

# The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life

Paul L. Maier

In 1968 I published an article that offered fresh evidence in support of Friday, 3 April A.D. 33, as the date of the Crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> Since then, much attention has focused on the other terminus of Jesus' life in response to recent recalculations of dates for the death of Herod the Great and the birth of Christ. Although a precise date, as in the case of the Crucifixion, still seems unattainable for the Nativity, some further refinement within the usual range of 7 to 4 B.C. is possible, which would suggest late 5 B.C. as the most probable time for the first Christmas. This time frame, along with 3 April A.D. 33 for the Crucifixion, provides a very balanced correlation of all surviving chronological clues in the New Testament, as well as the extrabiblical sources. Earlier or later dates, in either case, tend to disregard or manipulate at least one or more of the sources. Using the form of a running commentary on the relevant chronological *sedes* in the New Testament, I will respond briefly to the current status of research on each.

Paul L. Maier is Professor of History at Western Michigan University.

1. P. Maier, "Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion," *CH* 37 (1968) 3-13. Previously, A.D. 33 had been advocated by J. K. Fotheringham, "The Evidence of Astronomy and Technical Chronology for the Date of the Crucifixion," *JTS* 35 (1934) 146-62; G. Ogg, *The Chronology of the Public Ministry of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1940) 244ff.; and B. Reicke, *New Testament Era* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 183-84. Since then, this date has also been endorsed by H. W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972) 183, and *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 95ff. For the most recent support, by C. J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, see n. 27 below and their essay in this volume.

### The Nativity

#### *The Decree of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1)*

The claim that no non-Christian record exists of a universal Roman census ordered by Augustus is still valid.<sup>2</sup> The three celebrated censuses conducted by Augustus in 28 B.C., 8 B.C., and A.D. 14—Achievement No. 8 in his *Res Gestae*—are apparently enrollments of Roman citizens only, although they *may* have involved censuses in the provinces also, since some Roman citizens certainly lived outside Italy. Luke rather intends here a provincial census of noncitizens for purposes of taxation, and many records of such provincial registrations under Augustus have survived, including Gaul, Sicily, Cilicia, Cyrene, and Egypt. Among these were client kingdoms such as that of Herod the Great; for example, Archelaus (unrelated to Herod), client king of Cappadocia, instructed a subject tribe “to render in Roman fashion an account of their revenue and submit to tribute.”<sup>3</sup> Provincial enrollments are also well attested in Dio Cassius (53:22) and Livy (*Epistles* 134ff.; *Annals* 1:31, 2:6). There is also an epigraphic mention of a census by Quirinius at Apamea in Syria (an autonomous “client” city-state).<sup>4</sup>

In view of such provincial enrollments, Mason Hammond concludes that Augustus began “a general census of the whole Empire for purposes of taxation” in 27 B.C.<sup>5</sup> This is congruent with Luke 2:1, but the only chronological clue for a Nativity enrollment would have to be some relationship with the middle census of Augustus in 8 B.C. Perhaps this citizens’ census had a provincial counterpart instituted months later, although evidence is lacking.

#### *Quirinius and the Census of Judea (Luke 2:2)*

A bibliography on the vexed issue of which census and when Quirinius governed would fill pages, and the problem itself shows little hope of present solution. None of the proposed chronologies of the life of Jesus can resolve it, since the one recorded tenure of P. Sulpicius

2. See, for example, T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1888), 2/3:417; L. R. Taylor, “Quirinius and the Census of Judaea,” *American Journal of Philology* 54 (1933) 129; and R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 548-49.

3. Tacitus, *Annals* 6:41. The tribe involved (the Clitae) rebelled at the census concept in a manner parallel to the Judeans in A.D. 6.

4. H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (3d ed.; Berlin: Weidmann, 1962) 2685. Other provincial censuses are in Dessau 950, 1409, and 9011.

5. M. Hammond, *The Augustan Principate* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968) 91.

Quirinius as governor of Syria and the census he administered in Judea dates to A.D. 6, a decade after the death of Herod the Great. The suggestion that Quirinius had a previous term as governor of Syria founders on the fact that the list of the relevant Syrian governors is not only apparently complete, but well peopled with personalities who are far more than names on a stone fragment somewhere.<sup>6</sup> Two of these governors play dramatic roles on the pages of Josephus in the final years of Herod the Great: C. Sentius Saturninus (9-6 B.C.) served as judge over Herod's sons Alexander and Aristobulus at Beirut (*Jewish War* 1:538-39, *Antiquities* 16:361ff.), and P. Quintilius Varus (6-4 B.C.), victim at the Teutoberger Forest massacre, judged Herod's son Antipater in Jerusalem (*Jewish War* 1:617-18, *Antiquities* 17:89ff.).<sup>7</sup>

Since Luke links Quirinius's name with a census famous enough to merit designation simply as "the census" without further description in Acts 5:37 (Gamaliel's controversial speech), it becomes difficult to dislodge Quirinius and the Luke 2 census from a dating of A.D. 6—so difficult, in fact, that Tertullian sought to cut the Gordian knot by simply stating that the census was taken under the governorship of Saturninus instead of Quirinius (*Against Marcion* 4:19).

