

GOD'S BIRTHDAY

WHY CHRIST WAS BORN
ON DECEMBER 25
AND WHY IT MATTERS

TAYLOR R. MARSHALL



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Dedicated to my baby girl
Elizabeth Joy Anne Mary Marshall
who was born earlier this year
—2013 years after Christ.

Et repleta est Spiritu Sancto Elisabeth (Lk 1:41)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHRIST ON CHRISTMAS	1
THE FULLNESS OF TIME	5
APPARITION OF MARY TO CAESAR	15
THE BIRTH YEAR OF CHRIST	19
WAS CHRIST BORN ON DECEMBER 25?	25
WISE MEN RECOGNIZE THE JEWISH KING	35
KING HEROD AS ROME'S ANTI-MESSIAH	38
CONCLUSION	45

CHRIST ON CHRISTMAS

If you watch television or read magazines in the month leading up to Christmas, you will inevitably come across experts claiming that Jesus of Nazareth was not born on December 25, but during the spring months when shepherds would have been in their fields.

They will tell you about how some silly medieval monk named Denys or Dionysius made a faulty calculation and that Jesus was really born as early as 7 years “before Christ”—7 BC.

Next, the experts will tell you that December 25 was chosen by crafty Catholic priests in Rome in order to baptize a pagan winter festival with a Christian celebration. They will tell you about the Roman festival of the birth of the Unconquered Sun in December, and how Christians co-opted the feast for the sake of proselyting the Roman Empire.

I once believed all these arguments. I considered myself an enlightened man. I had heard these arguments in college, graduate courses, and even in seminary. I had heard it preached from pulpits. I assumed that everyone, everywhere knew that Christmas was not *really* the historical birthday of Christ our Lord.

Then one day, I had an epiphany. In 2009, I wrote a successful book on Judaism and early

Christianity titled *The Crucified Rabbi*. In this book, I did a considerable amount of research on Josephus, the most noteworthy Jewish historian of the first century. Much of what we know about Judaism and Rome from the time of Christ comes to us from Josephus. My epiphany came when I realized that Josephus *is a horrible keeper of dates*. He may be a famous historian, but he gets the numbers and dates wrong all the time.

If Josephus kept sloppy, I thought, perhaps we should reinvestigate his chronicle of the death of King Herod. If Josephus is inaccurate on that, then everything changes when it comes to our dating of Christ's birth, death, and resurrection. Sure enough, I found some interesting items. This discovery led me to study the issue more deeply, which I did. That's what this book is about.

This book in your hand challenges the claim that Jesus was *not* born on December 25. Even more, I challenge the claim that we cannot know the year of Christ's birth. As you will see, the expert arguments above are as anachronistic as claiming that Coca-cola invented Santa Clause in the 1930s in order to compete with Kwanza celebrations.

Consider this. The earliest Christian were keenly interested in the birthday of Jesus Christ whom they believed to be God incarnate. In the eyes of the earliest Christians, the day of God's birth from the stainless womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary was *the* most important day in human history, not counting the days of Christ's death and His resurrection from the dead.

The debate against December 25 as the birthday of Christ original sprouted as polemic against Christianity. It is a plot to deconstruct the historicity of biblical Christianity. It is an attempt to relegate Christianity to the realm of myth. More than that, it is an attack on Christ.

Ask yourself this. Would the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Apostles have been at all interested in knowing the birthdate of the Man they knew to be God Himself? If early Christians believed in the deity of Christ, would they have not recorded and commemorated the day?

I hope this book encourages you to rethink early Christianity. Even more, I hope it challenges you to celebrate Christmas for what it truly is—the birthday of Christ who is God. Merry Christmas.

—December 15, 2013

Gaudete Sunday

Taylor Marshall

THE FULLNESS OF TIME

The Apostle Paul once wrote, “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). For Paul and the early Christians, Christ was born in “the fullness of time.” In other words, God chose this specific era to bring about His redemption through Christ.

As described in my book [*The Eternal City*](#), the book of Daniel depicts the advent of the Son of Man occurring in the era of the Fourth Kingdom, that is, the Roman Empire. At last, the time had come. The Roman Empire was secure. Octavian Caesar, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had defeated both Pompey and Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Octavian Caesar emerged as the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Octavian Caesar was given the new title Caesar Augustus, and the *Pax Romana* settled upon the entire known world. Roman roads extended out from every major city. Rome ruled over what is today Spain, Britain, Western Europe, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, the entire coast along North Africa from Egypt to

the Strait of Gibraltar, and every island to be named within the Mediterranean Sea.

