

Discovering Jesus Course

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Fixing the Month of Jesus' Birth

If we are able to fix the year of Jesus' birth with reasonable certainty to 2 BC, is it possible to identify the month in which he was born? Once again, many would say that this is a no-brainer. It's December 25, of course!

A thoughtful reading of the Gospel accounts, however, will show that it is unlikely that Jesus was born in December. **Luke 2:8** records that "there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." This indicates that Jesus was not born in winter (when shepherds didn't sleep in the fields with their sheep), but in the warmer months. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Joseph and Mary would have undertaken the arduous journey to Bethlehem in the winter months, when the roads throughout Judea were often impassable (note **Matthew 24:20**). As the *Companion Bible* points out:

"Shepherds and their flocks would not be found 'abiding' (Greek *agrauleo*) in the open fields at night in December (*Tebeth*), for the paramount reason that there would be no pasturage at that time. It was the custom then (as now) to withdraw the flocks during the month *Marchesven* [October-November] from the open districts and house them for the winter."¹

So how did we come up with December 25 as the birthday for Jesus?

The early Christians didn't celebrate Christ's birthday (they were far more interested in the death and resurrection of Christ) and it wasn't until the fourth century that Christians became interested in Christ's birth date. There was much disagreement as to when it was, however, and finally in AD 440 the Church proclaimed December 25 as Christ's official birthday. They probably chose this date because it coincided with the pagan holiday of Saturnalia and the birthday of the Sun God. To celebrate Christ's birthday on December 25, in their view, would ease the transition from pagan to Christian worship, from the heathen Sun God to the one who is called "the Sun of Righteousness" (**Malachi 4:2**).

So is it possible to know in what month Jesus was born? The Gospel record provides some indirect evidence regarding the time of the conception of John the Baptist, and this casts clear light on the time of Christ's birth. **Luke 1:5** tells us that Zechariah (or, using his Hellenized name, Zacharias) was of the priestly division of Abijah. The priests were divided into 24 divisions (**1 Chronicles 24:7-19**), of which Abijah was the eighth (**Luke 24:10**). **Luke 1:8** tells us that it was while the Abijah division was on duty that the angel Gabriel visited Zechariah in the Temple. So the simple question is: When was the division of Abijah on duty?

Working on calculations based on Josephus' statement that the first division of priests had just taken office at the time of the destruction of the Temple,² we can figure backwards to establish that Zechariah came off duty on July 13, 3 BC and returned home to Elizabeth (**Luke 1:23**). Elizabeth then conceived (**1:24**), probably within that week, and John the Baptist would have been born approximately 280 days later which (on or around April 26, 2 BC). Interestingly, this date marked the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread that year.

Elizabeth went into reclusion for five months (**1:24**), and at the beginning of her sixth month of pregnancy, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, Elizabeth's relative (**1:26**). The time was the first week of January, 2 BC. Jesus' birth, approximately 280 days later would then be on or around October 13, 2 BC. This was the fifteenth day of Tishri – the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles. This may also be indirectly supported by **John 1:14**, which declares:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

The Greek word translated “dwelling” is *skenoō*, which means “to pitch tent, encamp, tabernacle, dwell in a tent.” Thus a more literal translation of **John 1:14** would read: “The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us.” Do you think that John may have been alluding to the significance of the Feast of Tabernacles in this verse? Samuele Bacchicocchi has to say:

“In seeking to describe the Messiah's first coming to His people, John chose the imagery of the [Feast of Tabernacles] since the feast celebrates the dwelling of God among His people. This raises an interesting question on whether or not John intended to link the birth of Jesus with the Feast of Tabernacles.”³

Can we pinpoint the exact date of Christ's birth? No, but it is possible to identify the season of his birth. The evidence strongly suggests that Jesus was born in September-October (in the Hebrew month of Tishri), during the celebrations of the Feast of Tabernacles.

¹ *The Companion Bible*, Appendix 179.

² Evidence as presented by Chuck Missler, “When Was Jesus Born,” printed in “Personal Update” (Coeur d'Alene, ID: Koinonia House), Volume 2, No. 7, August/September 1992.

³ Samuele Bacchicocchi, *God's Festivals in Scripture and History*, Part II: The Fall Festivals, p.241.

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