Those seeking to preserve Lukan accuracy had best resort to alternate translations, such as, "This enrollment was *before* that made when Quirinius was governor of Syria," which is possible according to Greek syntax and the textual variants.<sup>8</sup> An alternative suggestion turns on the idea that since it took forty years to complete one of the censuses in Gaul, the registration process could have begun under Herod, but then been completed under Quirinius, who was sent to clean up the mess left by Herod's son, Archelaus (*Antiquities* 17:355). Quirinius, in any case, helps but little in dating the Nativity.

#### *The Last Years of Herod the Great (Matt 2:1, Luke 1:5)*

Both Matthew (2:1) and Luke (1:5) agree that Herod was on the throne at the time Jesus was born. Indeed, his death between a lunar eclipse (12/13 March 4 B.C.) and the spring Passover festival (April 11) has for many years pointed to the error in our present calendar, made

6. [The list is open in 12-10 B.C., however—J. Vardaman.]

7. *Antiquities* 16:361 speaks of "governors of Syria" in the plural—Saturninus and Volumnius are intended—even though the latter was procurator. Still, this lax reference may offer some fuel to those seeking an earlier term or similar governing role for Quirinius.

8. For further discussion, see Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 394ff., 414-15, 547ff.; and Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, 13ff.

by the sixth-century Scythian monk who fathered reckoning in years B.C. and A.D. Recently, however, several scholars have claimed that Dionysius Exiguus may not have committed such a gaffe after all, particularly W. E. Filmer, who argues that the lunar eclipse of 9 January 1 B.C. was the one Josephus had in mind (*Antiquities* 17:167). By adjusting the traditional dating of Herod's accession (when he was declared king by the Romans) from 40 to 39 B.C., or (when he actually conquered Jerusalem) from 37 to 36 B.C., and using accession-year reckoning, Filmer claims to satisfy the Josephan parameters for Herod's life.<sup>9</sup>

A major difficulty in this otherwise attractive thesis is the chronology of the Herodians after Herod. Josephus's accounts of the reigns of Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip all correlate perfectly with a 4 B.C. date for their father's death—and not with 1 B.C. Filmer resorts to coregencies by which the reigns of the first two sons overlapped Herod's by several years, and he emends the text in the case of Philip to adjust his reign appropriately, but T. D. Barnes has convincingly refuted this attempt to transpose Herod's death.<sup>10</sup> Resort to coregencies is a malady that should never have infected New Testament chronological research to the extent it has. Having for years displaced the Crucifixion by three years due to the almost universal adoption of a joint rule of Augustus and Tiberius, this "solution" has now affected Nativity chronology as well. To arguments that Herod's sons and successors would try to augment the length of their reigns in this fashion, I note that Josephus was under no necessity to let them get away with it, writing as he did in Rome, under no pressure from any Herodian prince. His time grid for the Herodians holds up well enough without tampering.

Recently, P. M. Bernegger has underlined Barnes's refutation of a post-4 B.C. date for Herod's death by further elucidating Josephan chronology and confirming 37 B.C. (the year of Antigonus's death) as the start of Herod's *de facto* kingship.<sup>11</sup> Josephus's precise statements in both *Jewish War* (1:665) and *Antiquities* (17:191) that Herod reigned thirty-four years from the death of Antigonus can, by inclusive reckoning—that is, counting fractional portions of the years at the beginning and end of Herod's reign as complete years—point only to 4 B.C. as the year of his death.

9. W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *JTS* 17 (1966) 283-98. A similar chronology has been proposed by E. L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (2d ed.; Pasadena: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980).

10. T. D. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," *JTS* 19 (1968) 204-9.

11. P. M. Bernegger, "Affirmation of Herod's Death in 4 B.C.," *JTS* 34 (1983) 526-31.

Both Barnes and Bernegger, however, argue that the precise date of Herod's death need not be in March/April 4 B.C., according to the standard chronology, but may instead have occurred in December 5 B.C. The eclipse of the moon that preceded Herod's death (*Antiquities* 17:167) is usually dated 12/13 March 4 B.C., but a slightly larger eclipse of the moon was visible in Jerusalem on the night of 15/16 September 5 B.C. And since the *Megillat Ta'anit* speaks of Kislev 7 (December) as a Jewish festival, with a later commentator suggesting that this marked the date of Herod's death, an alternate reckoning would place Herod's death in December 5 B.C. Because so many events seem crowded into the time frame between March 12 and the following Passover of April 11, Barnes finds the December date "clearly preferable."<sup>12</sup>

On the contrary, the traditional dating of Herod's death in 4 B.C. seems preferable for several reasons. First, by inclusive reckoning on the Julian calendar, which Josephus regularly employs for the reign of Herod, 5 B.C. would mark only the thirty-third year since the death of Antigonus (not the thirty-fourth), and the thirty-sixth following his *de jure* kingship announced by the Romans (not the thirty-seventh, as Josephus specifies).

