

THE CHRISTMAS STORY (The Birth of Christ)

Purpose: To examine the scriptural integrity of the gospels concerning the birth of Jesus Christ in the midst of a needy but skeptical world.

Motivation: War on Christmas? The enemies greatest weapon is ignorance. When was Jesus born? How long did he live in Egypt? Where was Jesus when the wise men found him? Plays and skits are not sufficient instruction for mature saints. We need a better understanding if we are to carry the gospel message to a needful but sceptical world.

Introduction: In today's lesson, we will attempt to answer these questions as we encourage you to search the scriptures to see whether those things are so just as the Bereans of Macedonia did in the days of the Apostles (Acts 17:10).

When was Jesus Born?

In an attempt to establish the time of Christ's birth and explain why Jesus was born in Bethlehem and not Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph lived, Luke begins his account:

Luke 2:1 *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*

Luk 2:2 (*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

otherwise known as: (**Caius Sulpicius Quirinus**)

Matthew reported, "*Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king...*" (Matthew 2:1).

Cyrenius, didn't become governor of Syria until around 6 AD - 10 years after the death of Herod the Great. A contradiction? (Robert Green

Ingersoll, known as “The Great Agnostic” by some and “The Great Infidel” by others)

However, Cyrenius was in charge of Roman military matters in Syria between the period of 6 - 4 BC which was during the reign of Herod. This made him a likely candidate to enforce a census which would have been necessary before a tax could be collected.

Note: Luke 2:2 - “(this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)”

Thus, the gospels of Matthew and Luke are in perfect agreement. Jesus was born toward the end of the reign of Herod The Great and during the census that occurred between 6 - 4 BC.

If we can answer some other important questions we can narrow the date of Christ's birth down even further. The first question is:

How Long Did Jesus Spend in Egypt?

If you will remember, at the time of the wise men's visit, Herod had ordered that all children born in the vicinity of Bethlehem from two years old and under be killed (Matthew 2:16). There is evidence to suggest that the young family may have spent less than six months in Egypt, returning to Israel after Herod's death in 4 BC (Matthew 2:20-21). If this is true, then Jesus would have been born in 5 BC. Let's look at the evidence for this:

First, we see that Luke reports the parents of Jesus, “*went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover* (Luke 2:41).

The law of Moses required all males to appear before the Lord three times per year at the feasts of passover, pentecost and tabernacles (Ex 23:17).

While it is possible that Joseph went to Jerusalem alone from Egypt it is just as likely that Jesus at 6 months old accompanied his family to that first passover after his birth. How can this be?

Well, according to Josephus, a well known Jewish historian of the time, Herod died between a lunar eclipse and Passover. As a matter of fact, there was a lunar eclipse 29 days before Passover in 4 BC on March 13th. This would have allowed Joseph as much as 28 days to reach Jerusalem . (It's Approx 418 miles from Egypt to Jerusalem. Traveling 10 hours per day on foot at about 2 miles per hour would take about 21 days to make this trip).

How did Joseph know when Herod was dead? According to Matthew's gospel the angel of the Lord told him:

Mat 2:19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

Mat 2:20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

To remain true to both the Law and Luke's statement, that Christ's parents celebrated every Passover in Jerusalem, Joseph would have had to keep the previous Passover as well. Plus the other feasts as well. Is this possible?

According to Luke's account the shepherds were abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night when the angels announced the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8).

According to Clarke's commentary on this verse, **It was a custom among the Jews** to send out their sheep to the deserts, around the time of the passover (mid April), and bring them home at the commencement of the first rain (early October). This means, the shepherds were in the fields from Mid April thru early October. (May be why there was room in the stables)

Joseph could have celebrated all three festivals in the year 5 BC, attend the birth of his son, go to Egypt and return by Mid April of 4 BC after Herod's death.

- He could have celebrated the Feast of Passover in Mid April in 5 BC.
- He could have also celebrated Pentecost in late May or early June in 5 BC.
- Then he could have celebrated the Feasts of Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles in Jerusalem in late September to Early October of 5 BC. It should be noted that Bethlehem was less than 6 miles from Jerusalem and the Feast of Tabernacles is called by the Jews, “Sukkot” meaning “The Feast of Our Joy.” No wonder, we sing the song Joy to the World, the Lord is come, let heaven and earth receive her king.
- Shortly after this but, while the shepherds were still abiding in the field Jesus would have been born (Late September to early October, 5 B.C.).

Less than 6 Months Spent in Egypt

This means that Joseph, Mary and Jesus spent less than six months in Egypt. How is this figured?

Matthew 2:

¹ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Why did they come to Jerusalem? They were looking for a king. What better place to find a king than in the palace at Jerusalem? **The Prophet Balaam** had prophesied:

I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17).

So they asked King Herod, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?”

Matthew 2:

³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

⁵ **And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,**

The prophet they are referring to is the **Prophet Micah:**

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. (Micah 5:2)

Matthew 2:

⁷ **Then Herod**, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

⁹ **When they had heard the king**, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

Where was the young child?

Not in a manger in Bethlehem with the shepherds and sheep, though the wise men may have looked for him there. No, they found him in a house, which most lwas the home of Joseph and Mary in Nazareth.

Matthew 2:

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

¹¹ **And when they were come into the house**, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

Now if all the scripture is to line up giving evidence of the truth, then we have to consider some of the **events that took place immediately after the birth** of Christ and before the visit of the wise men.

According to Luke 2:21 Jesus was circumcised according to the law 8 days after his birth (Lev 12:3).

He was later **presented in the Temple at Jerusalem** after the period of Mary's purification with the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (Luk 2:24). This would have been after 40 days from birth according to Leviticus 12:3-4.

Then according to Luke, *And when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.* (Luke 2:39)

This would have been before the wise men found Jesus because the couples offering of two turtle doves (Lev 12:8) was considered the sacrifice of poor person. Had they been given the gold, frankincense and myrr by the wise men before this, they would have been required to present a more substantial offering of a lamb (Lev 12:8).

CONCLUSION: So, we can conclude that after Christ's birth in late September or early October of 5 BC, the family remained in Jerusalem for a little over a month. And, after the departure of the wise men, *the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.* (Matthew 2:13).

And Joseph took Jesus, most likely, that very night and departed to Egypt. This means, he would have been in Egypt from roughly December of the year 5 BC until about mid March in 4 BC until Joseph returned after Herod's death to celebrate the Passover.