Estimated Dates of Christ's Birth, Length of Earthly Sojourn, and Death: Study and Analysis

Jerry A. Stevens
December 23, 2007
Revised December 14, 2021

This study attempts to reach a satisfactory determination that the length of Christ's earthly sojourn was 33 ½ years, beginning with His birth in autumn of 4 B.C., and ending at the cross in spring of A.D. 31. A very useful benchmark date is that it presupposes as established fact that Jesus died on Nisan 14 (Thursday/Friday, April 27), A.D. 31,[1] having "sojourned in the world thirty-three years."[2]

Mrs. White's statements do not rule out the possibility that Jesus continued to live for several months after turning 33, for indeed, even today we seldom count individuals' ages in years *and* months after they pass out of infancy. (Similarly, when infants begin standing upright, we cease counting length and begin measuring height.)

The above scenario would mean that Jesus was born necessarily in 4 B.C., there being no 12-month transition "year zero" dividing the B.C. and A.D. epochs of the dating system. Though we can by no means rely on all of Irish-born Anglican Archbishop James Ussher's dates, I do think he had it right "that the Christian Era was four years late."[3]

Because of prior chronological miscalculations by sixth-century Scythian monk Dionysius Exiguus, who came up with the B.C./A.D. dating scale still in general use,[4] by mid-seventeenth century Ussher put Creation at 4004 B.C. Hence Ussher worked it all out quite neatly that Jesus made His first advent exactly four millennia after Creation, or in 4 B.C. Ironically, this revised date leads to the supreme absurdity of Christ being born "B.C." [literally before Christ]! What follows is an attempt to make sense of the matter without going to extremes either of oversimplification at one pole or of dogmatism at the other.

To launch our study, then, at the very beginning of human history, we reckon that the ancient Hebrews originally might have considered day number one of Creation week Ethanim 1 (later termed Tishri 1)—New Year's Day if there ever was one! Tracing down the stream of time exactly 4,000 years would place Jesus' birth date at Tishri 1, 4 B.C. The question naturally arises: On what equivalent Gregorian calendar date did this momentous event take place? A case might be made for Saturday/Sunday, September 21/22. Extracting from a personal letter written to me on January 3, 1990, by David J. Gilner, Ph.D., Deputy Librarian at Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, in Cincinnati, Ohio:

> Since the current Jewish calendar did not come into use until about the 7th century c.e., we do not know when 1 Tishri fell in the year 4 b.c.e. However, if you extrapolate backwards using the current calendar, the date would have been Sunday, September 22. . . . these dates follow the Gregorian calendar.

That Jesus was born in autumn also has support from Jewish historian Flavius Josephus,[5] with respect to the priestly courses in Christ's day—one week of Temple service (see Lk. 1:5, 8, 9) in the first half of the year and one week in the second half: two weeks out of the entire year. We thus can locate these two possibilities for Zacharias,

John's father, which means that John was born either in spring or in autumn. If he was born in spring, then Jesus, being about six months younger (see Lk. 1:24–27, 36), was born in autumn, an excellent possibility.

Now, despite what some commentators assume, Herod I (the Great) in fact may have died *shortly after* Jesus' birth rather than before it. Astronomers supply the date of March 13, or 29 days before Passover, to harmonize with Josephus's mention of a lunar eclipse, shortly after which Herod died.[6] Thus, Christ's birth could well have occurred in late autumn or early winter of 4 B.C., rather than the previous spring, as it seems more consistent that John the Baptist, in Elisabeth's womb six months at the time of the angelic annunciation to Mary, would have been born in the spring season (see Lk. 1:36).