Next, too much time would have to be inserted between a December death for Herod in 5 B.C. and the Passover of 11 April 4 B.C. to accommodate the accounts in Josephus. In these, Herod's principal successor, Archelaus, is shown observing the customary seven days' mourning for his father, but after that, he is understandably eager to sail to Rome as soon as possible in order to gain Augustus's confirmation of Herod's will and, thus, ratification of his own kingship. He had no interest in prolonging any interim period (when his own kingship was in question) that would have violated the provisions of Herod's will, thereby endangering his own political fortunes vis-à-vis the emperor. Indeed, Archelaus even gave in to pressures from hostile demonstrations in Jerusalem "because of his intention of making his way to Rome as quickly as possible in order to learn Caesar's decision" (*Antiquities* 17:209; cf. *Jewish War* 2:8: "in haste to depart"). The Passover, however, intervened, and he could not make the trip until afterward. If the December option for Herod's death were true, affairs would have dragged on at least four months prior to the trip, which is patently improbable.

Finally, the earlier eclipse and death for Herod are extremely unlikely when considered against the background of Herod's own living

12. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," 209.

habits during the last months of his life, when advancing illness demanded optimal comforts. Josephus attaches the lunar eclipse preceding Herod's death to the night when he had burned to death the two teachers and their students who were responsible for the assault on the golden eagle that Herod had placed over the great gate of the temple. Their trial had taken place at his theater in Jericho, where Herod was apparently living at the time in his winter palace. Yet he would hardly have been living here in early September, the time of the earlier eclipse, when the Jordan valley at Jericho, over a thousand feet below sea level, is excessively hot. But he would have been staying at his winter palace in early March, the time of the later eclipse.

Against this background, the notation of Kislev 7 in *Megillat Ta'anit* as marking the presumed date of Herod's death must be interpreted for what it undoubtedly is: the untrustworthy tradition of a late scholiast.<sup>13</sup> Certainly something as significant as Herod's death—if it were commemorated as a holiday—would have been so recorded in *Megillat Ta'anit* from the start.

This leaves, then, the traditional date of Herod's death in March/April 4 B.C. Against all recent objections that Herod's funeral was too elaborate to compress into the time frame between the eclipse and the Passover, I argue that if Herod did indeed die at the close of March, the Passover would have followed inexorably—no matter whose funeral was involved—and events would have progressed almost exactly as recorded by Josephus.<sup>14</sup>

The last events in Herod's life after the eclipse of March 12 are a brief excursion (of unspecified duration) to neighboring Callirrhoe to try its medicinal waters, a summoning of Jewish leaders to the hippodrome at Jericho, and the execution of his son Antipater. Herod himself died five days after the last episode, or approximately the end of March. Counting backward from the Passover of April 11, the following occur: demonstrations against Archelaus, a seven-day mourning period, and Herod's own funeral, again pointing to the end of March for Herod's death. However, if Josephus were reckoning according to the Jewish calendar, Herod's thirty-fourth year of reign would have begun on 1 Nisan 4 B.C., or March 29. Accordingly, we should not miss the mark excessively to estimate Herod's death about 1 April 4 B.C., particularly if Josephus (as seems probable) was using the Julian calendar.

13. See Josephus, *The Jewish War* (trans. H. St. J. Thackeray; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1927), 1:314-15 n. a. [Is it possible that Kislev 7 alludes to Herod's birthday, which Jews of that period could well have observed as though it were the day of a funeral? This mocking practice would be full of biting sarcasm!—J. Vardaman]

14. Contra Martin, *Birth of Christ Recalculated*, 20ff.

*The Star and the Magi (Matthew 2)*

Granting historical problems in the Matthean account, the Star of Bethlehem *could* serve to anchor Nativity chronology were we sure of the phenomenon behind it. But the star (alas!) must always shine only as secondary or tertiary evidence for purposes of Nativity chronology, since enough celestial events seem to have filled the skies over Judea between 12 and 1 B.C. to preclude any sure conclusion. In dealing with this episode, one must resist the tendency to regard Jesus as around two years old when the magi visited (based on a confusion of Matt 2:7 and 2:16—Herod asked the magi “what time the star appeared,” not the age of Jesus). The astral event could well have preceded the birth of Jesus and been in the heavens some months before the magi made their trip. Herod might also have allowed himself an extra year leeway in the infant massacre.