By this time, Jews could be found in every major city in the Roman Empire. It is estimated that about seven percent of the population of the empire was Jewish. These Jews carried their beliefs and Scriptures throughout the world. Jewish synagogues had been founded all over the Roman Empire. In the synagogues, Jews came together on the Sabbath to pray, read the Scriptures, and listen to the rabbis expound the sacred texts. The synagogues of the empire provided the original outposts of evangelism for the Apostles as they went out into the world to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Greek was still the *lingua franca* of the empire and the Septuagint provided the Jewish Scriptures in a language accessible to non-Jews. Everything was set in place so that God could spread message of the Messiah to the Gentiles.

It seems that the Jews were not the only ones waiting for a Savior. There is a strong tradition that even pagan seers began to prophesy of the coming Christ who would be a heavenly child and king of the world. The prophetic voice of the classical world belonged to sibyls. The word *sibyl* comes from the Greek word *sibylla*, which means “prophetess.” The sibyls were women who uttered prophetic oracles at shrines or temples throughout the classical world.

Visitors to the Vatican are sometimes amazed to learn that pagan sibyls are included along with the Israelite prophets on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo included five sibyls on the

ceiling of the Sistine Chapel since each prophesied of the coming of Christ:

Erythræan Sibyl
Persian Sibyl
Libyan Sibyl
Cumæan Sibyl
Delphic Sibyl

These prophecies of the Sibyls were well known in the ancient world. For example, Virgil quotes the Cumæan Sibyl in his fourth Eclogue:

*Now the last age of Cumæan Verses is come,
Afresh the great cycle of ages begins,
Returns the Virgin, Saturnian Kingdoms return,
The heavenly Offspring descends from on high.¹*

This was written before the birth of Christ, and yet Virgil acknowledges the Cumæan sibyls prophecy that a Virgin would bring forth a heavenly child from on high. Compare Virgil's words to those of Saint Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk 1:35).

Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher wrote "It has been announced in ancient prophecies that a king is to appear, to whom men must do homage in order to be saved."² The Roman historian Suetonius wrote that "throughout the East an old and constant opinion was frequently expressed to the effect men starting from Judea were destined at that time

to acquire the world-wide supremacy.”³ The Roman historian Tacitus concurs:

Men were convinced that it was written in the ancient books of the priests that at that very time the East should grow strong and men starting from Judea should acquire the supremacy.⁴

We read in the Gospel of Saint Matthew that Jesus Christ was born under the reign of Caesar Augustus. The reader should feel the political tension between the success of Caesar and birth of a mysterious baby acclaimed as the king of heaven *and earth*. The supernatural Kingdom of God has crashed into the Fourth Kingdom of this world as described in the second chapter of Daniel. Christ would later answer a nervous Pilate with the striking statement: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36).

The Angel Gabriel came to a young teenage maiden named Mary who lived under Roman rule. The message is amazing. According to the visions of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, the Blessed Virgin Mary was praying for the coming of the Messiah at the very moment the Angel Gabriel arrived. Gabriel announced:

“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!”

But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind

what sort of greeting this might be
(Lk 1:29).

Regarding this angelic salutation of Gabriel, the Blessed Virgin Mary herself related the following information to Saint Mechtilde of Hackeborn (died in 1298):

My daughter, I want you to know that no one can please me more by saying the salutation which the Most Adorable Trinity sent to me and by which He raised me to the dignity of Mother of God. By the word “Ave,” which is the name Eve, I learned that in His infinite power God has preserved me from all sin and its attendant misery which the first woman had been subject to.⁵

Moderns would likely dismiss Saint Mechtilde’s account as pious fiction for the simple fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary would not have likely received the angelic salutation in Latin with the Latin greeting *Ave*. Rather, the Greek of Saint Luke’s Gospel reads *Chaire*, not the Latin *Ave*.

There is, however, something to Saint Mechtilde’s revelation. The Catholic commentator Cornelius a Lapse makes an excellent observation. Saint Gabriel would have addressed Mary in Hebrew, and likely would have begun his annunciation with the Hebrew greeting “cha-ve” meaning “Live,” as in “Long live the king” or “Viva Papa” or “Viva Cristo Rey.” Now then, according to Genesis 3:20, the

Hebrew name of Eve is “cha-va” meaning “living” because, as the Holy Spirit explains, Eve is the “Mother of the Living.”

This shows that there is indeed a mystical meaning in the original Hebrew greeting of Gabriel to Mary, and that the Virgin’s explanation to Saint Mechtilde is linguistically accurate within the limits of Hebraic vocabulary. Moreover, this linguistic commonality further establishes Mary as the New Eve. It also reveals that the Latin Vulgate version captures the original Semitic meaning through an Indo-European root.

