second reference to Jesus' age occurs in connection with his baptism and provides a *terminus a quo*.

Luke tells us that Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday ("began to be about thirty") at his baptism in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Luke 3:1, 21).<sup>31</sup> According to the received calculation, Jesus' ministry lasted three and a half years from his baptism until his crucifixion Nisan 15, AD 33. That Jesus' ministry lasted three and a half years will be demonstrated with greater specificity later. Meanwhile, reckoning backward three and a half years (forty-two months) from Nisan 15, AD 33, and allowing for a leap year of thirteen months in AD 32, brings us to Heshvan 15, AD 29. (Four Passovers brings us to the spring of AD 30, the first Passover of Christ's ministry; the five-month period from the first Passover to Christ's baptism brings us to Heshvan 15, the autumn of AD 29.) Finegan is in accord. After surveying climatic, religious, and other factors, Finegan agrees Christ would have been baptized in the autumn: "There is every reason to believe Jesus was baptized and began his public ministry in the fall of A.D. 29."<sup>32</sup> Heshvan 15 translates into November 10<sup>th</sup> in the Julian calendar for that year. However, due to reforms made to the Jewish calendar in the fourth century by Hillel II, there is reason to question if this is correct.<sup>33</sup> The correct date (so far as this may be known) appears to be November 8<sup>th</sup>, which is the

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<sup>31</sup> The phrase "began to be about thirty" (Luke 3:23) is problematic for writers who hold to a 6 BC-4 BC nativity, for this would have made Jesus between 31 to 33 at his baptism in AD 29. This is usually handled by arguing that the Greek ὥσει ("about") lends elasticity to Jesus' age, allowing a range of years more or less than thirty. However, ὥσει is modified by the term ἀρχόμενος ("beginning [to be]"), which the early fathers unanimously took as pointing to the threshold of Jesus' thirtieth birthday. (Cf. Luke 23:44 – "about the sixth hour" – which, were it modified by ἀρχόμενος, none would urge meant later than the sixth hour.)

<sup>32</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Hendrickson, 1964, revised edition 1998), 342. See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Zondervan, 1977) at 38: "Jesus was baptized sometime in the summer or autumn of A.D. 29."

<sup>33</sup> Hillel II reformed the Hebrew calendar in the fourth century. Among his reforms were postponements that lengthened or shortened the year by one, two, or three days as needed to prevent Rosh Hoshana, the autumnal New Year, from occurring adjacent to the Sabbath, and to prevent the seventh day of Tabernacles from occurring on the Sabbath; in both cases to avoid two consecutive days fasting due to forced cessation of labor. However, because these alterations did not exist in Jesus' day, the modern Hebrew calendar is not a reliable source for projecting ancient dates as may be seen, for example, in Good Friday (Nisan 15, AD 33), which Hillel II's calendar causes to fall, not on Friday, but on a Saturday. [www.rosettacalendar.com](http://www.rosettacalendar.com); accessed 3/23/19; cf. [www.setapartpeople.com/why-we-do-not-follow-the-jewish-calendar](http://www.setapartpeople.com/why-we-do-not-follow-the-jewish-calendar); accessed 8/12/2019.

date given by Epiphanius for Christ's baptism (below). In either event, Jesus' baptism in early autumn provides a *terminus a quo*; Jesus' nativity necessarily occurring sometime after fall, but before spring. The early winter birth of Christ is therefore already shown to be a distinct possibility without more. However, the window between fall and spring can be narrowed considerably if we look more closely at the statements of Luke.

Luke tells us that Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday the fifteenth year of Tiberius. Roman emperors dated their reigns beginning January 1<sup>st</sup> though December 31<sup>st</sup> the calendar year following the death of their predecessor in office (the "accession-year" method). In other words, the regnal years of Roman emperors commenced with and were counted by *Julian calendar years*. Luke therefore is using the Roman calendar to frame the year of Jesus' thirtieth birthday, as opposed to the less accessible Jewish calendar. This makes sense given that Luke's Gospel was written originally for Theophilus who was almost certainly Greek and therefore would have been unfamiliar with the local calendar of the Jews. Indeed, the various peoples of the Roman Empire each had their own calendars, which framed the beginning and end of the year at different times and seasons according to local custom. The Julian calendar thus stood as a universal system of reckoning that all quarters of the empire might resort to, and is the one we would therefore expect historians like Luke to use. The Roman calendar should therefore provide the limit within which Jesus' thirtieth birthday will have occurred.

Augustus Caesar died August 19, AD 14. Tiberius' first regnal year commenced the following calendar year, January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, AD 15. His fifteenth regnal year would therefore have been the calendar year AD 29.<sup>34</sup> That Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday in AD 29 points to 2 BC as the year of his birth. This is the date the great majority of patristic writers assign to the nativity,

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<sup>34</sup> "Tiberius's fifteenth...regnal counted as Julian calendar years according to the accession-year system was Jan 1 to Dec 31, A.D. 29...the correct equation for Luke 3:1...[is]...Tiberius year 15 = Jan 1 to Dec 31, A.D. 29." Finegan, 340; cf., Hoehner: "Therefore it is concluded that Luke's reference to the fifteenth year of Tiberius points to the year A.D. 29," *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 43.

including Tertullian,<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>36</sup> Africanus,<sup>37</sup> Clement Alexandria,<sup>38</sup> Origen,<sup>39</sup> Hippolytus,<sup>40</sup> Eusebius,<sup>41</sup> and Epiphanius.<sup>42</sup> A person born in 2 BC will turn thirty years of age by December 31<sup>st</sup>, AD 29. The *terminus ad quem* of Jesus' nativity, which we earlier set at Passover, may thus be moved to December 31<sup>st</sup>. The window within which Jesus' thirtieth birthday will have occurred will therefore become the period between about November 8<sup>th</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup>, a period of 53 days. This is a fairly narrow window, representing 14.5% of the calendar year, and argues that the traditional early winter birth is scripturally and historically well-grounded. This, together with the evidence in the section following, allows us to tentatively place the annunciation and incarnation at the beginning of the nine-month period preceding early winter. This translates to Passover season, 2 BC.

## 5. Nativity of Christ

### Early winter (late December), 2 BC

#### 5.1 *Baptism and First Disciples*

As we have seen and learned from Luke, Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday when he was baptized in the autumn of AD 29. Luke provides this information at least in part because this was the age when Jewish men customarily began their public ministries (Num. 4:3; I Chron. 23:3). Following

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<sup>35</sup> *Contra Iudaeos* 7.8, dated from the Second Triumvirate, formed November 27, 43 BC, by enactment of the *Lex Titia*.

<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus dates Christ's birth to the forty-first year of Augustus, which, dated from the Second Triumvirate in 43 BC, is 2 BC. *Contra Haeresies* 3.21.3.

<sup>37</sup> See *Chronographiae*, F89, T92 where 14 Augustus = AM 5172. Therefore, AM 5500, the year of the nativity, = 42 Augustus, or 2 BC; cf. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 288, 289.

<sup>38</sup> *Stromata* 1.21, reckoned in the Egyptian calendar which did not make provision for leap years, the interval of one hundred ninety-four years (each 365 days), one month (thirty days), and thirteen days given by Clement produces a date of January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2 BC; cf. C. Philip E. Nothaft, "Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: In Defense of the 'Calculation Theory,'" 94 *Questions Liturgiques* (2013) 257. This was first discovered by Roland H. Bainton, "Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1923), XLII, 103, 4; cf. Thomas J. Talley, "Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church," in *Between Memory and Hope* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2000), 36-37.

