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25th December? Was the Bethlehem Birth Prophesied?

The dangers of precision

The Bible does not give the date of birth of the Lord Jesus. We may question, in any case, whether any real importance attaches to the actual date. It may be that God, in His wisdom, ensured that the precise date shall remain a mystery simply to prevent too much superstition surrounding it, and the birth of Jesus becoming too prominent in the minds of Christians. Whilst the birth of the Lord Jesus is an historic fact, He did not come into the world in order to give us an annual jamboree. He came to achieve the purpose of God to make available the possibility of a right relationship between man and God, a relationship summarised in one word—salvation. We might also reflect on the fact that the celebration called ‘Christmas’ in the Western world today has, to a large extent, been hijacked by secular and commercial interests—something we may assume that God foresaw. So, if ‘Christmas’ had become even more prominent in the minds of Christians, by virtue of a known historic date, this could do more harm than good to non-believers as they see the true meaning of the celebration being thoroughly subordinated to other interests. Perhaps God has guarded against this by keeping the precise date a mystery.

Some Christians have distanced themselves from an excessive focus on Christmas as a celebration. Non-Christian cults, such

as the Jehovah's Witnesses, refuse to have anything to do with Christmas because, they say, it is idolatrous. These cults deny the deity and Lordship of Jesus. Other religions, for example the Muslim faith, deny that Jesus is God's Son (though they defend the virgin-conception) and deny the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet other religions, such as the Hindu faith, view Christ as just one of many 'gods' and are to that extent willing to tolerate Christmas as a celebration.

For Christians, and by this term is meant believing and renewed followers of the Lord Jesus in the sense of John 3:16, there is a difficult dividing line between genuine rejoicing at the birth of the Lord Jesus and becoming part of a false and often very ugly habit of excess which coincides with the Christmas season. Without, then, wishing to arouse undue emphasis on what is very much a secondary matter, the actual date of Christ's birth, Christians need to be aware of the conflicting views of the time of year that the Lord Jesus was born. This is especially important as there is a case made that Christians simply grafted "Christmas" onto pre-existing pagan winter celebrations. We will look at the arguments.

Mithras

Some hold the view that the 'Christmas' celebration was part of the early church's response to the growing threat of an Eastern religion known as Mithraism. Mithra, or Mithras, was in ancient Indo-Persian mythology, the god of light. According to legend, Mithra was born bearing a torch and armed with a knife, beside a sacred stream and under a sacred tree, a child of the earth itself. He soon rode and later killed a cosmic bull, whose blood fertilises all vegetation. Mithra's slaying of the bull became a popular subject in Hellenic art and became the forerunner of bull-slaying fertility rituals in the Mithraic cult, which may in turn be the origin of modern bull fighting. It is interesting to contrast the fantastic ideas about Mithras with the quiet and restrained record of the birth of the Lord Jesus.

The first written record of the Vedic 'Mitra' dates to 1,400 BC. Mitra worship spread from India to Persia and, after Alexander

the Great's victory over the Persians, spread throughout the Hellenic world, although it never became popular with the Greeks because they identified the religion with their age-old enemies, the Persians. The cult spread from India in the east as far west as Spain, Germany and Britain so that in the third and fourth centuries AD the Mithras cult was the greatest rival to the steadily growing Christian faith. The sudden burgeoning of interest in Mithras in the Roman empire suggests that Roman Mithraism was to all intents and purposes a new creation, possibly brought about by some long-forgotten religious guru who may have lived as late as AD 100. Christians conjecture that the cult owed its rapid rise in popularity to a well-timed Satanic counter-attack upon Christianity.

Roman Mithraism was a religion of loyalty to the king and was carried and supported by the Roman military class. There was little notice of the religion in Rome until the beginning of the second century AD but from the year 136 onwards, archaeologists have discovered hundreds of dedicatory inscriptions to Mithras. The cult seems to have been encouraged by successive Roman emperors, in particular Commodus (180-182), Septimius Severus (193-211) and Caracalla (211-217). Most adherents known to modern scholars were high and low ranking soldiers and other Roman officials. It seems that adherence to Mithras may have been seen as a way to social and professional advancement.