Returning to the angelic greeting, Saint Gabriel continued by saying:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

And Mary said to the angel, “How shall this be, since I have no husband?”

And the angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will

overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.”

And Mary said, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her (Lk 1:28-38).

Mary, then, was the predestined mother of the long-expected Messiah. But there is something else that is startling—the identity of the messenger. It is Gabriel, whose name means *Mighty Man of God*. Gabriel’s role in the Annunciation is significant because Gabriel only appears in one other book of the Bible, the Book of Daniel. It would seem that Gabriel’s name meaning *Mighty Man of God* refers to his role in proclaiming the Incarnation of God the Son—the true Mighty Man of God.

It is the Angel Gabriel who explains to Daniel the time of the Messiah’s birth. Gabriel explains that the Messiah will appear publicly after “sixty-nine weeks” (Dan 9:20, 25). Sixty-nine weeks is another way of saying sixty-nine sevens ($69 \times 7 = 483$) or 483 years. The 483-year countdown begins, according to Gabriel, “from the going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one” (Dan 9:25).

The “going forth of the word to restore and build Jerusalem” occurred when King Artaxerxes issued the proclamation to restore and rebuild Jerusalem in 453 B.C. (Dan 9:25). If we follow the calculation given by the Archangel Gabriel to Daniel and measure out 483 years from the date of 453 B.C., we arrive at the date of A.D. 30, the time of Christ’s baptism and the beginning of His public ministry. It is Gabriel who tells Daniel the exact date of the Messiah’s appearance in A.D. 30. It is not surprising then that God sent the same angel to announce to Mary that the time had come for the Messiah to be born so that He would be ready to begin His ministry by A.D. 30.

Now Saint Gabriel explained that one more week of *seven years* shall follow after A.D. 30. During this time, “the Messiah shall be cut off, but not for himself” (Dan 9:26). In other words, the Messiah shall die not for Himself, but for others. Saint Gabriel explains to Daniel that this will happen at after “half the week” (Dan 9:27) or three and a half years after A.D. 30. Three and a half years after A.D. 30 brings us to A.D. 33—the year of Christ’s death on the cross. Gabriel foretells the death of the Messiah down to the exact year. The final three and a half years end in A.D. 36, the time marking the vision of Saint Peter in the ninth chapter of Acts which initiated the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Catholic Church. This time also marks the conversion of Saint Paul and his apostolic mission to the Gentiles.

When Caesar Augustus called for a census of the Roman Empire, he had ruled the Empire for

more than a quarter of a century. God chose this Roman Emperor to fulfill an obscure Jewish prophecy—that the Messiah should be born in Bethlehem:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are little to be among the clans of
Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days (Mic 5:2).

Until this time, Joseph and Mary had lived in Nazareth, and it appeared that the miraculous baby of Mary would be born there. Caesar intervened, and Joseph found himself packing up his pregnant wife for the ninety-mile journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We are only told that Joseph went to Bethlehem, “because he was of the house and lineage of David” (Luke 2:4). Joseph likely felt the need to go to Bethlehem in order to ensure that he would not forfeit land that was his by inheritance. In America, we are required to vote in the state of our residence. Failure to prove residence results in giving up the right to vote in that state. We can only conjecture why Joseph felt compelled to travel to Bethlehem. As a carpenter, Joseph was able to work anywhere. However, for official purposes, he likely wanted to be reckoned with his historic place of origin.

It would have taken about four or five days to travel the distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem. Bethlehem was not only the

prophetic birthplace of the future Messiah, but also it had been the birthplace of King David and the site of his anointing as the King of Israel. The Blessed Virgin Mary knew these details, and she would have recalled the words of the Angel Gabriel:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of *his father David*, and *he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever*; and of *his kingdom there will be no end*' (Lk 1:32-33).

As the Blessed Virgin Mary pondered all these things in her heart, she likely began to realize that the prophetic voices of the Old Covenant were falling into harmony. It was indeed the fullness of time.

APPARITION OF MARY TO CAESAR

The Roman reign of Caesar Augustus was an era of peace, prosperity, and felicity. Augustus took an imperial census during this era of peace, at which time he closed the temple of Janus for the third time, in the fortieth year of his reign. The Prince of Peace would be born into this historical parenthesis of peace.