Against this background, Johannes Kepler's venerable suggestion of the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7-6 B.C. remains the most attractive hypothesis for the Star of Bethlehem amid the plethora of other explanations, since 7 B.C. minus two years yields 5 B.C., the most likely date for the Nativity, as demonstrated below.<sup>15</sup> This rare conjunction also satisfies a common critical complaint about the star and the magi, best expressed by Raymond E. Brown in his authoritative *The Birth of the Messiah*:

A star that rose in the East, appeared over Jerusalem, turned south to Bethlehem, and then came to rest over a house would have constituted a celestial phenomenon unparalleled in astronomical history; yet it received no notice in the records of the times.<sup>16</sup>

But surely this critique is too literalistic an interpretation of Matthew, who implies that only the magi saw something in the heavens unique enough to draw their interest. Herod and his court did not respond to them (so far as we know), “Yes, we've been wondering about that star ourselves.” The triple conjunction would have required some astronomical sophistication—as well as astrological credulity—to induce a long trip westward, but if Jupiter (“the king's planet”) nearly impinged on Saturn (“the defender of Palestine”) three times, then, in the lore of the times, “a king is coming to Palestine,” and the magi set out.

This exhausts the chronological clues within the Christmas gospels, thus providing a terminus ad quem for the Nativity, but what about the

15. For a survey of other explanations for the Star of Bethlehem, see my *First Christmas* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971) 69-81.

16. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 188.

terminus a quo? How far in advance of March 4 B.C. was Jesus born? The answer necessarily involves further time references in the New Testament concerning Jesus' age during his maturity.

### *The Adult Ministry*

*"In the Fifteenth Year of the Reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1)*

No date in the entire Bible is given with more exactitude than Luke 3:1. Luke almost seems to grasp for our B.C.—A.D. dating system, but cannot find it. In its place, he substitutes the relational mode of defining years in terms of then-contemporary rulers, international and regional. Beginning with the Roman emperor, Tiberius, and his governor, Pontius Pilate, he goes on to list other local political and religious rulers—seven in all. Clearly, Luke is making a stronger chronological point here than in the Augustus decree (2:1) or the Quirinius census (2:2), and some scholars have deemed this the original beginning of Luke's gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Two problems, however, are associated with this verse in which Luke is at such pains to give a firm dating schema: (1) This passage determines the start of John the Baptist's ministry, not Jesus', so we must learn something of the duration of John's ministry prior to that of Jesus. (2) From what year ought Tiberius's reign be dated, in Luke's reckoning?

An active, but brief ministry, measured in months rather than years, seems postulated for John the Baptist in Matthew (chap. 3), Mark (chap. 1), and John (chap. 1). The overlap between John and Jesus is almost immediate: "The next day he saw Jesus. . . ." (John 1:29). Luke switches John's incarceration on a thematic—not chronological—pattern, although he indicates that Jesus had clearly been baptized by John by that time (3:18ff.) Accordingly, a previous ministry by John the Baptist of approximately six to nine months seems not unreasonable. Anything longer would have vitiated John's role as "forerunner" in favor of a developing following of his own. Most scholars, therefore, find this a proximate reference to the beginning of Jesus' own ministry.

The other problem, to define the "fifteenth year" of Tiberius, seeks an instinctive solution by noting that if Augustus (Tiberius's predecessor) died on 19 August A.D. 14, and the Roman Senate confirmed Tiberius as emperor on September 17, then his fifteenth regnal year would be A.D. 28 or 29, depending on whether the accession-year

17. So B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels* (London: Macmillan, 1930) 209ff.; H. J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: SPCK, 1958) 204ff.; Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 239ff.; and others.



system was used.<sup>18</sup> The simple arithmetic pointing to A.D. 28/29—which I believe accurate and what Luke intended—would probably never have been challenged had not Luke supplied another chronological clue twenty-two verses later.

*"About Thirty Years of Age" (Luke 3:23)*

Once it is established that Herod died in 4 B.C., it is apparent that Jesus' birth prior to Herod's death would have made him at least 32 or 33 in A.D. 28–29, rather than 30, as Luke states (3:23). But there is no need to rush to Luke's assistance with the wrong sort of first-aid: positing a coregency between Augustus and Tiberius in the last two years of Augustus's life, thus enabling the fifteenth year to be defined as A.D. 26 in behalf of a now-thirty year old Jesus, has skewed research into biblical chronology.

This standard reconciliation between Luke 3:1 and 3:23 has attained almost canonical status, but such a resort is absolutely unnecessary in terms of the New Testament text, as well as opposed to Roman imperial usage. First, Luke 3:23 must be translated correctly. The traditional rendition, "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age" (AV), implying that he was on the verge of attaining his thirtieth year, is not correct. Ἀρχόμενος refers rather to the beginning of his ministry, and most contemporary translations reflect this:

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age (RSV).

When Jesus began his work he was about thirty years old (NEB).

When he started to teach, Jesus was about thirty years old (JB).