Within a few generations, the Roman world had completely assimilated this Persian god amongst their pantheon of deities and when the emperor Diocletian attempted a renewal of the Roman state and religion, he did not forget Mithra. In AD 307 in a dedication near Vienna, Diocletian dedicated an altar to Mithra as patron of the empire. However in AD 312 Constantine won the battle at the Milvian Bridge under the sign of a cross and the Roman empire quickly turned towards Christianity. Worship of Mithras seems to have collapsed with the change in adherence by the emperor although some noble families opposed to the emperor continued the old religion, but only to worship Mithras alongside other traditional Roman deities.

Origin of a December celebration of Christmas

The argument is sometimes heard that the date of 25 December was chosen by the early church fathers to coincide with the pagan celebration of Mithras. It is said that Jesus' birth is more likely to have occurred in spring than in winter, because Luke tells us that shepherds were "living out in the fields nearby" and that shepherds guarded their flocks by night as well as day *only* at lambing time, whereas in the winter the animals were kept in barn yards, unwatched. Precise evidence for ancient near-eastern shepherding practice is unclear, but the theory seems to be exactly that— a theory.

The idea of celebrating Christmas on December 25th, the theory continues, was first suggested in the early fourth century, a clever move upon the part of the church fathers, who wished to eclipse the December 25 festivities associated with Mithras. Roman patricians and plebians alike enjoyed festivals of a protracted nature, so the church felt it needed a December celebration of its own. In order to offer converts a celebratory occasion in which to take pride, the church officially recognised Christ's birth which, up to that time, had received no interest among Christians. To offer head-on competition with the Mithras feast, the date of December 25 was chosen, and after Constantine was converted to Christianity the 'Christmas' celebration became an official Roman feast some time in the mid 300s. A neat theory and attractive because it simultaneously relieves Christians of any necessity to defend December 25th as being in any way special, whilst explaining how we reached our present situation as regards Christmas. However, the theory may be wrong, as we shall see.

The Great Paschal period — BC and AD

Before we attempt to review the conflicting evidence for the date of Christ's birth, we need to consider the year. We have already looked at how the year of Christ's birth was deduced and how most scholars consider 6 BC to be the most likely year—but why is this not 0 BC or even AD 1? In ancient times a number of different major calendar systems were in use across the globe and it was not

until the fifth century that the modern calendar was developed. In AD 463 Victorius of Aquitaine, who had been appointed by Pope Hilarius to undertake calendar revision, devised the Great Paschal (i.e. Passover) period. In the sixth century one Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Little), a Scythian monk in Rome, in computing the date of Easter, took the year now called AD 532 as the first year of the Great Paschal period and the year now designated 1 BC as the beginning of the previous cycle. Dionysius fixed the date of the Christian era by working backwards. Among biblical data Dionysius had to work with was the following:

* Luke 3:1 —Jesus was baptised in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius.

* Luke 3:23 —Jesus was baptised about 30 years of age, at the beginning of his ministry

Dionysius Exiguus, however, made several mistakes and miscalculations. He forgot the year zero which should have been inserted between 1 BC and AD 1. He also overlooked the four years when the Emperor Augustus had reigned under his own name Octavian. So, in the sixth century it was generally believed that AD 1 was the year of the birth of Christ and Dionysius introduced the idea of numbering years consecutively throughout the Christian era. The Dionysius method was used by some scholars but did not become widespread until it was popularised by the Venerable Bede of Jarrow (673-735) whose reputation as a scholar was extremely high in Western Christendom in the eighth century. This system of BC/AD threw into sharp relief the different systems then in use for reckoning the *beginning* of each year.

Pope Gregory XIII (1502-1585) noting that, for a variety of reasons, the calendar year was thirteen days behind the solar year, directed that ten days in 1582 should be dropped, the day of 4 October becoming 15 October. This so called Gregorian calendar was not universally accepted at the time, and was not adopted in Britain until 1752 when 03 to 13 September were dropped. Apparently protests were held in the streets demanding the “return” of the missing eleven days!

When the Gregorian calendar firmly established 1 January as

the beginning of each year, it was widely referred to as the New Style calendar, with the Julian calendar referred to as the Old Style calendar. In Britain, under the Julian calendar, the year had originally been computed as running from 25 December but later, from the fourteenth century, it was computed as beginning on 25 March. It was some hundreds of years before all of Western Europe (and the Americas) adopted the same calendar. Allowing that these different systems were in use, it can be recognised that computing the year of Christ's birth, let alone the actual date, would never be a straightforward matter.