According to Saint Bede the Venerable, “A lover of peace, He would be born in a time of the most profound quiet. And there could be no plainer indication of peace than that a census should be taken of the whole world, whose master Augustus was, having reigned at the time of Christ’s nativity for some twelve years in the greatest peace, war being lulled to sleep throughout all the world.”⁶

Tradition holds that Caesar Augustus learned from the oracle of the Tiburtine Sybil that a Hebrew child would silence all the oracles of the Roman gods. Tradition also records that the Blessed Virgin Mary, holding the Christ Child in her arms, appeared to Caesar Augustus on the Capitol Hill. Augustus recognized that this vision corresponded to the oracle concerning the Hebrew child. In response to this apparition of Mary and Jesus, Augustus built an altar in the

Capitol in honor of this child with the title *Ara Primogeniti Dei*, meaning “Altar of the Firstborn of God.” Over three hundred years later, the Christian emperor Constantine the Great built a church at this location of the apparition and altar, which is called *Basilica Sanctae Mariae de Ara Coeli*, meaning “Basilica of Saint Mary of the Altar of Heaven.”⁷ If one visits the church today, he will observe murals of Caesar Augustus and of the Tiburtine Sibyl painted on either side of the arch above the high altar. These images recall the oracle, which prophesied the advent of the Hebrew “Firstborn of God.” In the fifteenth century, this church became famous for a statue of the Christ Child carved from olive wood taken from the Garden of Gethsemane outside Jerusalem. The church’s connection to the birth of Christ made it a fitting place for devotion to the infancy of the Savior.

Meanwhile in the Jewish district of Rome, on the day of Christ’s nativity, a fountain of oil flowed out from the earth in the tavern of a certain man in what is today called *Trastevere*—the region south of the Vatican and to the west of the Tiber River. This fountain of oil revealed to the Jews of Rome that the Messiah had at last been born, since Messiah or Christ means “anointed with oil.” To this very day, the Church of Saint Maria in Trastevere marks the location. The Emperor Septimius Severus, who reigned from A.D. 193 to 211, granted the location to the Christians. In A.D. 220, Pope Saint Callixtus I established the site as a church, and his relics still remain under the church’s high altar. The church

has been rebuilt several times and can still be visited to this very day.

THE BIRTH YEAR OF CHRIST

As you know, B.C. refers to “before Christ” and it is therefore confusing to hear scholars say that Christ was born in 4 B.C. This would mean that Christ was born four years *before Christ*. However, recent and more precise chronological studies have validated the traditional date of Christ’s birth at December 25 in 1 B.C.⁸

As way of background, the dating of B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (*anno Domini* or year of the Lord) derives from the calculations of the Dionysius Exiguus. Exiguus means *little*, so he is often called Dionysius the Little. Dionysius was a Scythian monk living in Rome. He died in about A.D. 544. 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

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 did not include a year zero.

December 31 in 1 B.C. would have passed to January 1 in A.D. 1.

Now Dionysius identified Gabriel's annunciation to the Virgin and the incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary on March 25 in the year 1 B.C. He 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.

The Venerable Bede took up the dating scheme of Dionysius the Little in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 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. Josephus places the death of King Herod the Great in what Dionysius called 4 B.C. Since Herod tried to kill the infant Christ, then it would necessarily be the case that Christ would be born before the death of Herod. If Herod died in 4 B.C., then Christ would need to be born before 4 B.C. And so, ever since the seventeenth century, people have been claiming that Dionysius got it wrong and that Christ was born four years *before Christ*.

What do we make of all this? Well, 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.

However, there is now good reason for believing that Josephus got it wrong. Further studies of Josephus reveal that he was most certainly not consistent or accurate in dating several key events in Jewish and Roman history. In fact, Josephus contradicts verified history, the Bible, and even his own chronology about one hundred times. His dates are not very accurate. The French archaeologist, jurist, and historian Theodore Reinarch was one of the first to document the many factual and chronological errors of Josephus. 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

The following is an example of the poor chronology of Josephus. Josephus records in his *Jewish War* that Hyrcanus reigned for thirty-three years. Yet in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, that Hyrcanus reigned thirty-two years.¹⁰ Yet in another place in his *Antiquities*, Josephus says that Hyrcanus reigned only thirty years. That's three contradictory claims—two in the same book!

In his *Jewish War*, Josephus records that Aristobulus set the diadem on his head 471 years after the exile. Yet in his *Antiquities*, he says it was 481 years, a ten-year difference. By the way, modern historians now know that it was 490 years. Josephus is wrong on all accounts.