Next, does Luke intend an exact registration of thirty as Jesus' age at the start of his ministry? Not with the qualifier ὡσεὶ 'about' (literally, 'as if'), which, when used with numbers and measures, has precisely the same definition as in English. Within the context of Luke's own writings, ὡσεὶ is used for the feeding of "about 5000 men" (9:14), and no one would doubt that there could have been several dozens or hundreds more or less—this very use of the larger units (dozens, hundreds) forming a parallel to Luke's usage. Similarly, Luke refers to "about 120" Jerusalem believers (Acts 1:15), "about 3000" converts at Pentecost (Acts 2:41), "about [ὡς] three months" for the duration of

18. Jack Finegan, with meticulous care and admirable objectivity, has demonstrated how the fifteenth year of Tiberius could be defined in a variety of eastern Mediterranean calendars; see his *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1964) 259–73.

Mary's stay with Elizabeth prior to John the Baptist's birth (Luke 1:56), and "about a stone's throw" for Jesus' withdrawal from the disciples at Gethsemane (Luke 22:41). Not one of these references intends mathematical precision, but rather an approximation to the nearest integral unit or round number.

Apart from Luke, the other evangelists use ὥσπερ and ὡς in precisely the same manner, as do nonbiblical authors of the time.<sup>19</sup> Xenophon writes of "about 300" victims at a battle late in the Peloponnesian War (*Hellenica* 1:2:9) and of "about 70" horsemen (*Hellenica* 2:4:25), while Josephus has David amassing "about 400" followers at the Cave of Adullam (*Antiquities* 6:247) and Judas Maccabaeus killing "about 800" Syrians in battle (*Antiquities* 12:292). In this context, Luke's "about thirty" could well serve for any actual age ranging from 26 to 34, before and after which (presumably) the middle 5 might intrude before attraction to the next adjacent round number, 20 or 40 in this case. If Jesus was born in late 5 B.C., his age in A.D. 28–29 would have been 32 (since there in no 0 year, dates move from 1 B.C. to A.D. 1). Obviously, an age of 32 or 33 easily falls within the flexible parameters of ὥσπερ.

The coregency device also flies in the face of Roman custom of that day. Unquestionably, Tiberius had *proconsular imperium* over the provinces along with Augustus from A.D. 12 on, but no source—Roman or otherwise—claims Tiberius as full *princeps* or emperor before his succession in 14. Nor was Tiberius the sort to poach on Augustus's turf once he controlled the empire: no shred of evidence exists in any of his inscriptions or coinage to support such an overlap. Certainly Tiberius knew he could never implement such a claim since he was an unpopular emperor following no less than "the Father of the Fatherland."

In terms of historiography, the coregency also has no basis. The principal sources for this era—Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius—all date Tiberius's reign to full calendar years after the death of Augustus, as do the epigraphy, coinage, and papyri.<sup>20</sup> And since Luke-Acts is addressed to a "most excellent [κράτιστε] Theophilus" (Luke 1:3), a form of address used elsewhere by Luke only for a Roman official (Acts

19. Compare Matt 14:21; John 4:6, 6:10; 19:14. Other references in Luke include an interval of "about an hour" before the third challenge to Peter in Caiaphas's courtyard (Luke 22:59) and "about the ninth hour" for Cornelius's vision in Caesarea (Acts 10:3).

20. See Fotheringham, "Astronomy and Technical Chronology," 146ff. See especially his reference to Oscar Kästner, "De Aeris quae ab imperio Caesaris Octaviani constituto initium duxerint" (Inaugural diss., Leipzig, 1890), on double-dated coins from Antioch and Seleucia, which show Tiberius' regnal years in terms of the Actian era. All date to his succession in A.D. 14. Significantly, many scholars posit an Antiochene provenance for Luke-Acts.

23:26, 24:3), the gospel was probably written for gentile Greco-Roman consumption and would hardly have ignored normal Roman chronology. Finally, evidence given below will demonstrate that to date the Crucifixion in A.D. 33 (rather than in 30) would extend Jesus' ministry too far—if it had already begun in A.D. 26 on the basis of a coregency for the "fifteenth year."

*"Forty-six Years This Temple Has Been Built" (John 2:20)*

When Jerusalemites requested a sign from Jesus at the first Passover, he responded, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). To which his opponents replied (in traditional translation), "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" Calculating the start of Herod's Temple construction as 19 B.C. (from Josephus), Finegan posits A.D. 27/28 as the date of the statement if a continuing building operation is what the passage intends—or A.D. 29/30 if dating from the completion of the sanctuary, which was built in one year and five months according to Josephus (*Antiquities* 15:420–21).<sup>21</sup> The latter interpretation would seem indicated by the verb οἰκοδομήθη 'was built', an aorist passive denoting a completed building operation, not one still going on. If it actually took one year and five months to build the temple proper or sanctuary (ναός, used in both John 2:20 and Josephus), then A.D. 29/30 is probable, and the meaning of the Jews' response is: "Rebuild in three days something that has stood for forty-six years?!"<sup>22</sup>

*"Not Yet Fifty Years Old" (John 8:57)*

Jesus told a hostile crowd, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad"; to which they responded derisively, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" (John 8:57). This verse has extremely low utility for any chronology of the life of Jesus, and of the church fathers only Irenaeus, strangely, thought otherwise (*Against Heresies* 2:22:6). Irenaeus's claim for a much older Jesus would have been impressive had he reported it as a common tradition, perhaps via Polycarp and others, but he does not. Instead, his sole source is this very passage, and his purpose is theological rather than chronological. The context shows a crowd furious enough to stone Jesus inside the temple (John 8:59), and the meaning of this reference is "Abraham died centuries ago, but this

21. Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, 276–80.