<sup>39</sup> Origen appears to follow Tertullian. Frag. 82 on Luke 3:1; *Origenes Werke*, vol. 9, *Die Homilien zu Lukas*, ed. Max Rauer (GCS; 2d ed., Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 260; cited by Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 289.

<sup>40</sup> Hippolytus's commentary on Daniel follows Africanus in placing Christ's birth 5500 years from Adam, the forty-second year of Augustus, when he was consul the thirteenth time (= 2 BC). "Hippolytus of Rome, Commentary on Daniel and 'Chronicon,'" in *Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics*, Vol. 67 (2017, Gorgias Press), trans. T.C. Schmidt, 139, 152.

<sup>41</sup> "It was, then, the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, and the twenty-eighth year after the submission of Egypt and the death of Antony and Cleopatra...when our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ...was born." Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.5.2; Loeb ed.

<sup>42</sup> Epiphanius places the nativity in the forty-second year of Augustus, when he was consul the thirteenth time. "Panarion," ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation,"), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, eds. Einar Thomassen, Johannes van Oort, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (Brill, 2013); trans. Frank Williams, 51.22.3-4, Vol. 79, p. 51; cf. "Panarion" ("De Incarnatione"), 2.1, Vol. 63, p. 56.

his baptism, Jesus underwent a forty-day fast in the wilderness, followed by a period of temptation, also in preparation for his ministry (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). Since preaching was Jesus' life-work, it seems safe to assume he would not have interposed an unnecessary delay to beginning his public ministry by a protracted period of fasting and temptation following his thirtieth birthday. The better view, therefore, is that Jesus' fast and temptation were timed to conclude *on or just before* his thirtieth birthday, so that he could begin preaching immediately upon turning thirty. November 8<sup>th</sup> plus forty days brings us to December 18<sup>th</sup>. Christ's temptation following his fast probably spanned several days, placing us at or near the received date of the nativity. That this is correct is confirmed by John's Gospel. There we read that after his fast and temptation, Jesus returned to John at Bethabara where he made disciples of Andrew, Peter, Phillip, and Nathanael (Bartholomew) (John 1:26-51). Andrew and Nathanael call Jesus "rabbi," demonstrating that he is now of age to make disciples and commence his public ministry (John 1:38, 40, 49). In the words of Irenaeus:

For how could he have had disciples, if He did not teach? And how could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed thirty years of age (for thus Luke, who has mentioned His years, has expressed it: "Now Jesus was, as it were, beginning to be thirty years old," when He came to be baptized).<sup>43</sup>

In other words, sometime following his baptism but before returning to John, Jesus turned thirty years of age. Next, a close reading of John reveals that seven days were fulfilled between Jesus' return to Bethabara and the wedding at Cana (John 1:26, 29, 35, 43 (four days) plus John 2:1 (three days) = seven days). It was at this wedding that Christ performed his first miracle, turning water into wine, and "manifested" his glory to his disciples (John 2:11). The wedding at Cana was traditionally marked by Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>. Seven days prior to January 6<sup>th</sup> is December 31<sup>st</sup>. Assuming the wedding at Cana fell on January 6<sup>th</sup>, December 31<sup>st</sup> is the date Jesus ostensibly returned to John at Bethabara having already turned thirty. This would be consistent with our discussion of Luke and his use of Julian years to demarcate the limit of Jesus' thirtieth birthday, and seems to indicate that John is following a similar plan, intentionally providing continuity with the synoptic Gospels and Luke. Next, following the wedding at Cana, Jesus, his disciples, and his mother and brethren went to Capernaum where they remained "not many days" (John 2:12). This was followed by the first Passover (April 5<sup>th</sup>) of Jesus' ministry in which he

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<sup>43</sup> Irenaeus, "*Contra Haeresies*," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885) 2.4.5.

cleansed the temple for the first time (John 2:13–25).<sup>44</sup> He would cleanse it again a second time just before his crucifixion (Matt. 21:12-15; Mark 15-19; Luke 19:45-48).

Naturally, the historical accuracy of January 6<sup>th</sup> for the date of the wedding at Cana can be disputed. However, it is consistent with the overall chronology based upon a November 8<sup>th</sup> baptism and Passover April 5<sup>th</sup> following.<sup>45</sup> But that Jesus had turned thirty at or near the end of his fast and temptation before he began making disciples and teaching is almost beyond question. Moreover, since these events appear to be crowded into the closing days of AD 29 and the beginning of AD 30, the early winter birth again appears to be historically validated. That this is correct, we may call Epiphanius as witness:

First, he was baptized on the twelfth of the Egyptian month Athyr, the sixth before the Ides of November in the Roman calendar. In other words, he was baptized a full sixty days before the Epiphany,<sup>46</sup> which is the day of his birth in the flesh, as the Gospel according to Luke testifies, “Jesus began to be about thirty years old, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph.” Actually, he was twenty-nine years and ten months old—thirty years old but not quite when he came for his baptism. This is why it says, “began to be about thirty years old.” Then he was sent into the wilderness. Those forty days of the temptation appear next, and the slightly more than two weeks—two weeks and two days—which he spent after his return from the temptation to Galilee, that is, to Nazareth and its vicinity. And one day when he went to John—the day John said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” And the next day when John, again, stood, and two of his disciples, and looking upon Jesus as he walked, said, “Behold the Christ, the Lamb of God.” Then it, says, “The two disciples heard him and followed Jesus.”

As I said, this was the eighteenth day after the temptation, but the first after Jesus’ encounter with John, when Andrew and the others followed Jesus and stayed with him that day—it was about the tenth hour—and when Andrew found his brother Simon and

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<sup>44</sup> “We conclude that this event either happened twice, or, if it happened only once, John endeavored to relate it according to proper order” (Theodore of Mopsuestia, “Commentary on the Gospel of John,” in *Ancient Christian Texts* (2010, InterVarsity Press), p. 35; cf. 30).

<sup>45</sup> The date is also accepted by Bainton who took it as that intended by John’s Gospel for the wedding at Cana. Roland H Bainton, “Basilidian Chronology,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1923), XLII, 100-105.

<sup>46</sup> The sixth before the Ides of November (Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>) is November 8<sup>th</sup>. Nov. 8<sup>th</sup> to Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, inclusive, is sixty days (23 + 31 + 6 = 60).

brought him to Jesus. Then the Gospel says, “On the morrow the Lord would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.” As the sequence of the Gospel indicates, this was the nineteenth day after the temptation, and it includes the call of Philip and Nathanael.