More examples could be supplied. The fact is that Josephus was sloppy with dates, especially when they regarded monarchs. So let us take a look at the dates he gives for King Herod. We

discover that Josephus actually gave two contradictory dates for the death of Herod—4 B.C. and A.D. 7 or 8.

Josephus writes that Herod captured Jerusalem and began to rule in what Dionysius would call 37 B.C., and that Herod lived for 34 years after this. If you do the math, this means that Herod died in 4 or 3 B.C. Scholars site this as the authoritative proof that Jesus was born before 4-3 B.C.

However, Josephus records a different dating for the death of Herod elsewhere. In his *Antiquities*, Josephus writes that Herod was fifteen years old in what we would call 47 B.C. when Caesar appointed Hyrcanus as ethnarch.¹¹ But, twice elsewhere Josephus states that Herod was seventy years old when he died. So if Herod was 15 in 47 B.C., that means he died at age 70 in either A.D. 7 or A.D. 8.

We have a serious discrepancy in the dates of Josephus—a window of more than ten years. Moreover, who really knows if either number is accurate given his mistakes on other historical dates?

Why is this important? It reveals that we should not allow Josephus to have the last word on the chronology of Christ. Josephus' dating of Herod's death to 4 B.C. is truly only one version of his calculations. Why not use his date of A.D. 7 or 8? It is rather arbitrary for modern historians to endorse the date of 4 B.C.

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 at Jerusalem before sunset 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. Now what about the date? Was Christ truly born on December 25 in 1 B.C.?

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. For the sake of simplicity, let us set out the usual objections to the date of December 25 and counter each of them.

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 till 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: Let us examine first the cult of the Unconquered Sun. The Emperor Aurelian introduced the cult of the *Sol Invictus* or *Unconquered Sun* to Rome in A.D. 274. Aurelian found political traction with this cult, because his own name *Aurelian* derives from the Latin word *aurora* denoting “sunrise.” Coins reveal that Emperor Aurelian called himself the *Pontifex Solis* or *Pontiff of the Sun*. Thus, Aurelian simply accommodated a generic solar cult and identified his name with it at the end of the third century.

Most importantly, there is no historical record for a celebration *Natalis Sol Invictus* on December 25 prior to A.D. 354. 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.” The Roman numeral XXX equals 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. Moreover, 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.”¹²

The date of December 25th only became the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” under the Emperor Julian the Apostate. Julian the Apostate had been a Christian but who had apostatized and returned to Roman paganism. History reveals that it was the hateful former Christian Emperor that erected a pagan holiday on

December 25. Think about that for a moment. What was he trying to replace?

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!

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. My city of Dallas, Texas has the latitude of 32.8, and it’s still rather comfortable outside in December. As the great Cornelius a Lapide 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.

Now we move on to establishing the birthday of Christ from Sacred Scripture in two steps. The first step is to use Scripture to determine the

birthday of Saint John the Baptist. The next step is using Saint John the Baptist's birthday as the key for finding Christ's birthday. We can discover that Christ was born in late December by observing first the time of year in which Saint Luke describes Saint Zacharias in the temple. This provides us with the approximate conception date of Saint John the Baptist. From there we can follow the chronology that Saint Luke gives, and that lands us at the end of December.

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.¹³ 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 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 Saint Zacharias) was undoubtedly 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 immediately after Zacharias served his

course. This entails that Saint John the Baptist would have been conceived somewhere around the end of 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 of Saint James* also confirms a late September conception of the Baptist since the work depicts Saint Zacharias as High Priest and as entering the Holy of Holies—not merely the holy place with the altar of incense. This is a factual mistake because Zacharias was not the high priest, but one of the chief priests.¹⁵ Still, 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). Immediately after this entry into the temple and message of the Archangel Gabriel, Zacharias and Elizabeth conceive John the Baptist. 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.

The rest of the dating is rather simple. We read that just after the Immaculate Virgin 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. Then, if you subtract nine months from December 25 you get that the

Annunciation 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 about or on December 25.

Sacred Tradition also confirms December 25 as the birthday of the Son of God. The source of this ancient tradition is the Blessed Virgin Mary herself. Ask any mother about the birth of her children. She will not only give you the date of the birth, but she will be able to rattle off the time, the location, the weather, the weight of the baby, the length of the baby, and a number of other details. I'm the father of seven blessed children, and while I sometimes forget these details—*mea maxima culpa*—my wife never does. You see, mothers never forget the details surrounding the births of their babies.