The date of Christ's birth

In contrast with the primary Christian feasts of Easter (celebrating the resurrection) and the Lord's day as the weekly remembrance of the resurrection, there was, as far as is known, no early interest in the date of the Lord's birth nor indeed any annual remembrance of it. The Christian theologian Origen (b. c. 185, d. c. 254), who was the most important biblical scholar of the early Greek church, although he almost certainly visited the Bethlehem cave of the Nativity seems to have considered a birthday observance as a pagan ritual, and he claimed that only such persons as Pharaoh and Herod had their birthdays celebrated.

The earliest known statement of Christ's birth date was made by Origen's predecessor, Clement of Alexandria, writing in his *Stromata* in about AD 194. He cites a number of different dates and years then in vogue and goes on to give his own definitive statement: "Our Lord was born in the twenty eighth year ... in the reign of Augustus From the birth of Christ to the death of Commodus are, in all, a hundred and ninety four years, one month, thirteen days" (*Stromata* I 21, 145).¹ The reign of Augustus in Egypt, to which Clement would naturally refer, began in August of the year 30 BC, so the indicated year is 3/2 BC. The murder of the emperor Commodus took place on December 31 AD 192, so the precisely indicated date is 18 November in 3 BC. Now this date is certainly wrong, because Jesus was certainly born before the death of Herod 'the great', and Herod died in the spring of 4

BC. We have already seen that the probable year of Christ's birth is 6 BC. Clement's assessment, however, is interesting – being the earliest – in that it places Christ's birth in mid-winter, as do a number of other ancient documents.

December 25 first appears in the year AD 354 as the officially accepted date in the Roman city calendar (an almanac for the use of Christians) edited by one Furius Dionysius Filocalus and based on a list probably drawn up in AD 336. Here the date of Christ's birth is the same as the date then accepted as the winter solstice, and sun worship was then widespread in the Roman Empire. Earlier, in AD 274, the emperor Aurelian had declared the 'unconquered sun' the official deity of the Roman Empire and set the deity's birthday celebration as December 25. It should be noted that at this time sun worship and Mithras worship were almost indistinguishable.

Ultimately, as Jack Finegan points out in *The Archaeology of the New Testament* (reference below), the full equation with the solar year was completed by the belief that the crucifixion as well as the conception took place on 25 March and the Lord's birth on 25 December. Thus Augustine (354-430) writing *On the Trinity* says, "For he is believed to have been conceived on the twenty-fifth of March, upon which day he also suffered But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the twenty fifth." From the west the 25 December date spread to the east. Finegan points out that the seal upon the acceptance of 25 December as Christ's birthday was the sermons of a famous early church leader John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) who from his pulpit preached that Christ's birthday was the holiest day of the year because without it, Christ could not have been baptised, crucified or risen. Chrysostom elsewhere says this date was known earlier in the west, but was known among the Antioch Christians for only some ten years. Since this date was so new to his hearers, Chrysostom offered three proofs that the date was the correct one:

1. Remembering what Gamaliel had said (Acts 5:38-39) about failure or success of the apostolic cause, he argued that the new

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date would not have won such wide acceptance unless it was the right one.

2. The date is confirmed by the census (Luke 2:1-7) of which there was public record in Rome (to which record Justin, *Apology* I 34 and Tertullion, *Against Marcion* IV 7, also refer).

3. Exegesis of Scripture also confirms the date. The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah came when it was Zechariah's turn to enter the temple and burn incense. Chrysostom assumes, incorrectly, that Zechariah was high priest and the occasion of the announcement was therefore the Day of Atonement—the one day of the year when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple. By a careful process of extrapolation, too complex to enter into here, Chrysostom calculates the date of Christ's birth to be 25 December. Jack Finegan comments: 'Although some of Chrysostom's assumptions were no doubt incorrect, some modern studies have followed somewhat similar lines by trying to establish when Zechariah's priestly division was on duty, and counting from there. In the organisation of the Priesthood there were twenty-four divisions or courses, of which the first was that of Jehoiarib and the eighth was that of Abijah, to which Zechariah belonged (Lev 24:7-18). Each course served one week at a time beginning on the sabbath (Josephus *Antiquities* 7:14:7:365) and if the sequence were followed through twice it would make forty-eight weeks, but it is not known how the remaining weeks of a fifty two week year were covered.... Some think that the courses followed each other in unbroken succession without regard to the beginning and ending of years, others that the sequence began afresh at the first month of Nissan or the seventh month of Tishri.