And then, it says, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee on the third day after the two days I have mentioned which followed the encounter with John. Now if the twenty days are added to the forty days of the temptation, this makes two months. And when these are combined with the ten months they make a year, or, in other words, a full thirty years from the birth of the Lord. And we find that Christ performed his first miracle, the changing the water into wine, at the end of his thirtieth year, as you must realize if you follow the orders of the events in the Gospels closely.<sup>47</sup>

There are a few differences between how Epiphanius accounts for the period between Jesus’ baptism and our own. Epiphanius assigns forty days to both the fast and temptation of Jesus, whereas we believe the period of temptation followed the fast. Luke says “and when they were ended, he afterward hungered,” showing that Jesus’ temptation to turn bread to stones, *etc.*, followed the forty-day fast and was not part of it (Luke 4:2-13). Epiphanius causes Jesus to spend two weeks and two days in Nazareth on the strength of Luke 4:14-30, but this incident is better viewed as belonging to a period later in Jesus’ ministry, after he had already begun to perform miracles in Capernaum (v. 23). Epiphanius assigns only five days between Jesus’ return to John at Bethabara and the wedding at Cana, rather than the seven we find. Finally, Epiphanius places Jesus’ birthday on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the date of the wedding at Cana, whereas we believe with Irenaeus that Jesus would have turned thirty before making his first disciples. However, these small differences apart, that Jesus’ nativity occurred in early winter, sometime following his fall baptism but before Epiphany, seems impossible to refute. Hoehner is in accord:

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<sup>47</sup> Epiphanius, “Panarion,” (“Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation”), 51.16.1-7, Vol. 79, p. 42, 43; *cf.* 51.24.4-25.1, Vol. 79, p. 56, 57. See also, Hoehner at 44: “After John baptized Jesus, there was the temptation (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13); the call of His first disciples (John 1:35-51); the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11); His journey to Capernaum (John 2:12); and His journey to Jerusalem to attend the first Passover of his ministry on Nisan 14, or April 7 [sic], A.D. 30.”

During the winter months the sheep were bought in from the wilderness. The Lukan narrative states that the shepherds were around Bethlehem (rather than the wilderness), thus indicating that the nativity was in the winter months...Although the exact date cannot be known, either December...or January...is most reasonable.<sup>48</sup>

And these conclusions will grow stronger as we proceed.

## ***5.2 Presentment of the Christ Child and Herod's Final Illness.***

### ***5.2.1 The magi arrived after presentment of the Christ-child***

The ecclesiastical calendar places the presentment of the Christ-child at the Jerusalem temple February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the fortieth day after the traditional, received date of the nativity. This is based upon the testimony of Luke and what was required by the mosaic law (Luke 2:22-24; Lev. 12:2-6; cf. Ex.13:3, 13; Num 3:46, 47). Following the customary offerings at the temple, Luke tells us that the holy family returned home to Nazareth (Luke 2:39). Some have imagined a contradiction here between Luke and Matthew. Matthew records the arrival of the magi and the flight of the holy family to Egypt, which is commonly supposed to have occurred on or near the day of Christ's birth (Matt. 2:1-15). But, if the flight to Egypt occurred immediately following Jesus' birth, it is difficult to see how the presentment at the temple could have occurred the fortieth day as stated by Luke. One solution is for the holy family's sojourn in Egypt to have been less than forty days, permitting the presentment to occur at the time of their return. Against this, however, is Matthew's statement that Joseph did not enter Judea when the holy family returned from Egypt. Rather, fearing Archelaus and being instructed by the angel, Joseph "turned aside to Galilee" (Matt. 2:2-23). Since the temple was located in Judea, this makes impossible that the presentment of the Christ-child occurred following the flight to Egypt. The conclusion therefore seems inescapable that the presentment at the temple preceded the arrival of the magi and flight to Egypt. If so, the magi necessarily found the holy family in Nazareth, not Bethlehem.

It is true, of course, that Herod directed the magi to Bethlehem and doubtless they left Jerusalem intending to go there (Matt. 2:8). However, scripture does not tell us that the magi ever actually arrived in Bethlehem; it is generally assumed they did, but it is this assumption that creates a contradiction. Instead, what Matthew tells us is that the star the magi saw in the east wondrously appeared again "and went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was" (v. 9). Given that Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem and Herod had directed them there in any event, the magi hardly required the

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<sup>48</sup> Hoehner, 26, 27.

star to lead them to Bethlehem. The shepherds located the babe the night of his birth without assistance of a star, so we must imagine the magi would not have required a star either (Luke 2:8-20). The better view, therefore, is that the star was interposed by heaven to lead the magi *away* from Bethlehem toward Nazareth where the holy family had returned following the presentment of Christ at the temple. Matthew all but confirms this when he states that the magi “entered the house” (Matt. 2:11); not the “inn” or other temporary accommodation we would expect if the holy family was still in Bethlehem, but “the house;” *viz.*, the family home where Luke informs us they returned forty-odd days after Jesus’ birth. That the holy family returned to Nazareth prior to the arrival of the magi was the view of several patristic writers, including Methodius<sup>49</sup> and Epiphanius:

He was born in Bethlehem, circumcised in the cavern, presented in Jerusalem, embraced by Simeon, openly confessed by Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, and taken away to Nazareth.<sup>50</sup>

However, *where* the magi found the Christ-child is of secondary importance for present purposes. It is *when* they found Mary and the babe that now concerns us. The testimony of Luke requires that we place the arrival of the magi sometime after the presentment at the temple the fortieth day following Jesus’ birth.

### ***5.2.2 The magi arrived before Herod quit Jerusalem for the mineral springs at Callirhoe immediately preceding his death***

By the time the magi arrived Herod would have been in the final weeks and months of his life. The trial for treason of his son, Antipater, had been too much for Herod and cast him into what would be his final illness. Herod was in the seventieth year of his life and despaired of recovery, at one point even attempting suicide. Word of Herod’s illness and impending death emboldened certain rabbis to inflame

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<sup>49</sup> “Therefore the prophet brought the virgin from Nazareth, in order that she might give birth at Bethlehem to her salvation-bringing child, and brought her back again to Nazareth, in order to make manifest to the world the hope of life. Hence it was that the ark of God removed from the inn at Bethlehem, for there He paid to the law that debt of the forty days, due not to justice but to grace... The holy mother goes up to the temple to exhibit to the law a new and strange wonder, even that child long expected.” Methodius, “Oration Concerning Simeon and Anna” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 6:385.

<sup>50</sup> Epiphanius, “Panarion” (“De Incarnatione”), 1.4, Vol. 63, p. 55; *cf.* “Panarion” (“Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation”), 51.7.9, Vol. 79, p. 33. See also Bede who causes the flight to Egypt to follow the presentment at the temple (‘post haec’), but before the holy family’s return to Nazareth: “Praetermisit hoc loco Lucas quae a Mattheo satis exposita noverat, Dominum videlicet post haec ne ab Herode necandus inveniretur, Aegyptum a parentibus esse delatum, defunctoque Herode sic demum Galileam reversum, Nazareth civitatem suam inhabitare coepisse” (“Lucae Evangelium Expositio” in *The Complete Works of the Venerable Bede*, editor J.A. Giles (London, 1844), Vol. 10, p. 336). Hoehner places the visitation by the magi before the presentment at the temple, but the flight to Egypt after the presentment and return to Nazareth (*Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 27). Hence, by all these accounts there were forty days prior to the flight to Egypt and Herod’s death.

the local youth to cut down the golden eagle over the temple gate. When rumor came that Herod was dead, the young men set upon the temple and eagle in broad daylight. However, soldiers came upon them suddenly, capturing many. Herod then had the young men and rabbis sent to Jericho, where the leaders were eventually burned alive. Josephus reports that the night of the rabbis' execution there was an eclipse of the moon (*Ant.* 17.146–167). This lunar eclipse is important for dating Herod's death. For many years, it was thought to be the partial lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 BC. However, the 4 BC death of Herod occurs very late in church history,<sup>51</sup> and did not attain academic standing until about 120 years ago with publication of Emil Schürer's *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* in 1897.<sup>52</sup> However, this has been seriously challenged in recent years and shown to be untenable. The weight and trend of current scholarship now agrees that it was the full lunar eclipse of January 10, 1 BC.<sup>53</sup> This is consistent with Luke and the unanimous voice of the early fathers placing Jesus' birth in 2 BC.