Now ask yourself: Would the Blessed Virgin Mary ever forget the birth of her Son Jesus Christ who was conceived without human seed, proclaimed by angels, born in a miraculous way, and visited by Magi? She knew from the moment of His incarnation in her stainless womb that He was the Son of God and Messiah. Would she ever forget that day?¹⁶

Next, ask yourself: Would the Apostles be interested in hearing Mary tell the story? Of course they would. Do you think the holy Apostle who wrote, "And the Word was made flesh," was not interested in the minute details of His birth? Even when I walk around with our seven-month-old son, people always ask "How

old is he?” or “When was he born?” Don’t you think people asked this question of Mary?

So the exact birth date (December 25) and the time (midnight) would have been known in the first century. Moreover, the Apostles would have asked about it and would have, no doubt, commemorated the blessed event that both Saint Matthew and Saint Luke chronicle for us. In summary, it is completely reasonable to state that the early Christians both knew and commemorated the birth of Christ. Their source would have been His Immaculate Mother.

Further testimony reveals that the Church Fathers claimed December 25 as the Birthday of Christ *prior* to the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire. The earliest record of this is that 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.”¹⁷

Shortly thereafter in the second century, 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.¹⁸

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).¹⁹ 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.

In the Syrian Church, March 25 or the Feast of the Annunciation was seen as one of the most important feasts of the entire year. It denoted the day that God took up his abode in the womb of the Virgin. In fact, if the Annunciation and Good Friday came into conflict on the calendar, the Annunciation trumped it, so important was the day in Syrian tradition. It goes without saying that the Syrian Church preserved some of the most ancient Christian traditions and had a sweet and profound devotion for Mary and the Incarnation of Christ.

Now then, March 25 was enshrined in the early Christian tradition, and from this date it is easy to discern the date of Christ's birth. March 25 (Christ conceived by the Holy Ghost) plus nine months brings us to December 25 (the birth of Christ at Bethlehem).

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.²⁰

In about A.D. 400, Saint Augustine also noted how the schismatic Donatists celebrated December 25 as the birth of Christ, but that the schismatics 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 may indicate that the Latin Church was celebrating a December 25 Christmas (but not a January 6 Epiphany) before A.D. 311. Whichever is the 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 and right 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.

WISE MEN RECOGNIZE THE JEWISH KING

A word must be said here about the Wise Men. It has often been explained by provocative preachers that Scripture does not explicitly record that there were *three* Wise Men. This is only a reasonable conclusion based on the fact that the Wise Men presented *three* gifts. It is assumed, therefore, that there were three gift-givers. The alleged relics of the *three* Wise Men rest in the Cathedral of Cologne, Germany. According to tradition, Saint Helena discovered the grave of the Wise Men and their remains were later transported to the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Later these relics were moved to Milan before finally coming to their current resting place in A.D. 1164. However, the Milanese still celebrate the fact that these relics once resided in Milan by hosting a medieval costume parade every January 6.

Traditional iconography depicts them as representing three different races. The book of Genesis explains that Noah had three sons and that these three sons repopulated the earth. The genealogies listed in Genesis chapters ten and eleven reveal that Noah's son Shem fathered the people who would become the nations of Middle

East. This includes the Israelites, and for this reason they are called *Semitic* people – from the name *Shem*. Ham, the second son of Noah, became the father of the Canaanite, Egyptian, and African peoples. Noah's third son Japheth fathered the people who eventually populated Europe.

Thus, most nativity scenes depict the Three Wise Men as representatives of these three “sons of Noah.” Melchior is the “Shemite” and is typically depicted as an Arabian. Balthasar is the “Hamite” and is typically represented as a young African or Moor. Gaspar or Casper is sometimes featured as a European, at other times Far Eastern or Asian. The symbolism (which didn't fully develop until the twelfth century) points to the reality that every tribe and nation of the world has come to adore the Son of God.

Now Matthew records that the Wise Men visited the Infant Jesus in a *house*. “And going into the *house* they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him” (Mt 2:11). Modern commentators make much of this. They suggest that Jesus, Mary, Joseph had relocated to a physical home and perhaps lived for some time in a house of Bethlehem. This is not only contrary to tradition, but it also does not make sense of the Scriptural context. “They found the Babe lying in the manger.” If Joseph and Mary had relocated to an established home, why is Christ still using an animal's food trough for His bed? The answer is that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were still living in the cave of Bethlehem, which served as a stable.

Why, then does Saint Matthew refer to a “house”? The answer is that Jews call any home a house. In Psalm 103, as Cornelius a Lapidé notes, refers to a bird’s nest as a “house.” Francisco Suárez concludes: “It is plain that Christ, and the Blessed Virgin, as a woman who had lately given birth to a child, remained in the stable until her Purification.” Saint Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine are also of the opinion that “house” in Matthew 2:11 refers to the stable in which Christ was born.²¹

After the Wise Men left Joseph received an angelic warning of Herod’s impending massacre in a dream:

Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt (Mt 2:14-14).

