

# When Was Jesus Born?

by John O. Reid (1930-2016)

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We are approaching the time of the year when the world celebrates the supposed birth of Jesus Christ. The jingles on the radio and television invade our sanity earlier every year, and the decorations now go up before Halloween! Anywhere we go, Christmas "cheer" is inescapable. For most of us, this is a season we struggle through, wishing it would rush by and be over.

Yet it is also a season that requires us to be on our guard. Since we do not celebrate Christmas, we often stick out in a crowd. Such a difference piques the curiosity of some, and they may ask why we do not keep it. If we respond, "Christ was not born on December 25," can we prove it? If He was not born on that date, then when was He born? What are the facts?

When this subject is broached, many Protestants and Catholics become quite emotional, often becoming firmly entrenched concerning the December 25 date in spite of the facts. Many simply enjoy the season and feel that the actual day of Christ's birth is irrelevant. Biblical and historical scholars are equally divided over this question as well. Christmas, however, is founded on the premise that Jesus was born on December 25, and a person who is truly striving to follow the Bible will see that the celebration of Christmas is based upon falsehood.

## The Clues in Luke's Gospel

On the surface, the accounts of Matthew and Luke reveal little about the time of Jesus' birth. No dates are given, no season of the year is named. As a well-regarded historian, Luke, however, provides a sound, orderly account of the events that removes any doubt as to the general time of Jesus' birth. All the clues are there, and all that is required is to dig them out and put them in order to discover the truth.

In a long section covering Luke 1:5 through 2:8, Luke writes of a specific series of events in chronological order. He begins by telling the story of Zacharias, a priest, and his wife Elizabeth, who were childless. While administering his priestly duties during the course of Abijah, Zacharias was visited by the angel Gabriel, who told him that his prayers had been answered and that he and Elizabeth would have a son. They were to name him John.

Because Zacharias doubted that this would happen, Gabriel informed him that he would not be able to speak until the birth of his son. As soon as his service in the Temple was completed, he returned to his own house. Elizabeth soon conceived and hid herself five months, unsure of how her pregnancy would be viewed.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Gabriel visited Mary and informed her, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call His name Jesus" (verse 31). Soon thereafter, Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth and stayed with her until the latter's ninth month, leaving just prior to John's birth. Jesus, then, was born approximately six months after John.

What information do we have up to this point?

- » Zacharias, a priest, performed his duties during the course of Abijah.
- » After he returned home from Jerusalem, Elizabeth conceived.
- » Mary conceived in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy.
- » John was born approximately six months before Jesus.

## **The Course of Abijah**

To date Jesus' birth, we need a starting point. Fortunately, Luke supplies one in mentioning "the course of Abijah" (Luke 1:5). Is it possible to know if this course existed then, when it fell during the year, and how long it lasted?

Indeed it is!

I Chronicles 24 lists the courses, divisions or shifts of the priesthood that served in the Temple throughout the year. Verse 1 states, "These are the divisions of the sons of Aaron." Among the sons of Eleazar were sixteen heads of their father's house, while among the sons of Ithamar were eight additional heads of house, making twenty-four courses (verse 4).

These courses of priests were divided by lot to be officials of the sanctuary and of the house of God (verse 5). Beginning on Nisan 1, these courses rotated throughout the year, serving in the Temple for one week apiece. The course of Abijah, the course during which Zacharias was responsible to work, was the eighth shift (verse 10).

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian—who was, by the way, of the priestly lineage of the course of Jehoiarib, the first course—supplies further information about the priestly courses.

"He [David] divided them also into courses: and when he had separated the priests from them, he found of these priests twenty-four courses, sixteen of the house of Eleazar and eight of that of Ithamar; and he ordained that one course should minister to God [during] eight days, from [noon] Sabbath to [noon on the following] Sabbath. And thus were the courses distributed by lot, in the presence of David, and Zadok and Abiathar the high priest, and of all the rulers: and that course which came up first was written down as the first, and accordingly the second, and so on to the twenty-fourth; and this partition hath remained to this day" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 7:14.7).

These courses were strictly followed until the Temple was destroyed in AD 70.

