

A Look at the Birth Date of Jesus and the Origins of Christmas



(with excerpts from the writings of Taylor Marshall and Jimmy Akin)

God's Birthday

The single most influential event in the course of human **history** is the Incarnation (God becoming man, so that man can become like God). It has transformed culture, history and our world as we know it. We call it “Christmas.”¹

“In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (*Eph. 1:9*) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see *Eph. 2:18*; *2 Peter 1:4*)”²

The single most influential event in course of human **salvation** is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the resurrection, if Christ has not risen, our faith is in vain (*1 Cor 15:14, 17*). It is the promise of the resurrection that makes our belief in Jesus Christ the center of our faith.

The Birth Year of Christ

A common but incorrect view is that Jesus was born sometime between 4-6 B.C. Recent and more precise chronological studies have validated the traditional date of Christ's birth at December 25 in 1 B.C.³

- The origins of B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (*anno Domini* or year of the Lord) derives from the calculations of a Scythian monk, Dionysius the Little. He died in about A.D. 544.
- In Rome, Dionysius worked with the best Roman records and Church documents to compute the birth of Christ. This new computation divided time before and after Christ.
- Dionysius identified Gabriel's annunciation and the incarnation of Christ on March 25 in the year 1 B.C. and recognized the birthday of Christ as being December 25 in the year 1 B.C. The circumcision of Christ, eight days after His birth, was on January 1 of A.D. 1. His crucifixion was in the year A.D. 33.

St. Bede took up the dating scheme of Dionysius the Little in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (A.D. 731), and the rest is history. We still use his dating system to this day—B.C. and A.D.

Doubts over the birth year of Christ arose in the 1600s. Scholars became aware of the chronology provided by the Jewish historian Josephus.

¹ The word *Christmas* has its origin from the old English term *Cristes Maesse*, meaning “Christ's Mass.”

² *Dei Verbum*, 2.

³ Hugues de Nanteuil, *Sur les dates de naissance et de mort de Jésus*, Paris: Téqui editions, 1988. Translated by J.S. Daly and F. Egregyi. Paris, 2008.

- Josephus places the death of King Herod the Great in what Dionysius called 4 B.C. Since Herod tried to kill the infant Jesus, then it would necessary that Jesus be born before the death of Herod.
- Either Josephus is correct, or Dionysius is correct. Both cannot be right. Until recently most scholars agreed with Josephus because: A) Josephus lived in the century of Christ, B) Josephus was Jewish, and C) Josephus was a professional historian. Dionysius was just a monk living in Rome over five hundred years later.
- There is now good reason for believing that Josephus got it wrong. Further studies of Josephus reveal that he was not consistent or accurate in dating several key events in Jewish and Roman history.
- Josephus contradicts verified history, the Bible, and even his own chronology about one hundred times. The French archaeologist and historian Theodore Reinarch was one of the first to document the many factual and chronological errors of Josephus.⁴
- Josephus actually gave two contradictory dates for the death of Herod—4 B.C. and A.D. 7 or 8, further casting doubt on his accuracy.⁵

The best way to date Herod's death is by focusing on the testimony that Herod died a few months after a well-observed lunar eclipse. With modern astronomical models, we know that such a lunar eclipse occurred in Judea on December 29 in 1 B.C. This would mean that Herod died sometime after A.D. 1. This lines up perfectly with the chronology of Dionysius the Little.

Was Christ Born on December 25?

The Catholic Church, from at least the second century, has claimed that Christ was born on December 25. However, it is commonly alleged that our Lord Jesus Christ was not born on December 25.

Objection 1: December 25 was chosen in order to replace the pagan Roman festival of Saturnalia. Saturnalia was a popular winter festival and so the Catholic Church prudently substituted Christmas in its place.

Reply to Objection 1: Saturnalia commemorated the winter solstice. Yet the winter solstice falls on December 22. It is true that Saturnalia celebrations began as early as December 17 and extended until December 23. Still, the dates don't match up.