22. I have discussed this issue in detail in my "Sejanus, Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion," 4–5; see also Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, 276–80.

TABLE 1. *Chronology of the Life of Jesus*

Date	Event
Nov.-Dec. 5 B.C.	Nativity
Nov.-Dec. 1 B.C.	Jesus' fourth birthday
Nov.-Dec. A.D. 1	Jesus' fifth birthday
Nov.-Dec. A.D. 28	Jesus' thirty-second birthday
A.D. 29	Fifteenth year of Tiberius (by Roman reckoning), extending from 1 January to 31 December A.D. 29 (Luke 3:1)
	Ministry of John the Baptist early in the year and extending throughout A.D. 29
	Baptism and start of public ministry of Jesus, probably in the fall, since the Jordan valley is extremely hot during the summer months; Jesus "about thirty" (Luke 3:23)
Nov.-Dec. A.D. 29	Jesus' thirty-third birthday
A.D. 30	First Passover, forty-six years after the priests finished building the temple edifice proper (John 2:20)
A.D. 31	Second Passover
A.D. 32	Third Passover
A.D. 33	Final Passover
Friday, 3 April A.D. 33	Crucifixion

deceiver isn't even one century old, or even half a century old!" The attraction of round numbers only reinforces the comments on Luke 3:23 above.

### *The Crucifixion*

The net results of all the chronological references above are incorporated in Table 1.<sup>23</sup> Briefly summarized, with the mission of John the Baptist beginning in A.D. 28/29, and Jesus' first public Passover in 29 or 30, the Passover of Good Friday should have been at least two and probably three Passovers later, since three Passovers are specifically cited in the Fourth Gospel (2:13, 6:4, 11:55), while a fourth is implied.

23. Compare the similar tables in Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, 270 and 301.

This would allow a range of dates from A.D. 31 to 33 for the Crucifixion. But which year is the most probable?

The Fourth Gospel (19:14) states that Jesus was crucified on "the day of Preparation for the Passover" when the Passover lamb was slain—defined in Exod 12:6 as Nisan 14. And since all the gospels report Jesus' Crucifixion on the day before the Sabbath (Saturday), it is only necessary to determine when Nisan 14 fell on a Friday in the years appropriate (specified above). J. K. Fotheringham and others have calculated this date and found that Nisan 14 fell on a Friday in both A.D. 30 and 33: 7 April A.D. 30 and 3 April A.D. 33.<sup>24</sup>

The evidence for the latter is overpowering. The former would demand resurrection of the moribund device of a coregency between Augustus and Tiberius to make room for three Passovers prior to the Crucifixion. There is also fresh evidence to support A.D. 33 from the context of Roman imperial politics. In another study, I have demonstrated the startling shift in imperial policy vis-à-vis the Jews that took place after 18 October A.D. 31, when L. Aelius Sejanus, Tiberius' anti-Semitic Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, was executed. Briefly stated, Pontius Pilate's aggressive, anti-Judaic conduct prior to A.D. 31 contrasts sharply with his defensive posture after that date, in accord with Tiberius's new directives to favor Jews throughout the Roman Empire. In this context, the prosecution's threat on Good Friday at the trial of Jesus—"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend; every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar" (John 19:12)—would have made no sense whatever prior to A.D. 31 and Pilate would cheerfully have disregarded it. But it reflects perfectly the political climate after that date and the cowed reaction of the Roman governor.<sup>25</sup>

If the Nativity has its star, the Crucifixion has its mysterious darkness. Phlegon, a Greek from Caria writing a chronology soon after A.D. 137, reported that in the fourth year of the 202d Olympiad there was "the greatest eclipse of the sun" and that "it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that the stars even appeared in the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea." An eclipse, of course, was impossible at

24. Fotheringham, "Astronomy and Technical Chronology," 146ff.; and R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology: 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence: Brown University, 1956) 34-69.

25. The detailed arguments set forth in my "Sejanus; Pilate, and the Date of the Crucifixion" have not been refuted to date. See also my "The Episode of the Golden Roman Shields at Jerusalem," *HTR* 62 (1969) 109-21; and *Pontius Pilate* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968).

that time, but how intriguing that Year 4 of the 202d Olympiad should be A.D. 33!<sup>26</sup>

Finally, and most recently, C. J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, using refined astronomical calculations, have not only reaffirmed Fotheringham's conclusion that 7 April A.D. 30 and 3 April A.D. 33 are the only possible calendrical candidates for the first Good Friday, but they also strongly support the latter by citing a lunar eclipse that took place that evening, thereby corroborating the reference in Peter's speech to Pentecost about the "moon turning into blood" (Acts 2:20).<sup>27</sup>

On many bases, then, 3 April A.D. 33 makes a strong claim as the date of the Crucifixion.