The Talmud describes the details of the rotation of courses, beginning on Nisan 1. With only twenty-four courses, obviously each course was required to work twice a year, leaving three extra weeks. (The Hebrew year normally has fifty-one weeks. Intercalary, or leap, years have an additional four weeks.) The three holy day seasons, Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, during which all the courses were required to serve, made up these three extra weeks. Thus, each of the courses worked five weeks out of the year: two in their specific courses and three during the holy day seasons.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Messiah (Malachi 3:1; Luke 1:13-17). The gospel accounts make it very clear that he was born about half a year before Jesus was born. From historical

details in Luke's account especially, as well as the accuracy of the Seventy Weeks prophecy (see "Seventy Weeks Are Determined . . .," p. 2), it is clear that Jesus was born sometime in 4 BC. This means, counting back the nine months of gestation and the six-month difference in age, John must have been conceived in the first half of 5 BC.

This fact forces us to choose the first shift of the course of Abijah as the time when Gabriel visited Zacharias in the Temple. Frederick R. Coulter, in his *A Harmony of the Gospels* (p. 9), computes it this way:

In the year 5 BC, the first day of the first month, the month of Nisan, according to the Hebrew Calendar, was a Sabbath. According to computer calculation synchronizing the Hebrew Calendar and the stylized Julian Calendar, it was April 8. Projecting forward, the assignments course by course, and week by week, were: Course 1, the first week; Course 2, the second week; all Courses for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread, the third week; Course 3, the fourth week; Course 4, the fifth week; Course 5, the sixth week; Course 6, the seventh week; Course 7, the eighth week; Course 8, the ninth week; and all courses [sic] the tenth week, which was the week of Pentecost.

Zacharias of the course of Abijah worked the ninth week in his assigned course and the tenth week in the Pentecost course, and this period ran from Iyar 27 through Sivan 12 (Hebrew calendar) or June 3 through 17 (Julian calendar). He probably returned home immediately after his shifts were completed, and Elizabeth most likely conceived in the following two-week period, June 18 through July 1, 5 BC.

With this information we can calculate Elizabeth's sixth month as December, during which Mary also conceived (Luke 1:26-38). It is probable, because of the circumstances shown in Luke 1, that Mary conceived during the last two weeks of Elizabeth's sixth month. Thus, John was born in the spring of 4 BC, probably between March 18 and 31. By projecting forward another six months to Jesus' birth, the most probable time for His birth occurred between September 16 and 29. It is an interesting sidelight that Tishri 1, the Feast of Trumpets, is one of the two middle days of this time period.

### **Flocks in the Fields**

There is additional proof that Jesus was born in the fall of the year. The census of Quirinius that required Joseph to travel from Galilee to Bethlehem would most probably have taken place after the fall harvest when people were more able to return to their ancestral homes (Luke 2:1-5). Besides, it was customary in Judea to do their tax collecting during this period, as the bulk of a farmer's income came at this time.

Another point is that Joseph and Mary had to find shelter in a barn or some other kind of animal shelter like a cave or grotto because the inns were full (verse 7). This indicates that the pilgrims from around the world had begun to arrive in Jerusalem and surrounding towns. Thus, the fall festival season had already commenced. There would have been no similar influx of pilgrims in December.

Also, as the shepherds were still in the fields with their flocks (verse 8), Jesus' birth could not have occurred during the cold-weather months of winter. Sheep were normally brought into centrally located pens or corrals as the weather turned colder and the rainy season began, especially at night. If this were not significant, it begs the question, "Why would Luke have mentioned it in such detail if not to convey a time reference?"

Notice what commentator Adam Clarke writes regarding this:

It was a custom among the Jews to send out their sheep to the deserts [wilderness], about the passover [sic], and bring them home at the commencement of the first rain: during the time they were out, the shepherds watched them night and day. As the passover [sic] occurred in the spring, and the first rain began early in the month of Marchesvan, which answers to part of our October and November, we find that the sheep were kept out in the open country during the whole of the summer. And as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could He have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact, which casts considerable light on this disputed point. (*Clarke's Commentary*, vol. V, p. 370)

Why is it important that we know when Jesus was born? We certainly do not use this knowledge to celebrate His birthday—He tells us to commemorate His death, not His birth (I Corinthians 11:23-26). The true date, however, destroys the entire foundation of the Christmas holiday. It also points to the proper time of His ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, helping to disprove the Good Friday—Easter Sunday tradition also. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, it renews our faith in God's Word—that it is true, verifiable and historically accurate.

In addition, we should know even these details so that we can provide common-sense reasons for our beliefs. We live in a world of compromise and confusion—especially in the realm of religion—and thus we must study and follow what is true so we will not be fooled by what is counterfeit. The Christmas season promotes a lie concerning the date of the birth of Jesus Christ. We need to do more than reject the world's explanation; we need to know, prove and follow what is true.