Objection 2: December 25 was chosen to replace the pagan Roman holiday *Natalis Solis Invicti* which means "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun."

Reply to Objection 2: The Emperor Aurelian introduced the cult of the *Sol Invictus* or *Unconquered Sun* to Rome in A.D. 274. His own name *Aurelian* derives from the Latin word *aurora* denoting "sunrise."

- There is no historical record for a celebration *Natalis Sol Invictus* on December 25 prior to A.D. 354.

⁴ de Nanteuil, 2008.

⁵Marshall, Taylor, *God's Birthday*, pg. 30.

- Within an illuminated manuscript for the year A.D. 354, there is an entry for December 25 reading “N INVICTI CM XXX.” Here N means “nativity.” INVICTI means “of the Unconquered.” CM signifies “circenses missus” or “games ordered” and the Roman numeral XXX thirty. Thus, the inscription means that thirty games were ordered for the nativity of the Unconquered for December 25th. Note that the word “sun” is not present.
- The very same codex also lists “natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae” for the day of December 25. The phrase is translated as “birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea.”⁶
- The date of December 25th only became the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” under the Emperor Julian the Apostate (A.D. 361). Julian the Apostate was a Christian who apostatized and returned to Roman paganism. History reveals that it was the hateful former Christian Emperor that erected a pagan holiday on December 25.

Objection 3: Christ could not have been born in December since Saint Luke describes shepherds herding in the neighboring fields of Bethlehem. Shepherds do not herd during the winter. Thus, Christ was not born in winter.

Reply to Objection 3: Recall that Palestine is not England, Russia, or Alaska. Bethlehem is situated at the latitude of 31.7. As the great Cornelius a Lapide⁷ remarks during his lifetime, one could still see shepherds and sheep in the fields of Italy during late December, and Italy is at higher latitude than Bethlehem.

The Birth of Christ from Sacred Scripture

The first step is to use Scripture to determine the birthday of Saint John the Baptist.

- Saint Luke reports that Zacharias served in the “course of Abias” (*Lk 1:5*) which Scripture records as the eighth course among the twenty-four priestly courses (*Neh 12:17*). Each shift of priests served one week in the temple for two times each year. The course of Abias served during the eighth week and the thirty-second week in the annual cycle.⁸ However, when did the cycle of courses begin?
- Josef Heinrich Friedlieb has convincingly established that the first priestly course of Jojarib was on duty during the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av.¹⁴ Thus the priestly course of Jojarib was on duty during the second week of Av. Consequently, the priestly course of Abias (the course of Zacharias) was serving during the second week of the Jewish month of **Tishri**—the very week of the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of Tishri. In our calendar, the Day of Atonement would land anywhere from September 22 to October 8.
- Zacharias and Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist after Zacharias served his course. This means Saint John the Baptist would have been conceived around the end of

⁶ *The Chronography of AD 354*. Part 12: Commemorations of the Martyrs. MGH *Chronica Minora* I (1892), pp. 71-2.

⁷ Flemish Jesuit, (18 December 1567 – 12 March 1637)

⁸ This theory only works if Zacharias and Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist after Zacharias' second course - the course in September.

September, placing John's birth at the end of June, confirming the Catholic Church's celebration of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist on June 24.

- The second-century *Protoevangelium (Gospel) of Saint James* also confirms a late September conception of the Baptist. The *Protoevangelium* regards Zacharias as a high priest and this associates him with the Day of Atonement, which lands on the tenth day of the Hebrew month of Tishri (roughly the end of our September). Allowing for forty weeks of gestation, this places the birth of John the Baptist at the end of June—once again confirming the Catholic date for the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist on June 24.
- We read in the Gospel of Saint Luke, that just after Mary conceived Christ, she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was six months pregnant with John the Baptist. This means that John the Baptist was six months older than our Lord Jesus Christ (Lk 1:24-27, 36). If you add six months to June 24 you get December 24-25 as the birthday of Christ.
- If you subtract nine months from December 25 you get that the Annunciation (of Gabriel to Mary) was March 25. All the dates match up perfectly. So then, if John the Baptist was conceived shortly after the Jewish Day of the Atonement, then the traditional Catholic dates are essentially correct. The birth of Christ would be on or about December 25.