As Herod's final illness grew worse, his doctors persuaded him to travel beyond the Jordon River to bathe in the mineral springs at Callirrhoe hoping for a cure. However, when this failed and his health continued to decline, Herod returned to Jericho, dying shortly thereafter, never to return to Jerusalem again (*Ant.* 17.168–179). Since Matthew tells us that Herod was still at Jerusalem when the magi arrived (*Matt* 2:1), the magi had to arrive *before* Herod left Jerusalem for the mineral springs beyond the Jordan, probably after the rabbis' execution sometime in the first week or two of February, 1 BC.

Part of the story of the magi is the holy family's flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents. Matthew tells us that when Herod realized the magi were not going to return, he ordered the slaughter of all male children two years old and under in Bethlehem and the neighboring region (*Matt* 2:16–18). The witness of Matthew is corroborated by a pagan writer named Macrobius who records the following witty saying of Augustus Caesar:

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<sup>51</sup> It first occurs in 1605 in the doctoral thesis of the Polish Jesuit and historian Laurentius Suslyga entitled *Theoremata de anno ortus et mortis Domini, deque universa Jesu Christi in carne oeconomia* at the University of Graz. Suslyga was followed, in part, by Johannes Kepler (*De Nova Stella in Pede Serpentarii* (Bohemia, 1606)). William Whiston (1737), whose translation of Joseph is popular even today, next put forward the date of 4 BC based upon the lunar eclipse just mentioned (*Ant.* 17.6.4 fn 8).

<sup>52</sup> Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 5 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1896; reprint, revised G. Vermes and F. Millar, eds. 3 vols. in 4; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1973-1987) 1.281 n. 3; 1.2 84 n. 11; 1.327, n. 1.

<sup>53</sup> W. E. Filmer, *The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great*, JTS 17 (1966), 283–298; Earnest L. Martin, *The Nativity and Herod's Death, Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Eisenbrauns, 1989), 85–92; idem, *The Star that Astonished the World* (2nd ed.; Portland: ASK Publications, 1996), 119–155; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 298-301; Andrew E. Steinmann, *When Did Herod the Great Reign?*, *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009), 1–29; cf. Rodger C. Young and Andrew E. Steinmann, *Caligula's Statue for the Jerusalem Temple and its Relation to the Chronology of Herod the Great*, JETS 62.4 (2019)759-773.

On hearing that the son of Herod, king of the Jews, had been slain when Herod ordered that all boys in Syria under the age of two be killed, Augustus said, “It’s better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”<sup>54</sup>

Macrobius’ report is sometimes read to include Antipater among those who perished in the slaughter of the innocents, which obviously would be incorrect. However, Macrobius probably only intended to indicate that Antipater was executed at the *same time* the slaughter of the innocents was being carried out, not that he died with or among them. We need not enter into a discussion which is correct, for by either reading the death of Antipater and slaughter of the innocents were contemporaneous events. Since the execution of Antipater and slaughter of the innocents occurred at the same time, Antipater’s death allows us to establish the time of the slaughter of the innocents, and the approximate time the magi arrived. Josephus informs us that Herod outlived the execution of Antipater by only *five days*, dying shortly before Passover, which current scholarship places April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1 BC (*Ant.* 17.188–192).<sup>55</sup> Knowing that Herod died shortly before Passover 1 BC, we should be able to reckon backward from Passover following Herod’s death to his departure from Jerusalem, and from there to find the approximate time of the nativity.

Scholars have estimated the length of time between Passover 1 BC and onset of Herod’s final illness, based largely upon the preparations needed for his state funeral and burial at Herodium. Andrew Steinmann estimates that there was a minimum of forty-one days, but that sixty-two is more likely. Other scholars have put forward estimates of varying length, including Maier (twenty-nine days), Martin (fifty-four & seventy), and Finegan (more than twenty-nine).<sup>56</sup> The average of the combined length of these scholars, including Steinmann, is fifty-one days. Using Steinmann’s sixty-two-day figure would place the onset of Herod’s final illness at February 5<sup>th</sup>. If we then reckon backward three days (the period needed for the holy family to travel from Jerusalem to Nazareth) we arrive at February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the traditional date of the presentation of Christ at the temple. If we reckon backward forty-days more (the period of ritual

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<sup>54</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2.11; Loeb ed. The credibility of Macrobius’ report was recently defended: “It seems relatively implausible that Macrobius, who held a very high position in one imperial administration—perhaps even praetorian prefect of Italy—should simply have fabricated memorable sayings that were then subsequently ascribed to those of an earlier imperial administration” (Barry J. Beitzel, *Herod the Great: Another Snapshot of His Treachery?* JETS 57 (2014) 309-322).

<sup>55</sup> “If the death of Herod was in 1 B.C...the relevant eclipse of the moon was a total eclipse on the night of Jan 9/10, and the full paschal moon of Nisan 14 was on Apr 8, twelve and a half weeks later.” Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 299.

<sup>56</sup> Steinmann, *When Did Herod the Great Reign?* *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009), 15, 16; Paul L. Maier, “The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus’ Life,” in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, 113–130; Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980), 29-33; idem *The Star That Astonished the World* (2d ed.; Portland, ASK Publications, 1996), 124-137; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 300; cf. P. M. Bernegger, *Affirmation of Herod’s Death*, JTS 34 (1983), 526–531; Timothy D. Barns, *The Date of Herod’s Death*, JTS 19 (1968), 204–209.

impurity before the presentation of Christ at the temple) we arrive exactly at December 25<sup>th</sup>, the traditional date of Christ's birth. This coincidence is quite remarkable and fortuitous to say the least. However, none of the other periods proposed by scholars seriously affects this result, but still place the time of Christ's birth in early winter. The shortest, twenty-nine days from Passover April 8<sup>th</sup>, would bring us to March 10<sup>th</sup>; this compresses the final illness of Herod and funeral preparations into an implausibly narrow space, but leaves the received date of the nativity reasonably within reach. The longest (seventy days) would make January 29<sup>th</sup> the point at which Herod's final illness ostensibly grew worse. If we allow a week during which his physicians treated him before quitting Jerusalem for Callirrhoe, this would bring us to February 4<sup>th</sup>, two days after the traditional date of the presentment of the Christ-child at the temple, again leaving our general chronology in tack. Thus, regardless of which scholar we follow, the result will be about the same: the magi will have arrived *after* the presentment of Christ at the temple, but *before* Herod quit Jerusalem, probably in the first week or two of February, 1 BC, Jesus being born forty to fifty-odd days before, in the closing days of December, 2 BC.

### ***5.2.3 Zachariah, the Priestly Courses, and Conception of John the Baptist***

The vision of Zachariah is integral to the birth narrative of John and Christ, including the annunciation to Mary. Luke tells us that Zachariah was a member of the course of Abijah and was burning incense in the temple when he received the vision regarding John (Luke 1:5-22). Following his ministrations, Zachariah returned home and his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. Elizabeth hid herself five months and was in her sixth month at the time of the annunciation (Luke 1:23-38). If it can be determined when Zachariah was serving and John was conceived, the time of Christ's birth fifteen months later can putatively be identified.