Contrary to popular interpretation, however, let us suppose instead that the most rational explanation for this seeming chronological impossibility is that Herod I (the Great) in fact died *shortly after* Jesus' birth. Consider also the Biblical record that "Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men" (Mt. 2:16), became maddened and paranoid,[7] and in truly draconic/satanic fashion[8] abruptly ordered the slaughter of all infants up to two years of age in Bethlehem and the surrounding region (Mt. 2:16–18). Angelic warning of this monstrously cruel act (v. 13) immediately detoured Joseph, Mary, and Jesus into Egypt for safety's sake until after Herod should die, which felicitous event occurred "soon after the slaughter of the innocents."[9]

This scenario of the key events surrounding the birth of Jesus involves an admittedly tight economy of time, yet it is entirely possible that He was in fact born in the autumn of 4 B.C. (say, around October 1 [arbitrarily selected to correspond with Tishri 1, the Jewish New Year], which happens to comport with Ussher's dating system (borrowing somewhat from John Lightfoot) and a first advent exactly 4,000 years after the creation of man on Friday, October 28, 4004 B.C., at 9 a.m., no less!). Moreover, an autumn birth date would still allow time for the visit of the magi (even if their journey had begun a number of weeks previously), the precipitous slaughter of the innocents, and the fact that Herod "soon died a sudden and terrible death"[10]—all still occurring *before the close* of 4 B.C. Recall that Joseph and Mary left Egypt with Jesus immediately after an angel informed Joseph of Herod's demise (Mt. 2:19–21), and so might have returned to Joseph and Mary's hometown of Nazareth in late December of the same year, 4 B.C., or perhaps in January of 3 B.C., the month following.

All of the above calculations harmonize very nicely with a baptism of Christ at the outset of His public ministry when He was 30,[11] having lived in Nazareth 30 years[12] in autumn A.D. 27,[13] and a crucifixion date of spring A.D. 31, when Messiah attained His ultimate earthly age of just 33 ½. Several Spirit of Prophecy statements support the intervening period of 3 ½ years of Christ's ministry as prophesied in Dan. 9:24–27.[14] The calculation is simple, for tacking on another 3 ½ years to 30 gives us "about 33 ½" total years for His earthly sojourn.

The foregoing is the most logical model we have been able to devise, while still reconciling the Biblical record with the inspired statements in the Spirit of Prophecy and with historical suppositions, all of which taken together account for Christ's *approximately* 33-year sojourn on planet Earth. Taking all of the inspired, time-specific statements into consideration, the length of the entire sojourn comes more accurately to 33 ½ years. These calculations mean that traditional *estimates* of the date of Herod's death in the spring of 4 B.C. may be early by as many as several months, and may very well
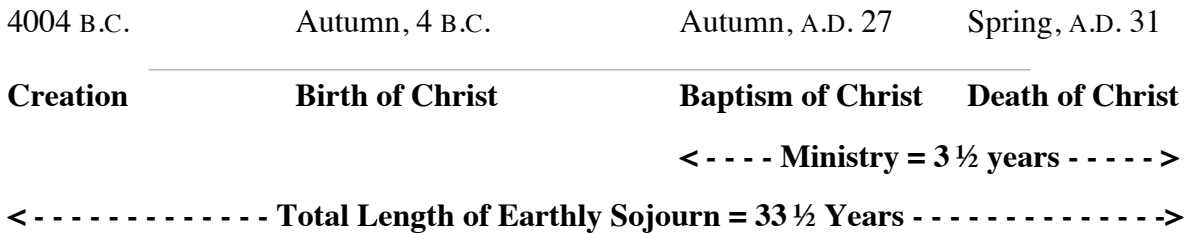
demand ultimate revision should the spade of archæology discover new and more accurate evidence.

To summarize, we are highly comfortable with a precise crucifixion date of Friday, Nisan 14, A.D. 31 (at the ninth hour, or 3:00 p.m.—Mt. 27:46–50; Mk. 15:34–37; Lk. 23:44–46), in contrast with an admittedly less precise autumn birth date in 4 B.C. Everything considered, however, the Ussher/Lightfoot chronology for Christ's time of birth turns out to be entirely feasible after all, and therefore more acceptable than other traditional explanations whose dates cannot be harmonized at all with inspired statements. That Messiah's baptism/inauguration of His ministry occurred in the autumn of A.D. 27 and that His death occurred in the spring of A.D. 31 are facts confirmed by the pen of inspiration.[15] Significantly, all of this dovetails perfectly with the Messianic dates derived from the prophecy of Dan. 9:25–27. Highly impressive are the precision and timing of historical events and their fulfillment of prophecy concerning Messiah.