Testimony from the Early Church Fathers

The Church Fathers claimed December 25 as the Birthday of Christ *prior* to the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire.

- The earliest record is that of Pope Saint Telesphorus (reigned A.D. 126 -137) instituted the tradition of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. Although the *Liber Pontificalis* does not give us the date of Christmas, it assumes that the Pope was already celebrating Christmas and that a Mass at midnight was added.
- During this time, we also read the following words of Theophilus (A.D. 115-181), Catholic bishop of Caesarea in Palestine: “We ought to celebrate the birthday of Our Lord on what day soever the 25th of December shall happen.”⁹
- Saint Hippolytus (A.D. 170-240) wrote in passing that the birth of Christ occurred on December 25: “The First Advent of our Lord in the flesh occurred when He was born in Bethlehem, was December 25th, a Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, which is five thousand and five hundred years from Adam. He suffered in the thirty-third year, March 25th, Friday, the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, while Rufus and Roubellion were Consuls.”¹⁰

Also note in the quote above the special significance of March 25, which marks the death of Christ (March 25 was assumed to corresponded to the Hebrew month Nisan 14 - the traditional date of crucifixion).¹¹

⁹ *Magdeburgenses*, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, *De origine Festorum Chirstianorum*.

¹⁰ Saint Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel*.

¹¹ There is some discrepancy in the Fathers as to whether Nisan 14/March 25 marked the death of Christ or his resurrection.

- Christ, as the perfect man, was believed to have been conceived and died on the same day—March 25. In his *Chronicon*, Saint Hippolytus states that the earth was created on March 25, 5500 B.C. Thus, March 25 was identified by the Church Fathers as the Creation date of the universe, as the date of the Annunciation and Incarnation of Christ, and also as the date of the Death of Christ our Savior.

Saint Augustine confirms this tradition of March 25 as the Messianic conception and December 25 as His birth:

- For Christ is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th.¹²
- Saint Augustine also noted how the schismatic Donatists celebrated December 25 as the birth of Christ, but refused to celebrate Epiphany on January 6, since they regarded Epiphany as a new feast without a basis in Apostolic Tradition.
 - The Donatist schism originated in A.D. 311, which indicates the Latin Church was celebrating a December 25 Christmas (but not a January 6 Epiphany) before A.D. 311.

In either case, the liturgical celebration of Christ's birth was commemorated in Rome on December 25 long before Christianity became legalized and long before our earliest record of a pagan feast for the birthday of the Unconquered Sun. For these reasons, it is reasonable to hold that Christ was born on December 25 in 1 B.C. and that he died and rose again in March of A.D. 33.

The Origin of the Christmas Tree

The roots of the Christmas tree are medieval, and it is the Germans, with their innate sense of the innocence of Christmas, who spread the custom.¹³

- Christmas Eve is the feast day of our first parents, Adam and Eve, who are commemorated as Saints in the calendars of the Catholic churches of Eastern rites.
- Around the 12th century the custom began of celebrating this feast on December 24 with the *Paradise Play*, which became one of the most popular medieval mystery plays. It depicted the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin and their banishment from Paradise. The play ended with the promise of the coming Savior and His incarnation.
- One of the few props in the play was a large evergreen tree called a Paradise Tree, its branches laden with red apples.
- It became the custom to put up a "paradise tree" in the home to honor the first parents. This was a fir tree laden with apples, the symbol of Adam's fall. They also decorated the tree with white wafers, representing the Eucharist, the symbol of man's redemption and

¹² Saint Augustine, *De trinitate*, 5. (about A.D. 400)

¹³ https://www.traditioninaction.org/religious/f031_Tree.htm

salvation. It was customary as early as the 16th century in Germany to ring the tree with candles.