### *Chronological Conclusions*

The birth of Jesus is most widely dated between 7 and 4 B.C., but further refinement within this range now seems possible. The terminus ad quem, the first week of April 4 B.C., must certainly be advanced by several months at the very least. Too much occurred between the birth of Jesus and the death of Herod to crowd into the early weeks of 4 B.C., as seen in Table 2. The events listed here required an estimated minimum of fourteen weeks—and the sojourn in Egypt could have been considerably longer—thereby excluding 4 B.C., since Herod lived only thirteen or fourteen weeks in this year.

But what of the terminus a quo? How far back into 5 or 6 B.C., or even earlier, was the birth of Jesus? Certainly Herod's massacre of infants "two years old and under" (Matt 2:16) establishes 7 B.C. as the limit, even though this refers to the star rather than the birth of Jesus and is of little help chronologically.<sup>28</sup>

A cluster of evidence, however, urges a date for the birth of Jesus as late as possible, up to the forward limit. The qualifier ὥσει for Jesus being "about thirty years of age" at the start of his ministry will stretch only so far, and a dating back to 6 or 7 B.C. would make him 34 or 35 at

26. My translation from the fragmentary thirteenth book of Phlegon, *Olympiades he Chronika*, in *Rerum naturalium scriptores graeci minores* (ed. O. Keller; Leipzig: Teubner, 1877), 1:101. An actual eclipse of the sun was impossible on Nisan 14 since the Passover occurred at the time of the full moon.

27. C. J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, "Dating the Crucifixion," *Nature* 306 (22 Dec. 1983) 743-46. See also their essay in this volume.

28. While the historicity of the infant massacre has been called into question, along with most of the Matthean Nativity account, arguments for its validity are impressive; see my "The Infant Massacre—History or Myth?" *Christianity Today* 20 (19 December 1975) 7-10; and R. T. France, "Herod and the Children of Bethlehem," *NovT* 21 (1979) 98-120.

TABLE 2. Events between Jesus' Birth and Herod's Death

Event	Number of Weeks
<i>Purification of Mary and Presentation of Jesus</i>	6
Lev 12:2-4 specifies that a woman is ritually unclean for 33 days after the circumcision of a male child and can come to the sanctuary only after 40 days have elapsed. Six weeks includes two days for travel to and from Jerusalem.	
<i>Visit of the Magi</i>	1
Included here are Herod's awaiting the return of the Magi and the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem. (See n 28 for a discussion of the historicity of the massacre.)	
<i>Flight to Egypt and sojourn there</i>	3 OR 4
Even if Jesus' family merely fled over the border to Gaza—which seems doubtful according to any existing traditions—a minimal duration of three or four weeks is required (not including the return to Judea).	
<i>Herod's final illness</i>	3
This is an arbitrary guess for the duration of Herod's incapacitating final illness, which Josephus describes in repulsive detail. Herod tried desperately to cure himself, primarily at Jericho and Callirrhoe (the hot springs at the northeastern end of the Dead Sea). The Magi could hardly have found him in Jerusalem at this time or, if this had been the time of one of his last visits to the Jerusalem palace, surely Matthew would have made reference to Herod's malady.	
<i>Total:</i> 13 or 14 weeks	

that point, and thus a candidate for the next round number, "about forty years of age." Moreover, the testimony of the church fathers—disappointingly conflicting in matters chronological, particularly as regards the Crucifixion date—achieves some unanimity in assigning the years 3 or 2 B.C. for the birth of Jesus by correspondence with the regnal years of Augustus and other Roman emperors.<sup>29</sup>

While 3/2 B.C. is, of course, too late for the Nativity and may well have been based on counting backward from the Lukan "about thirty years of age"—the fathers using the same sources as we do—other evidence also appears to juxtapose the events of the Nativity into a rather short time frame. Justin Martyr, for example, claims the Magi visited "as soon as the child was born" (*Dialogue with Trypho* 88). In any case, there is much forward pressure on the date of Nativity, which

29. Finegan, *Biblical Chronology*, 222-30.

brings December 5 B.C. into focus. (This is, of course, "embarrassing" because it seems so very "uncritical" to opt for a date like this, which, in terms of our present celebration on December 25, was determined in the fourth century!)