David divided the priests into twenty-four courses, which served at appointed times (1 Chron. 24:7-18). Two courses concern us here: Jehoiarib, the first, and Abijah, the eighth, the course Zachariah belonged to. To determine when Zachariah was serving requires reconstructing the priestly courses; to do this requires a point of reference from which to start. Happily, history steps in here to fill the gap. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Taan. 4; cf. S. Olam 30.86-97*) records a saying of Rabbi Yose ben Halaftha, dating to about AD 150, stating that the course of Jehoiarib was serving when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70:

Whence do we know that the second Temple was also destroyed on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab? We have learned in a Boraitha: "A happy event is credited to the day on which another happy event happened, while a calamity is ascribed to the day when another calamity occurred;" and it was said that when the first Temple was destroyed it was on the eve preceding the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab, which

was also the night at the close of the Sabbath and also the close of the Sabbatical year. The watch at the time was that of Jehoiarib, and the Levites were chanting in their proper places, at that moment reciting the passage: “And he will bring back upon them their own injustice, and in their own wickedness will he destroy them;” and they did not have time to end the passage, which concludes, “yea, he will destroy them—the Lord our God,” before the enemy entered and took possession of the Temple. This happened also at the destruction of the second Temple.

Rabbi Halafta’s record provides several important pieces of information. First, it tells us that the course of Jehoiarib was serving at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Second, that it was the eve preceding the 9<sup>th</sup> of Ab (August 4<sup>th</sup>). Third, it tells us that it was the close of the Sabbath (Saturday). This information allows us to recreate the week of Ab 8-14, and those leading up to it, thus:

Sat.	Tam. 16	Sat.	Tam. 23	Sat.	Ab 1	Sat.	Ab 8
Sun.	Tam. 17	Sun.	Tam. 24	Sun.	Ab 2	Sun.	Ab 9
Mon.	Tam. 18	Mon.	Tam. 25	Mon.	Ab 3	Mon.	Ab 10
Tue.	Tam. 19	Tue.	Tam. 26	Tue.	Ab 4	Tue.	Ab 11
Wed.	Tam. 20	Wed.	Tam. 27	Wed.	Ab 5	Wed.	Ab 12
Thur.	Tam. 21	Thur.	Tam. 28	Thur.	Ab 6	Thur.	Ab 13
Fri.	Tam. 22	Fri.	Tam. 29	Fri.	Ab 7	Fri.	Ab 14

Reckoning backward, the preceding week would have been Ab 1-7; then Tammuz 23-29; then Tammuz 16-22; and so forth *ad infinitum*.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Halafta’s report makes clear that the courses were not static, but advanced in some form or other. Otherwise, Jehoiarib, whose service commenced the first and twenty-fifth weeks of the priestly cycle, would not have been serving in the month of Ab, which is the eleventh month and about forty-fourth week of the priestly-year (below). Moreover, that the courses served the same week so many centuries apart tells us that there existed some revolving cycle that repeated itself, causing the courses to arrive back at or near the same position at regular intervals.

On two separate occasions, the temple service commenced in the seventh month of Tishri, first under Solomon, then when the temple was restored in the time of Ezra (2 Kgs 11:5; Ezra 3:6). Tishri therefore marked the commencement of the temple service and priestly cycle, which would presumably have still been true when the temple was destroyed in AD 70.<sup>58</sup> The approach adopted here is to frame the

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<sup>57</sup> Knowing that Jesus was crucified Friday, Nisan 15, allows us to also recreate the calendar from this point, but as we do not know the course then serving, Halafta’s record serves our purpose better.

<sup>58</sup> “In tables drawn up by Roger T. Beckwith it is, in fact, established that in New Testament times the cycle of the priestly courses commenced each year at the beginning of Tishri and that this was its one fixed point in the year. At Qumran the same was true, but with the difference that Jerusalem began the cycle not on the Sabbath on or next after Tishri 1, but on the Sabbath on or next before Tishri 1, so that the first course (Jehoiarib) would always be on

courses in twenty-four year cycles, beginning the Sabbath on or next preceding Tishri 1, with each course serving one week twice annually, coming in Friday afternoon preceding the Sabbath and going out Friday afternoon next following (2 Kgs 11:5; 1 Chron 9:25; 24:19; Josephus, *Ant.* 7.14.7). Since there are twenty-four courses, serving twice annually will accomplish forty-eight weeks. This would leave two and a half weeks remaining to the lunar year ( $29.5 \times 12 = 354 \div 7 = 50.5714 - 48 = 2.5714$ ). Presumably, these would have been filled by the first several courses serving a third time.<sup>59</sup> Leap years in the Jewish calendar added a thirteenth month (“second Adar”) seven times in nineteen years.<sup>60</sup> The approach adopted here is for the weeks composing Adar II to be filled by the courses whose turn it was to serve in Adar that year, so that each served an extra week, allowing for the uninterrupted progression of the courses.<sup>61</sup>

Assuming each course advanced annually to the next station or week of the year, the cycle of priestly ministration would be completed in twenty-four years, at which point it would begin anew. Rabbinic tradition placing Jehoiarib on service when the temple was destroyed allows us to identify the station in the twenty-four-year cycle by identifying where it intersects with Tishri 1. Then, by reckoning backward in twenty-four-year increments to the beginning of the cycle preceding the conception of John the Baptist in 3 BC, we can putatively identify the week and month Zachariah was serving.

As already noted, the courses served twice annually. At the commencement of a twenty-four-year cycle, Jehoiarib, being the first, served the first week in the cycle commencing the sabbath on or next preceding Tishri 1 that year. It would then serve a second time the twenty-fifth week. There are eleven months between Tishri and Ab, or about forty-four weeks. Since there are only twenty-four years in a cycle, the course serving in the first position the first week of Tishri can never reach the month of Ab; in twenty-four years it will have advanced twenty-four stations, not the forty-four necessary to reach Ab. However, the second course commencing the twenty-fifth week can and does. If the second course is

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duty on Tishri 1 itself, whereas Qumaran began the cycle from the Sabbath next after Tishri 1.” Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 134; cf. Roger T. Beckwith, “St. Luke, the Date of Christmas and the Priestly Courses at Qumran,” *RQ* 9 (1977):81, 85-90.

<sup>59</sup> Mishnayoth, *Kodashim*, appendix note 17, asserts that the two-and-a-half week deficiency between forty-eight courses and the fifty-one week lunar year was satisfied by a temporary suspension in the regular cycle of priestly courses during the three pilgrim festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, during which all courses allegedly served. However, this is contradicted by the fact that the courses served Sabbath to Sabbath in weeks based upon division of the solar year, whereas Passover and Tabernacles followed the lunar cycle and might fall on any day of the week and run seven days thereafter, more often than not spanning separate weeks, so that the weekly order of the priestly courses and the feasts would not agree. Doubtless the other courses assisted and supplemented the courses serving at the pilgrim feasts, but they would not have displaced them. Cf. 2 Chr. 29:34; 35:1-11.

<sup>60</sup> “There is much to make it look as if, in general, the Babylonian system came to prevail relatively early, but with some variations in Jewish practice from the Babylonian... Therefore, in spite of the fact that the Jewish system used only added Adars, the result was the same as in the Babylonian system and seven months were intercalated in nineteen years” (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 35-39).

<sup>61</sup> For a general discussion of the priestly courses see Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 131-138.

placed on duty the week of Ab 8-14 in AD 70, the first course will intersect the week of Tishri 1 twenty-one years into the twenty-four-year cycle.