In the Talmud (*Ta'anith* 29a SBT 9, p. 154) it is stated that the first temple was destroyed on the ninth day of Ab (July/August) and the course of Jehoiarib was on duty at the time, and it was the same with the second temple (destroyed AD 70). Counting backward from this point one study finds that in the year 6 BC, before the birth of Jesus the course of Abijah would have been on duty during the week of October 2-9. From this point, fifteen

months (six for Elizabeth and nine for Mary) would come toward the end of December (and quite reasonably on December 25) in the following year (5 BC) and this reckoning is not far from that by Chrysostom..... approximation is safer than exact dates in some conclusions, nevertheless there are several pointers in the foregoing toward the midwinter for the season of the birth of Jesus, and it may be thought not impossible that there was authentic tradition to that effect at least, while in respect of the later ministry of Jesus as well as to his birth, astronomical and calendrical data may allow greater exactitude.²

And the shepherds in the fields?

It is often said that Jesus' birth is more likely to have occurred in spring than in winter, because Luke tells us that shepherds were "living out in the fields nearby" and that shepherds guarded their flocks by night as well as day *only* at lambing time, whereas in the winter animals were kept in barn yards, unwatched. We saw in chapter 8 that there is good reason to suppose that the shepherds referred to in Luke chapter 2 were not ordinary shepherds and that their lambs were not ordinary lambs. To recap, we refer once again to the helpful work of Alfred Edersheim. He points out that a passage in the Mishnah (Shek 7: 4) leads to the conclusion that the flocks which pastured at Migdal Eder were destined for temple sacrifices. The Mishna, says Edersheim, "...expressly forbids the keeping of flocks throughout the land of Israel except in the wilderness —and the only flocks otherwise kept, would be those for the temple-services..... accordingly, the shepherds who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer that these flocks lay out *all the year round*, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before passover —that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of

the Messiah from that *Migdal Eder*, where shepherds watched the temple flocks all the year round.”³

There is a clear inference that these shepherds were watching over their flocks during the winter. This again lends support to the idea of a midwinter birth of the Lord Jesus. In conclusion, we simply cannot be dogmatic about the date of birth of our Lord and nor should we be. We can say, however, that the evidences for a midwinter birth are as strong as the evidence for a birth at any other time of the year. Whilst critics like to sneer and say that ‘Christmas’ is simply Christianity competing with pagan religions, we might conjecture that, in the realm of spiritual warfare, the reality may actually be the reverse: satanically inspired pagan religions may have adopted winter feasts to introduce an element of doubt as to the timing of the Lord’s birth. This author’s view, for what it is worth, is that it is more, rather than less likely that the Lord Jesus was born on 25 December.

Was the birth in Bethlehem prophesied?

The most breathtakingly absurd view to have emerged in recent years is that Bethlehem was not a place but a person. We will look at the ‘logic’ of this shortly. But it is worth reflecting on the vigour with which critics seek to ‘rubbish’ what the Bible says. Aside from the obvious realm of spiritual warfare in which Christians are always engaged (Ephesians 6:12), would it be too simplistic to suggest that those who expend most effort in attacking the Bible are those who, in reality, are most afraid that its claims are true and so live with the nagging fear of the logical conclusion that this truth demands a personal response? The response can only be of faith and surrender or rejection and attack.

In attacking the biblical account of the Nativity, anti-Christians will sometimes go to considerable lengths to question any and every aspect of the account. The position of Bethlehem in the narrative has accordingly come under scrutiny. In Chapter 10 we looked briefly at Bethlehem and its connection with the Nativity. Of most significance is the fact that Bethlehem was well known, to first century Jews, as being the place where the Messiah would

be born. King Herod “the Great” turned to his chief priests and teachers of the law who gave the emphatic “in Bethlehem in Judaea” to answer his question about where the Christ would be born (Matt 2:5). It is, therefore, an uncomfortable and unwelcome fact to atheists that Jesus was born there. If this awkward and unwelcome fact can be denied, so much the better!

We should always carefully weigh biblical criticism, from whatever source, but especially where it attacks what the Bible says. A common trick is to alter punctuation in strategic places and to run verses into each other to alter the apparent meaning. Another is to paraphrase groups of verses but to present them as though, on a cursory inspection, they are *the actual verses verbatim*. Yet another is to quote from different versions of the Bible when ‘investigating’ the meaning of verses *in conjunction with each other*. These tricks are all used in the modern attack on the position of Bethlehem in the Gospel narratives and the Old Testament prophecies which refer to the Bethlehem birth.