- We find first mention of the Christmas tree as early as 1419 at the Freiburg Fraternity Baker's Apprentices of the German Alsace. We also have a letter written by a Strasbourg resident in 1605 who describes the established custom, "At Christmas they set up fir trees in the parlors at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut of many-colored paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, sweets."¹⁴

Is the Christmas Tree Forbidden in the Bible?

Scholars who oppose the Christmas trees as a pagan tradition often cite the prophet Jeremiah:

Jer 10:24 "Learn not the way of the heathen . . . For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest . . . with the ax. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not." (KJV)

But Solomon used trees, chains and pomegranates to adorn the Temple of God.

2 Chr 3:5 "And the greater house he ceiled [lined] with fir tree, which he overlaid with fine gold, and set thereon palm trees and chains."

2 Chr 3:16 "And he made chains . . . and put *them* on the heads of the pillars; and made an hundred pomegranates, and put *them* on the chains."¹⁵

The use of graven images such as cherubim, lions and oxen in the Temple of God (1Kgs 7:24-29) did not violate God's own commandment with Moses (Ex. 20:4). God condemned all graven images at the time of Moses because the people had just come out of Egypt and were worshipping graven images. Later in time, God began to allow them more and more.

¹⁴ B. Brunner, *Inventing the Christmas Tree*, Yale University Press, p. 3

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., 2 Ch 3:16). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Dionysius did not include a year zero. December 31 in 1 B.C. would have passed to January 1 in A.D. 1.

Incidentally, when you write dates, B.C. goes after the number and A.D. goes in front of it. For example: 754 B.C. or A.D. 1492

The Gregorian calendar was first adopted in Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain in 1582,

Republican Calendar Adds January and February

Months in the Republican Calendar (Common Year)	
Month Names	Number of Days (355)
Ianuarus	29
Februarius	28
Martius	31
Aprilis	29
Maius	31
Iunius	29
Quintilis	31
Sextilis	29
September	29
October	31
November	29
December	29

Following another calendar reform, which later Roman writers attributed to Romulus' successor, Numa Pompilius, the Republican calendar was instituted. To account for the days of winter between the years, two additional months were introduced: [Ianuarus](#) and [Februarius](#).

This meant that some of the month names no longer agreed with their position in the calendar. For example, September means “the 7th month,” but it was now the 9th month of the year—an inconsistency that was preserved and is still part of the [Gregorian calendar](#) we use today.

A [common year](#) was now divided into 12 months of different lengths: 4 “full” months with 31 days, 7 “hollow” months with 29 days, and 1 month with 28 days.

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- Reinarch’s translation of Josephus is steadily interrupted by comments such as “this is a mistake” or “in another book his figures are different.”⁹

These historical facts reveal that the Unconquered Sun was not likely a popular deity in the Roman Empire. The Roman people did not need to be weaned off of a so-called ancient holiday. Moreover, the tradition of a December 25th celebration does not find a place on the Roman calendar *until after the Christianization of Rome*. The “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” holiday was scarcely traditional and hardly popular. Saturnalia (mentioned above) was much more popular, traditional, and fun. It seems, rather, that Julian the Apostate had attempted to introduce a pagan holiday in order to replace the Christian one!

https://everipedia.org/wiki/Chronography_of_354/

"VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae" ("Eighth day before the kalends of January [December 25], Birth of Christ in Bethlehem Judea")

the full set appears in other copies (on December 25 "N·INVICTI·CM·XXX" - "Birthday of the unconquered, games ordered, thirty races" - is the oldest literary reference to the pagan feast of Sol Invictus.

The Jewish Calendar

Month	Length	Gregorian Equivalent
Nissan	30 days	March-April
Iyar	29 days	April-May
Sivan	30 days	May-June
Tammuz	29 days	June-July
Av	30 days	July-August
Elul	29 days	August-September
Tishri	30 days	September-October
Heshvan	29 or 30 days	October-November
Kislev	30 or 29 days	November-December
Tevet	29 days	December-January
Shevat	30 days	January-February
Adar	29 or 30 days	February-March
Adar II	29 days	March-April