Since Jehoiarib intersected the week of Tishri 1 twenty-one years into the cycle, to return to the beginning of the cycle we subtract twenty years from AD 70, which brings us to AD 50. Subtracting twenty-four more years brings us to AD 26; this course would therefore have consisted of the years AD 26-49. Twenty-four more years brings us to AD 2; this course would have consisted of the years AD 2-25. Twenty-four years more bring us to 23 BC. This course would have consisted of the years 23 BC to 1 AD. At this point, we turn our attention to the course of Abijah. Where Jehoiarib served the first and twenty-fifth weeks the first year of the twenty-four-year cycle, Abijah served the eighth and thirty-second weeks. The first course of Abijah began the first year of the priestly-cycle in the month of Heshvan. The autumnal equinox occurs in the month of Tishri. From Heshvan to Tishri 1 is about forty-four weeks ( $8+44=52$ , bringing us to the beginning of the next year's cycle which commenced Tishri 1). Since there are about forty-four weeks between Heshvan and Tishri 1, in twenty-four years the first course can never reach the month of Tishri. However, the second course, which commenced the priestly cycle in the month of Jyar, the 32<sup>nd</sup> week of the cycle, can and does reach the month of Tishri twenty-one years into the twenty-four-year cycle, what in this case turns out to be 3 BC. If we then consult the dates the second course of Abijah served, we find that it would have been on duty the Julian week of about September 8-14 (Elul 28-Tishri 5), ten days before the autumnal equinox September 24<sup>th</sup>. If it is assumed Zechariah served this week when his course was ostensibly on duty and that Elizabeth conceived shortly after he returned home, John would have been born about the time of the summer solstice. Jesus would then have been born about the time of the winter solstice six months later. Halaftha's report therefore not only appears to be correct as to Ab 8-14, AD 70, it tends to corroborate church tradition regarding the births of John and Christ.<sup>62</sup>

## 6. Ministry of Christ

Passing from the nativity to the ministry of Christ, although scripture tells us the day and month Jesus' ministry ended, it does not tell us the year. As we have seen, this created considerable confusion in former times: some early writers thought Jesus' ministry lasted only one year and several months, placing his death in AD 31 (Clement Alexandria, Tertullian, Julius Africanus); others, that it lasted two and a half

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<sup>62</sup> It is unlikely that the early fathers knew how to reconstruct the priestly courses. This could account for invention of the fiction in the *Protevangelium Jacobi* that Zechariah was High Priest serving on the Day of Atonement. If there was an existing tradition that connected the births of John and Christ with the solstices and the ministrations of Zechariah, lacking knowledge of how to re-create the priestly courses, the fiction that Zechariah was High Priest serving on the Day of Atonement may have been substituted for lack of better means to explain Luke's Gospel and the traditional dates of John's and Jesus' births.

years, placing his death in AD 32 (Hippolytus, Epiphanius); still others recognized that it lasted three and a half years and so placed it in AD 33 (Eusebius). The sum of what follows will serve to demonstrate the length of Jesus' ministry, by denoting the passage of feasts and other indicia in the Gospels. The events between Christ's baptism and the wedding at Cana having already been discussed, we will begin with the first Passover of Jesus' public ministry.

### **6.1 April 5, AD 30 – First Passover of Christ's Ministry**

The synoptics record Jesus casting out those that bought and sold in the temple just prior to his crucifixion (Matt. 21:12, 13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45, 46). A similar incident in the second chapter of John's Gospel is often supposed to recount the same events (John 2:13-25). This raises the perplexing question why John would record at the beginning of his Gospel events belonging near its end? However, the better view is that they are not the same, but represent two separate but related events.<sup>63</sup>

Most will have noticed that the synoptic Gospels omit much of the early part of Jesus' ministry. After a brief mention of John the Baptist, followed by Jesus' baptism and wilderness fast and temptation, Mark skips ahead to the period following the Baptist's arrest, saying, "Now after John was cast into prison," *etc.* (Mark 1:14). Matthew and Luke do likewise (Matt. 4:12; Luke 3:19-20; *cf.* Matt. 4:12, 18-22; Luke 5:1-11). Indeed, it is the omission of large portions of the first year or two of Jesus' ministry that apparently gave birth to the so-called "short" chronology, which has it that Jesus' ministry lasted only a year and several months. One of the important contributions of John's Gospel is that it supplies these missing parts and periods, providing many details from the first weeks, months, and years of Jesus' public life. John tells us about Jesus' return to John the Baptist at Bethabara following his wilderness fast and temptation (John 1:26-34); of Jesus' first encounters with Andrew, Peter, Phillip, and Nathanael (vv. 35-51); of the wedding at Cana and Jesus' first miracle (John 2:1-11); of Jesus' exploratory journey to Capernaum with his mother, brothers, and disciples before permanently relocating there soon after John's arrest (v. 12; *cf.* Matt. 4:12, 13; 9:1); about the night-visit of Nicodemus prompted by Jesus' miracles "in Jerusalem at the Passover" (John 2:23; 3:1-21), and John's baptizing in Aenon near Salim prior to his arrest; of the growth of Jesus' ministry (vv. 22-36), and John's statement that "he must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30); about the ominous notice of the Pharisees that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (John 4:1-3), prompting his return from Judea to Galilee and his encounter with the woman of Samaria (vv. 4-42). This was followed by his second miracle in Cana of Galilee, healing the nobleman's son (vv. 43-54).

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<sup>63</sup> For a full analysis see, Allan Chapple, *Jesus' Intervention in the Temple: Once or Twice?* JETS 58 (2015) 545-569.

Since these events all occurred before John was cast into prison, they obviously belong to the earliest part of Jesus' public life and ministry, and precede the bulk of the narrative recorded in the synoptic Gospels. Moreover, the continuity and interdependence of the early chapters of John's Gospel foreclose the possibility that he has included at the beginning events belonging to its end. The better view, therefore, is that the Passover and cleansing of the temple following the wedding at Cana belong to the spring of AD 30 and is distinct from that of Jesus' final week in the spring of AD 33. This was the view of Epiphanius:

“And the Passover of the Jews was nigh,” as he says, “and Jesus went up to Jerusalem, and found the sellers of oxen, sheep, and doves in the temple, and the changers of money sitting.” And after expelling these money-changers and dove-sellers and the rest and saying, “Take these things hence and make not my Father's house a house of merchandise”—and after hearing their answer, “What sign showest thou us, seeing thou doest these things?” and telling them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”—(it was at this time that Nicodemus came to him)—and after saying a great deal, John says, “Jesus came, and his disciples, into Judaea, and there he tarried with them and baptized, and John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, for there was much water there; for John was not yet cast into prison.”<sup>64</sup>

### **6.2 December, AD 30 / February, AD 31 – Encounter with Samaritan Woman**

Jesus' encounter at the well with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42) may be dated to early February, AD 31, on the basis of Jesus' statement that there remained *four months* until harvest (v. 35). Barley was harvested in spring at the time of Passover (March – April). The first fruits of the barley harvest were presented on “the morrow following the Sabbath” after Passover (Lev. 23:9-14), and were a prophetic type of Christ's resurrection the first day of the week. The first day of the week following Passover also commenced the fifty-day period until Pentecost (Lev. 23:15-21). Pentecost was timed to correspond with the wheat harvest (vv. 16, 20). It is probably to the wheat harvest Jesus referred to here when speaking with the Samaritan woman. If so, this encounter may be dated to February, AD 31. If it was to the barley harvest, then this encounter may be pushed back to December, AD 30.