So Joseph packed up once again and led the baby Messiah and his Mother into Egypt until Herod the Great should die. No doubt the costly gifts of the Wise Men helped subsidize their journey into the land of Egypt.

KING HEROD AS ROME'S ANTI-MESSIAH

When King Herod the Great learned that a great king had been born in Bethlehem, he ordered the death of every male under the age of two within that city.

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men (Matt. 2:16).

This tragic event is commemorated on December 28 as the feast of the Holy Innocents. It may seem hard to believe that a ruler would order the death of innocent children, but a little background information concerning Herod the Great reveals that this sort of act was in perfect keeping with his abhorrent character.

Herod the Great seized rule in Palestine by slaying some fifty leading Jewish men to ensure that his reign would remain undisputed. This number included leaders of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Senate of Jerusalem led by the High Priest. Herod banished his first wife Doris and their three-year-old son in order to marry the Hasmonean (that is, of the Maccabaeen family dynasty) princess Mariamne. Princess Mariamne bore five children to Herod

by the time she was twenty-five and then Herod killed her in a fit of jealousy. Herod the Great then murdered Princess Mariamne's parents—King Hyrcanus and Queen Alexandria. At the end of his life Herod killed his two sons Alexander and Aristobulus for fear that they might try to usurp his authority. Then five days before his death, Herod murdered another one of his sons—Antipater. Given that Herod was willing to murder his own sons out of suspicion of a rival claimant, it should be no surprise that the murderer commanded the death of all the babies in Bethlehem.

It all began when Wise Men came to Jerusalem from the East:

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying,

“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.”

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born (Mt 2:1-4).

The star indicated that a new King of the Jews had been born. Herod had spent his entire life

pulling strings in Rome and killing the suspicious for the sake of his title “King of the Jews.” He was not about to give up his claim as king. Whether they knew it or not, the Wise Men were bringing very bad news to Herod the Great. A child recently born in Bethlehem had usurped the present king’s authority.

Herod the Great did not get to where he was in life without a web of schemes and he wasn’t going to let a defenseless baby undermine his reign. However, Herod could not kill the child if he did not know where the child was located. The Jewish scholars quoted Micah 5:2 to Herod, a commonly known passage, which states that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a suburb five miles south of Jerusalem

So Herod falsely pledged his desire to pay homage to this new king and asked the Wise Men to report on the child’s whereabouts. The act of Herod paying homage to this newborn king in Bethlehem would have amounted to an abdication of his status as King of the Jews. Anyone who knew the political record of Herod the Great knew that this was not in Herod’s nature.

Herod died shortly after the birth of Christ. The Jewish historian Josephus records that Herod died an excruciating death related to kidney disease and gangrene of the genitals.

But the disease of Herod grew more severe, God inflicting punishment for his crimes. For a slow fire burned in him which was not so apparent to those who touched him, but

augmented his internal distress; for he had a terrible desire for food which it was not possible to resist. He was affected also with ulceration of the intestines, and with especially severe pains in the colon, while a watery and transparent humor settled about his feet.

He suffered also from a similar trouble in his abdomen. Nay more, his privy member was putrefied and produced worms. He found also excessive difficulty in breathing, and it was particularly disagreeable because of the offensiveness of the odor and the rapidity of respiration.

He had convulsions also in every limb, which gave him uncontrollable strength. It was said, indeed, by those who possessed the power of divination and wisdom to explain such events, that God had inflicted this punishment upon the King on account of his great impiety.²²

Herod had two Jewish scribes burned on the occasion of his death so that Jerusalem would be filled with mourning at his death. Instead, Jerusalem responded with a revolt during the feast of Pentecost.

Herod had left a plan of succession and Rome accordingly confirmed it. Palestine was divided into three districts to be ruled by Herod's

three sons, the only ones he hadn't murdered. Archelaus became the ethnarch of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Herod Antipas became the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Herod Philip I became tetrarch of the northeastern region of Ituraea and Trachonitis. In all three cases, Rome did not grant these three sons the right to bear the title of *king*. Perhaps Rome had seen enough bloodshed. Instead, they were *rulers*.