If, however, the year 5 B.C. is posited as the twelvemonth that best satisfies all the evidence, is any further refinement possible aside from the forward pressure above? Finegan has demonstrated some patristic evidence for a spring conception and winter birth of Jesus.<sup>30</sup> It is especially interesting to note that John Chrysostom's defense of the Western date for Christmas, December 25, seems to have turned the tide against the Eastern date, January 6 (*Homily on Philogonius*, Dec 20, A.D. 386). Chrysostom, basing his argument on the earlier claim of Hippolytus, cleverly reckons back to the announcement in the temple to Zechariah that he would father John the Baptist. Luke identifies Zechariah as a "priest of the division of Abijah" (1:5), and Chrysostom assumed that he was high priest at the time and the occasion involved was the Day of Atonement followed by the Feast of Tabernacles (Tishri 10-15 or September 20-25). The Annunciation to Mary took place six months later according to Luke 1:26, or around March 25, with Christmas of course nine months later.

This interesting calculation (only sketched in the paragraph above) is based on the premise that Zechariah was high priest, but there is no evidence for this or the claimed festivals involved. Alfred Edersheim worked instead from Luke's reference that Zechariah's priestly division, Abijah, might be datable in terms of service in the temple. A Mishna tradition, *b. Ta'an. 29a*, states that at the time the temple was destroyed, the course of Jehoiarib was on duty, the first of the twenty-four priestly courses (1 Chr 24:7-18), of which Abijah's was the eighth. The destruction occurred on 9 or 10 Ab A.D. 70 (August 4 or 5); this date is confirmed by Josephus (*Jewish War* 6:220, 250, where *Lous* equals *Ab*). Counting the priestly courses backward to 6 B.C., Edersheim found the Abijah course on duty the week of October 2-9, quite close to Chrysostom's reckoning, although he rightly admits that "absolute reliance cannot be placed on such calculations."<sup>31</sup> (The course of Abijah would also have been on duty twenty-six weeks earlier.)

A preliminary computer study that I authorized finds February 10 and July 28 in the year 6 B.C. as the two dates on which the course of

30. *Ibid.* However, arguments as to when sheep would have been in the fields are indeterminate, since sheep in the Bethlehem area destined for temple sacrifice were continually in the fields.

31. A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (London: Longmans, Green, 1883; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936), 2:705.



Abijah would have begun its week of duty in the temple, using the same bases for calculation as above.<sup>32</sup> If the temple episode were dated approximately August 1 and Elizabeth conceived "after these days" (Luke 1:24)—two weeks?—Jesus' conception would come six (apparently lunar) months later.<sup>33</sup> This would move the Annunciation to Mary from March to February, and the Nativity from December to November.

A recent study by Roger T. Beckwith, however, denies that the twenty-four priestly courses followed one another inexorably regardless of the year involved.<sup>34</sup> While a six-year cycle based on the solar year controlled these courses at Qumran, the orthodox lunar calendar at Jerusalem seems to have compelled a recommencing of the cycle each year, beginning with the course of Jehoiarib on the sabbath on or immediately preceding Tishri 1. But because leap-year months (Second Adar) had to be included so frequently in the Jerusalem lunar calendar, and the starting point for the twenty-four courses and their progress is still much debated, this device has only questionable utility in establishing the Nativity month.

A better solution may be to recall again the earliest patristic date for the first Christmas, that given by Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromateis* (written about A.D. 194). Not only is it the earliest, but it is also the most exactly specified date: "From the birth of Christ . . . to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety-four years, one month, thirteen days" (1:21:145). Since Commodus was murdered on 31 December 192, this fixes Clement's date for the Nativity as 18 November 3 B.C. While this is two years too late—an error forgivable in the absence of published records in those days—what is impressive are the fixed points involved in producing this date, for which the *time of year* would be much more easily remembered by the Egyptian church than the exact tabulation of the years since the Nativity. Clement knew categorically the date of Commodus's death since he wrote just two years afterward, and the date itself was unforgettable since it was the last day of the year in the Julian calendar. When he calculated the Nativity on November 18, then—in specific relation to so fixed a terminus as the end of the year—he gives not only the earliest patristic reference to the Nativity, but probably the most accurate one in terms

32. Courtesy of E. W. Faulstich of Ruthven, Iowa.

33. At the time of the Annunciation of Mary, Elizabeth was in her sixth month (Luke 1:26); but Mary stayed with her about three months and still left before the baby was born (Luke 1:56), suggesting a pregnancy of ten lunar months (280 days). See the discussion in Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 264.

34. R. T. Beckwith, "St. Luke, the Date of Christmas, and the Priestly Courses at Qumran," *RevQ* 9 (1977) 73-96.

of month and day. It also corresponds perfectly with the parameters of the chronology of the life of Christ as detailed above.

Because December 25 barely escapes the improbable time limitation of 4 B.C. and because it is suspect as coincidental with what was then deemed to be the winter solstice, not to mention its late observance in the early church, the November date is clearly preferable. In any case, a date late in 5 B.C. for the Nativity seems an optimal conclusion on the basis of all surviving evidence in the New Testament and beyond. A resulting chronology for the life of Jesus appears in Table 1.