### **6.3 Late Spring / Early Fall (Pentecost or Tabernacles) AD 31 – Healing at the Sheep Pool**

John opens the narrative of Jesus' healing at the Sheep Pool by mentioning an unnamed feast of the Jews (John 5:1). Since on other occasions he typically names the feast under discussion (*e.g.*,

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<sup>64</sup> Epiphanius, “Panarion” (“Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation,”), 51.21.22-24, Vol. 79, p. 49; *cf.* Bede, “Ex quibus constat quod ea, quae antequam Joannes traderetur ab Jesu fuerant gesta, describit” (“Lucae Evangelium Expositio” in *The Complete Works of the Venerable Bede*, Vol. 10, p. 375).

Passover, Tabernacles, Dedication), it is unclear why he omits the name here. Jewish men were required to attend three feasts annually: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). There were also several feasts superadded to those given by Moses (*e.g.*, Purim, Dedication). There is nothing in the narrative that allows us to determine conclusively what feast John refers to. However, the fact that John thrice mentions Passover by name, but does not name it here, would seem to argue against it being Passover. Moreover, the narrative tells us that a great many people were lying under the porches waiting for the moving of the water (John 5:2, 3). This is probably more consistent with one of the later feasts, since cold weather in early spring would likely inhibit their lying out of doors.<sup>65</sup> Significantly, Jesus refers to John the Baptist in the past tense (John 5:33-35). This probably refers to John's arrest by Herod Antipas ending his public ministry. John was not put to death until shortly before the feeding of the five thousand and Passover, AD 32 (below). The number of events covered in the synoptics following the arrest of John but before the feeding of the five thousand argue that John was arrested fairly early in the year and may have been held in prison as many as ten months before being executed. We know that Antipas was in Jerusalem for Passover the year of Jesus' crucifixion (Luke 23:6-12). If it is assumed this was Herod's regular custom, it may have been Passover AD 31 when he came into Judea, was confronted by John the Baptist over Herodias, Philip's wife, and caused him to be arrested. If so, the gap between chapters four and five of John's Gospel cannot have been very large, making possible that Pentecost is the feast mentioned here. Epiphanius took the feast to be either Pentecost or Tabernacles.<sup>66</sup> Either way, Jesus' ministry will have spanned two Passovers; more than a year has elapsed since the first Passover when he cleansed the temple the first time; better than a year and a half has elapsed since his baptism by John in the Jordan.

#### **6.4 Spring (Passover), AD 32 – Feeding of Five Thousand**

These scenes take place just following the death of John the Baptist and the return of the apostles from the "limited commission" (Matt. 14:1-21; Mark 6:7-44; Luke 9:1-17; John 6:1-13). The grass is green (Mark 6:39), showing that it is spring in this desert climate. John tells us that Passover was near (John 6:4). The synoptic Gospels record the feeding of five thousand (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17) several chapters after the incident when the disciples were plucking ears of grain or corn while passing through some fields and were accused by the Pharisees of breaking the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-9; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1, 2). If the ears were barley, this would have occurred near Passover; if wheat, near Pentecost; if corn, sometime in summer. In any event, as this incident preceded the death of

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<sup>65</sup> At Jesus' trial before Annas, the servants and officers made a fire of coal to warm themselves, showing that even into early April Palestine experienced cold nights (Luke 22:55; John 18:18).

<sup>66</sup> Epiphanius, "Panarion," ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation,"), 51.21.28, Vol. 79, p. 50.

John the Baptist (Matt. 11:2-6; Mark 2:-28; 6:14-44; Luke 7:18-23) and could not have belonged to the spring and the feeding of the five thousand here, it must have belonged to the preceding year (AD 31), following Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria and the arrest of John. Hence, the Passover mentioned here would be the *third* of Jesus' ministry, or that of AD 32. Jesus' public ministry has spanned two and a half years.

### **6.5 Autumn, AD 32 (Tabernacles) – “If any man thirst”**

John 7:2 states that the Jews' feast of Tabernacles was near. Tabernacles commemorated the Jews' departure from Egypt and their first encampment at Succoth, which means “booths” or “tabernacles” (Ex. 12:37; Num. 33:5; *cf.* Lev. 23:39-43). Tabernacles was an autumn feast following the summer harvest and vintage. It began the fifteenth day of the seventh month (Tishri) and would have fallen in the thirty-day window running from approximately September 18<sup>th</sup> through October 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>67</sup> It was on the last day of this feast that Jesus stood in the midst of the temple and cried “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink.”

### **6.6 Early winter, AD 32 (Dedication) – “My sheep hear my voice.”**

John states that it was winter and the feast of Dedication when the Jews confronted Jesus while he was walking in the temple in Solomon's porch and made the statement “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me” (John 10:22, 23, 27). The feast of Dedication commemorated the cleansing of the temple after its desecration by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215-164 BC). The temple was re-dedicated and cleansed Casleu 25 (II Macc. 4:52; II Macc. 10:1-8). Hebrew date converters place Casleu 25 in AD 32 on December 17<sup>th</sup>. AD 32 was also a leap year.<sup>68</sup> As noted above, the Jews had a lunar calendar. Twelve lunar months is three hundred fifty-four days, about eleven days short of the solar year. To bring their calendar back into synchronization with the solar cycle, the Jews added a thirteenth month seven times in nineteen years, adding a second “Adar.” It is this extra month that carries Jesus' baptism back to Heshvan 15 (Nov. 8<sup>th</sup>), AD 29; without it, forty-two months from Christ's passion would place his baptism Tishri 15 (Oct. 11<sup>th</sup>).

### **6.7 Late winter, AD 33 – “I am the resurrection and the life.”**

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<sup>67</sup> Assuming the earliest Passover could occur was the full moon (Nisan 14) of the vernal equinox (= March 25<sup>th</sup>), the full moon should recur every twenty-nine and a half days thereafter. Six full moons would elapse between Passover and Tabernacles.  $6 \times 29.5 = 177 =$  September 18<sup>th</sup>, causing the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishri to nominally fall in the thirty-day window beginning September 18<sup>th</sup> through October 17<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>68</sup> [www.rosettacalendar.com](http://www.rosettacalendar.com); accessed 3/23/19.

Jesus uttered the above words just prior to raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:25). The vernal equinox marks the end of winter and beginning of spring. After raising Lazarus, the rulers of the Jews actively conspired to put Jesus to death (vv. 47-53). Jesus therefore would not walk openly among the Jews, but went away into the country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim (v. 54). Shortly thereafter, we are told that Passover was near at hand (v. 55). Passover (Nisan 14) fell on or about April 2<sup>nd</sup> in AD 33. Therefore, raising Lazarus probably occurred sometime toward the end of winter, perhaps a month or more before the vernal equinox.

### **6.8 Jesus' Final Week**

**Nisan 9-15 (March 28 – April 3) (Passover), AD 33** – John tells us that Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was raised, six days before Passover (John 11:55; 12:1). Hebrew date converters place Nisan 14, when the paschal lamb was slain, on Friday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>. But as we know this was a Thursday (April 2<sup>nd</sup>) in AD 33, Jesus' arrival in Bethany may be placed on Saturday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, six days before. The events of this week include:

- **Nisan 9 (Saturday, March 28)** – Supper at the home of Simon the leper; Mary anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:2, 3). Judas conceives his intention to betray Jesus.
- **Nisan 10 (Sunday, March 29)** – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; John 12:12-16).<sup>69</sup>
- **Nisan 11 (Monday, March 30)** – Jesus curses the unfruitful fig tree; second cleansing of temple (Matt. 21:12, 13; 18, 19; Mark 11:12-19; Luke 19:45-48). Bede saw Jesus' cursing the unfruitful fig tree as a mystical type pointing to heaven's divine sentence against the unbelieving and disobedient Jewish nation.<sup>70</sup>
- **Nisan 12 (Tuesday, March 31)** – Jesus' Great Denunciation upon Jerusalem; Olivet Discourse (Mark 11:20-13:37; cf. Matt. 21:23-25:46; Luke 20:1-21:37).
- **Nisan 13 (Wednesday, April 1)** – Jesus teaches again in the temple (Luke 21:38; 22:1, 2); Judas covenants to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:14-16; Mark 14:10, 11; Luke 22:3-6).