To tabulate our findings:

Creation: autumn, 4004 B.C.
+ 4,000 years =
Christ's birth: autumn, 4 B.C.
+ 30 years =
Christ's baptism: autumn, A.D. 27
+ 3 ½ years =
Christ's death at age 33 ½ on April 27, A.D. 31

Or, depicted as a timeline:

4004 B.C.	Autumn, 4 B.C.	Autumn, A.D. 27	Spring, A.D. 31
Creation	**Birth of Christ**	**Baptism of Christ**	**Death of Christ**
		< - - - - Ministry = 3 ½ years - - - - - >	

< - - - - - - - - - - - - - Total Length of Earthly Sojourn = 33 ½ Years - - - - - - - - - - - - - ->

Breaking News!

The following breakthrough analysis is something to consider carefully and prayerfully.

Thoughtful Christians must not be blamed for rejecting the association of Christ's birth with the traditional Christmas date of December 25, which derives from the ancient Roman pagan festival of Saturnalia honoring their agricultural god on that day.

But what if the *incarnation* of Jesus occurred as He was *conceived* through the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary precisely on December 25![16] Doing the necessary gestational math, counting nine months from conception to birth takes us quite credibly to the very time of Christ's *birth* in late September, as we showed to have likely occurred on September 21/22 above. "Although we do not know the exact day of Christ's birth, we would honor the sacred event. May the Lord forbid that anyone should be so narrow-minded as to overlook the event because there is an uncertainty in regard to the exact time."[17] Moreover, a December 25 incarnation scenario certainly justifies Christians in intelligently, unapologetically, wishing others "Merry Christmas!" or perhaps more accurately, "Happy Conception Day!"[18]

---

[1] See GC 399.3, 410.1 + 5BC 251.2–260, esp. 252.3.

[2] 3SP 250.2; 6Red 67.3; MS 4, 1883, in 1SM 69.6–70.0; BEcho August 1, 1887, para. 1; 1888 176.4, ST August 31, 1895, para. 1; May 14, 1902, para. 9 & November 2, 1904, para. 1; MS 67, May 30, 1903, in RC 237.3; DA 830.2; AU Gleaner June 19, 1903, para. 2.

[3] 5BC 240.2; see also the rest of said commentary to 242.2.

[4] *The World Book Encyclopedia*, 1978 ed., s.vv. "B.C.," "A.D.," "Christian Era," "New Testament | Dating the New Testament | The Birth of Jesus."

[5] *Antiquities* 7.14.7.

[6] *Antiquities* 17.7.4.

[7] See DA 65.3.

[8] See Rev. 12:9; cf. GC 438.2.

[9] DA 66.1.

[10] EGW, *Christ Our Savior*, 41.2.

[11] "Jesus . . . began to be about thirty" in Lk. 3:23; cf. "nearly thirty" with "thirty years of His private life," respectively, in RH October 24, 1899, paras. 9, 12.

[12] YI March 1872, paras. 1, 4; April 1872, para. 1; February 1873, para. 3 & September 1, 1873, para. 3.

[13] PK 699.0; GC 327.1, 2.

[14] PK 699.1; DA 233.2; GC 327.3 & 410.1; AA 17.2; and MS 85, September 29, 1902 (filed in 1903), in 6BC 1055.8.

[15] See PK 699.1 and in GC 327.3, 399.3 & 410.1.

[16] David E. Smith, "What Happened on Christmas?" *Adventist Review*, December 2021, 34. Smith cites the source of his findings as Richard Davidson, "Christmas Festival of Lights," *Andrews University Seminary Studies,* Vol. 44, No. 2, 197–201.

[17] EGW, RH December 17, 1889, para. 7. Yet this is also true: "The exact time when humanity blended with divinity, it is not necessary for us to know" (Lt 8, 1895 [as filed, but actually dated February 9, 1896], in 5BC 1129).

[18] Davidson, 200.