The author came across the following ‘scholarship’ in anti-Christian sites on the internet. The basic premise is that the first century Gospel writers, believing the Old Testament to be the word of God, thought they had to ‘fit’ the ‘Jesus story’ into what was prophesied of old. It is worth asking ourselves again, what real benefit could the Gospel writers have achieved by deliberately falsifying their accounts. If they knew the accounts were lies, would they have risked their lives, liberties and reputations for them? Surely there were more congenial ways of spending time in first century Judaea?

The prophet Micah

Critics say that the words used in Matthew 2:6 (“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel”), which are themselves a quotation of the prophet Micah in chapter 5 and verse 2 of the book which bears his name, refer not to Bethlehem the place but Bethlehem a person. So, they say, he is referred to as a ‘ruler’. These critics

point out, rightly, that the words in Micah are actually ‘Bethlehem Ephrathah’ but go on to say that this was a person. In support of this they run Micah 5:5 into one sentence which they roughly portray as “this man shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into the land”. It is not known what translation, if any, is used in this rendering, but all modern translations known to this author recognise a break in verse 5, where the prophecy concludes with the statement that the man born in Bethlehem will be the peace of the world (full stop!) and then goes on to refer to deliverance from the Assyrian invader.

In support of the view that Bethlehem was a person, critics then quote from 1 Chronicles 2:50 where, in a very long list of descendants of the clans of Caleb, there is referred to Salma, the father of Bethlehem and Hareph the father of Beth Gader. It is again unclear which translation is being used in this rendering, but modern translations known to the author render this Salma the *founder* of Bethlehem and Hareph the *founder* of Beth Gader. Be this as it may, it is unclear what possible connection there may be between a supposed person called ‘Bethlehem’ referred to in Chronicles and Micah’s alleged person called Bethlehem, being a peacemaker for Judah at the time of the Assyrian troubles in king Hezekiah’s reign (720-693 BC).

Muddying the waters still more, we are then presented with a conjecture that ‘Bethlehem Ephrathah’ of Micah was a proper name, referring back to Bethlehem son of Salma who was a grandson of someone called Ephrathah—who is indeed referred to in 1 Chronicles chapter 2. All this strikes one as being a fairly ragged attempt to link together random names which actually have no logical linkage. If the modern Bible translations are right, then Salma was founder of Bethlehem rather than a father of someone by that name. But Jack Finegan has a more scholarly approach to Bethlehem Ephrathah as he refers to Rachel’s burial place: “Gen 35:19 and 48:7 state that the burial place of Rachel was, ‘on the way to Ephrath’ (that is Bethlehem). The wording suggests that Ephrath or Ephrathah was an older village that was absorbed into Bethlehem and in Micah 5:2 the two names are put together.”⁷⁴

Before leaving Micah, we should stop and look at the full prophecy. The debate above is over individual words taken out of the context in which they are written. If we read the entire book of Micah, who was a contemporary of Isaiah, we see that the book is a warning to the people of Israel that destruction from external invaders awaits them unless they repent and turn back to the Lord. But as so often with the writings of prophets, there is a strong allusion to the future Saviour. So, in Micah chapter 5 and verses 2 to 5 inclusive, we see a number of key evidences that the Saviour referred to is indeed the Lord Jesus. So, the Saviour comes out of Bethlehem, he comes from ancient times (or ‘from days of eternity’), he will shepherd his flock and his greatness will reach the ends of the earth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the Bible tells us he comes from ancient times (“Before Abraham was, I am!” said Jesus —John 8: 58). He was the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11) and, beyond any dispute, His greatness today reaches to the ends of the earth, and has done so for at least the last fifty years. Jesus, we might remember, commanded that His message should be taken by His disciples to all nations, teaching them to obey all He had commanded the disciples (Matthew 28:19-20 —often called ‘the great commission’). So far, Micah seems to have a pretty good success rate in terms of prophecy!

Notes

¹ Jack Finegan, quoted in *The Archaeology of the New Testament* Revised Edition (Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xliii. Readers who want to follow the full account of the development of the early Christian church’s festivals should consult Finegan’s chapter on the subject.

² *Ibid.* p. xlviiii.

³ Alfred Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Hendrickson Publishers Inc. 1993), pp. 131-132.

⁴ *Op. cit.* *The Archaeology of the New Testament* (p. 38).