After Herod the Great had died, an angel came once again to Joseph in a dream and informed him that Herod had died and that it was safe to return to the Holy Land. Joseph soon learned that Herod's son Archelaus had succeeded his father as ruler of Judaea. "He was afraid to go there." (Matt. 2:22) It seems that Joseph received yet another dream and "withdrew to the district of Galilee." (Matt 2:22)

Archelaus would fall into disfavor only a few years later and lived in exile for the rest of his life in what is now France. In A.D. 6, Rome combined Judea, Samaria, and Idumea to create the united Roman province of Judaea. From that time forward, the Jews were ruled directly by a series of Roman prefects. The first prefect was Coponius (A.D. 6-9), the second was Marcus Ambibulus (9-12), and the third was Annius Rufus (12-15). Valerius Gratus (15-26) was the fourth prefect of Judea, and he appointed Joseph Caiaphas as High Priest. This is the same Caiaphas who masterminded the plot against Jesus Christ. The prefect after Gratus was the most famous prefect of all time: Pontius Pilate (prefect from A.D. 26-36). Rome had tightened its grip around Judea. Meanwhile to the north,

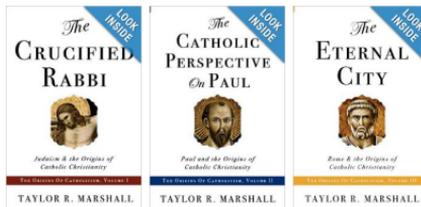
the Messiah was passing his adolescence and early manhood in the district of Galilee. The spiritual battle for Rome and the rest of humanity had yet to be fought.

CONCLUSION

Bill O'Reilly recently re-popularized the chronological myths related to the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ in his best-selling book *Killing Jesus*. It's my prayer that this short book leads others to question whether the revisionist chronology of the life of Christ is accurate. Most of this book is an excerpt from my full-length book *The Eternal City*.

If you would like to learn more about how Christ and the early Church fulfilled Old Testament Judaism and conquered pagan Rome, please take a look at my *Origins of Catholicism* series at amazon.com:

1. [*The Crucified Rabbi*](#)
2. [*The Catholic Perspective on Paul*](#)
3. [*The Eternal City*](#)



¹ Virgil applied this Cumæan prophecy to Pollio, the son of the Roman Consul Asinius Pollio. Virgil's application is incorrect

² Cicero, *De Divinitate*, 2, 54.

³ Suetonius. *Vespas.*, c. 4.

⁴ Tacitus, *Hist.*, 5, 13.

⁵ Saint Louis de Montfort relates this account in his *Secret of the Rosary*, Part 1, Sixth Rose.

⁶ Quoted by Cornelius a Lapide in his *Commentary on Luke* at Luke 2:1.

⁷ This tradition is confirmed by Baronius, citing Suidas, Nicephorus, and others, in the materials of his *Annals*.

⁸ 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.

⁹ de Nanteuil, 2008.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.

¹¹ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.

¹² *The Chronography of AD 354*.

Part 12: Commemorations of the

Martyrs. MGH *Chronica Minora* I (1892), pp. 71-2.

¹³ I realize that there are two courses of Abias. This theory only works if Zacharias and Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist after Zacharias' second course - the course in September. If Saint Luke refers to the first course, this then would place the birth of John the Baptist in late Fall and the birth of Christ in late Spring. However, I think tradition and the Protoevangelium substantiate that the Baptist was conceived in late September.

¹⁴ Josef Heinrich Friedlieb's *Leben J. Christi des Erlösers*. Münster, 1887, p. 312.

¹⁵ The Greek tradition especially celebrates Saint Zacharias as "high priest." Nevertheless, Acts 5:24 reveals that there were several "chief priests" (ἀρχιερεῖς), and thus the claim that Zacharias was a "high priest" may not indicate a contradiction. The Greek tradition identifies Zacharias as an archpriest and martyr based on the narrative of the

Protoevangelium of James and Matthew 23:35: “That upon you may come all the just blood that hath been shed upon the earth, from the blood of Abel the just, even unto the blood of Zacharias the son of Barachias, whom you killed between the temple and the altar.” (Matthew 23:35)

¹⁶ A special thanks to the Reverend Father Phil Wolfe, FSSP for bringing the “memory of Mary” argument to my attention.

¹⁷ *Magdeburgenses*, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, *De origine Festorum Chirstianorum*.

¹⁸ Saint Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel*.

¹⁹ There is some discrepancy in the Fathers as to whether Nisan 14/March 25 marked the death of Christ or his resurrection.

²⁰ Saint Augustine, *De trinitate*, 4, 5.

²¹ Saint Augustine, *Sermones* 1 & 2 de Epiph. Saint Justin Martyr, *Against Trypho*.

²² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.6.5