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<sup>69</sup> Hoehner places Christ's triumphal entry on Monday rather than the traditional Palm Sunday, finding an extra day between the supper in the house of Simon the leper on Saturday and Jesus' triumphal entry (Hoehner, 72, 91). However, John's Gospel makes clear that the triumphal entry occurred the "next day" after the Saturday supper in the home of Simon the leper, which therefore could not have fallen on a Monday (John 12:12-19; cf. Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9). The synoptics relate the story of the supper in Simon's home where they do (Wednesday, Nisan 13), to show the connection between Jesus' rebuke of Judas for troubling Mary for anointing Jesus' feet with spinknard and Judas' decision to betray Jesus to his enemies.

<sup>70</sup> Bede, "Marci Evangelium Expositio," *in loc*; *The Complete Works of the Venerable Bede*, editor J.A. Giles (London, 1844), Vol. 10, p. 175.

- **Nisan 14 (Thursday, April 2)** – The paschal lamb is slain at the full moon (Nisan 14) following the vernal equinox; Jesus eats Passover with the twelve disciples, instituting the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:17-35; 14:12-31; Luke 22:1-23; John 13:1, 2). Afterward, he is arrested in Gethsemane and brought before Annas and Caiaphas (Matt. 26:36-75; Mark 14:32-72; Luke 22:24-54; John 18:1-14).
- **Nisan 15 (Friday, April 3)** – Jesus is tried before Pilate and crucified (Matt. 27: 1-38; Mark 15:1-25; Luke 23:1-33; John 18:28-19:23). He dies late afternoon and his body is laid in a tomb (Matt. 27:46-50, 57-60; Mark 15:34-37, 42-46; Luke 23:46-53; John 19:30-42). Mark gives the hour of his crucifixion as third hour of the day (Mark 15:25); John gives it as the sixth (John 19:14). This is probably best explained as attributable to a custom whereby the day of Preparation, which John specifically mentions in connection with the hour Pilate gave sentence, commenced *three hours early* to allow them to accomplish the day’s work and end business early in time for the Sabbath. That such a custom existed, we have in evidence the decree of Augustus freeing Jews from attendance in courts of law after the ninth hour or about 3 pm Friday.<sup>71</sup> This coincided with the evening sacrifice after which “all business was to cease, and every kind of work to be stopped.”<sup>72</sup> But if the day’s work stopped three hours early for the Sabbath, it would seem to follow that it also commenced three hours early so that the day’s work, which necessarily included the extra preparations needed for the Sabbath, might be accomplished. If so, John would thus give the hour according to reckoning peculiar to the Preparation for the sabbath, Mark according to the actual time of day.

### **6.9 Jesus’ Sabbath Rest**

**Nisan 16 (Saturday, April 4), AD 33** – Jesus’ body lay in the tomb while his soul or spirit rested in Hadean Paradise (Luke 23:43; Acts 2:27, 31).

### **6.10 Jesus’ Resurrection**

**Nisan 17 (Sunday, April 5), AD 33** – Jesus rises from the dead toward sunrise, and appears to Mary Magdalene and the disciples (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20:1-23). He appeared to the disciples again eight days later, which would also have been a Sunday (John 20:26).

### **6.11 Jesus’ Ascension**

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<sup>71</sup> “...that they [the Jews] be not obliged to go before any judge on the Sabbath-day, nor on the day of the preparation to it, after the ninth hour.” Josephus, *Ant.* 16.6.2 (Whiston ed).

<sup>72</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as they were in the time of Christ* (1897, republished by Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1997), 122; cf. 126; Mishnah, *Pesachim* 5.1; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.4.3; *Contra Apion*, 2.8. §108).

**Jyar 25 (Thursday, May 14), AD 33** – Jesus showed himself alive by “many infallible proofs” over the course of forty days, then ascended into heaven, where he sat down on the right hand of the Father (Acts 1:3; 2:29-36; Heb. 1:3; I Pet. 3:22). Hence, there were three forty-day periods in Jesus’ life and ministry, each of which had to do with sanctification: one following his birth in the flesh before being presented in the temple; one following his baptism in preparation for his ministry; and one following his resurrection before ascending into heaven.

### **6.12 Pentecost**

**Sivan 6 (Sunday, May 24), AD 33** – Pentecost occurred fifty days from the “morrow following the Sabbath” after Passover (Lev. 23:9-14) and therefore always fell on a Sunday. Pentecost marked the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, the first gospel sermon by Peter, and the formal institution of the church. Present in Jerusalem were men and proselytes from every nation and language under heaven, so that what was put asunder at Babel was put together again in Christ.

We have now surveyed Jesus’ ministry and find that it spanned four Passovers in the space of three and a half years. John’s Gospel provides the clearest evidence of its length, expressly naming three Passovers. The first Passover (AD 30) is sometimes confused with the last (AD 33) because Jesus cleansed the temple in both. However, the continuity of the narrative, the mention of Jesus’ miracles at the feast (John 2:23; 3:2), and that John the Baptist was still actively preaching (3:23-36), make impossible that they are the same. The unnamed feast at John 5:2, between Jesus’ encounter with the woman of Samaria and the feeding of the five thousand, also presents some difficulty. However, even here the arrival of another year (AD 31) is fairly evident. Otherwise, there is no place to set the arrest and execution of John the Baptist, since he was alive in John chapters three and four, but had perished immediately prior to John chapter six (AD 32). The third Passover of Jesus’ ministry occurred following the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:4). Jesus kept the fourth and final Passover with his disciples and the following day was put to death.<sup>73</sup>

## **7. Conclusion**

The dates of December 25<sup>th</sup> and January 6<sup>th</sup> occur very early in patristic writers and the church. Bainton traces January 6<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the second century; we have argued that it may have been

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<sup>73</sup> “On the ordinary Christian interpretation, this applies to the crucifixion of our Lord, which took place, according to the received calculation, during the fourth year after his baptism by John, and the consequent opening of his ministry” (J. E. H. Thomson, “Daniel” in *The Pulpit Commentary*, eds. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, n.d.), 13:275). “Since the baptism and beginning of the public ministry preceded the first Passover in the outline, with the baptism perhaps coming in the preceding fall, it seems that a total ministry of three years plus a number of months is indicated” (Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 352).

known as early as the reign of Nero and used to associate the church with the cult of Bacchus as a dangerous and subversive sect. Based upon Africanus, a writing attributed to Evodius, and the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*, December 25<sup>th</sup> may also be traced to about the same time. That the dates find their source in paganism is demonstratively false. Every indication is that they were handed down from earliest times, preserved in the oral and written tradition of the church. Although the dates themselves do not occur in scripture, they are fully consistent therewith, if not corroborated thereby. The sum of the evidence argues forcefully that the early fathers received the dates of the nativity and Epiphany in good faith as handed down by tradition, preserved by legend and/or report. If the early fathers could receive these dates as consistent with the witness of scripture, we may also. God grant us the courage to follow where the evidence leads.

## Time Line of Jesus' Ministry

