

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Circumstances Around Jesus' Birth

by Dan Trygg

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. ⁷ And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both advanced in years.”

Luke 1:5-7

“Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ² This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David. ⁵ in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. ⁶ And it came about that while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the guest room.”

Luke 2:1-7

Luke is the only gospel writer to make a point of tying his writing to historical events of the larger world. He clearly stated that he had carefully investigated everything, talking especially to eyewitnesses, in order that he might compile an accurate, orderly account of what took place during the lifetime of Jesus (Lk. 1:1-4).

From chapter one, we find out that **Herod the Great was king of Judea** (vs. 5). This is corroborated by Matthew (2:1), and is significant because Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C. Therefore, Jesus had to have been born previous to this. (Yes, the present calendar system was not devised for about 525 years *after* Jesus' birth, by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus [translated as “Dennis the Small”]. Unfortunately, his calculations regarding the death of Herod were off by several years, which meant that the birth date of Jesus was also in error. The whole idea was to move away from the pagan Julian calendar, and devise a calendar that began with the coming of the Lord. A.D. stood for the Latin phrase, *anno domini*, “in the year of our Lord”.)

We are also introduced to Zacharias, a priest from the division of Abijah (1:5). There were 24 divisions of priests, based upon paternal households. Each division served in the temple for one week, twice a year. During the major pilgrim festivals, all of the priests would be present to serve. **The allotted position of the division of Abijah, was the eighth week after the Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread** (1 Chr. 24:10), in the summer, and the eighth week after the Feast of Booths, in the winter. The summer session would usually work out to be the last week in May, or the first week in June. In 6 B.C., the final day of the Passover/Unleavened Bread celebration would have been April 8th. The division of Abijah would have served from June 3rd through the 10th. So, Zachariah would have returned home the second week in June. If Elizabeth conceived right after he returned home, their future son, John, would have been born the following March in 5 BC. Gabriel visited Mary when Elizabeth was in her sixth month (Lk. 1:36), in mid-December. **Jesus would have been born six months after John, in September. This would have coincided with the Feast of Tabernacles.** This would make more sense than a December birth date, since shepherds are customarily out in the field with their flocks in the autumn, ...but in the winter months they were not, since it was the rainy season. It is interesting, too, to note that the apostle John chose to refer to Jesus' birth as “the Word tabernacled among us” (Jn. 1:14), possibly an intentional reference to Jesus' birth at that time of the year. (Herod would die the following spring, in March/April 4 BC.)

In chapter two, we are given three other important pieces of information. We are told that **Caesar Augustus was in power** (27 B.C.-14 A.D.), **and Quirinius was governing Syria**. Furthermore, we are told that **a census was ordered** by Augustus. The historical accuracy of Luke's record has been challenged by skeptics repeatedly, but Sir William Ramsay, a 20th century archaeologist, discovered that Luke was amazingly accurate. In fact, he himself was an unsympathetic skeptic who came to believe in Jesus, as he saw the Bible repeatedly vindicated by the relics, inscriptions, and writings of the period discovered by excavations he personally conducted. Again and again, the arrogant and cynical claims and theories of mocking archaeologists were dashed to pieces and buried by the findings of their own shovels. At first, critics claimed that the Bible must be in error, because the writings of Josephus, a first-century Jew, indicated that Quirinius was governor of Syria in A.D. 6. This would be too late for Jesus' birth. Ramsay, however, found papyri and inscriptions that show that Quirinius was indeed ruling Syria on *two* occasions, the first of which was from 8-5 B.C., and that Augustus had ordered several censuses during his reign, including one initiated in 8 B.C. This would have taken 2-3 years to implement and fully carry out, which means that the census enrollment would have continued until 6-5 B.C. Luke specifically mentioned that this was “the first census taken when Quirinius was ruling Syria”. Clearly, he was aware that there was more than one census. The census described by Josephus was later. **When all this is taken together, it is clear that Jesus had to have been born about 5 B.C.**

This date is further corroborated by John 2:20, where, early in Jesus' ministry, the Jews mention that the temple had been under construction for 46 years. We know from records that Herod had begun this temple refurbishing project in approximately 20 B.C., meaning that Jesus' started His ministry as a 30 year old man in 25-26 A.D. (cf. Lk. 3:23). **Working backward from there, He had to have been born approximately in 5-4 B.C.**

Amazingly, **there is one other cross-check to the time of the Messiah's coming. This one is a prophetic word.** Instead of working backwards from some known event later in Jesus' life, **this requires that we count forwards from some known event in the past.** In **Daniel 9:25**, the angel Gabriel (the same angel that later visited Zacharias and Mary – Lk. 1:8-19,26-38) told Daniel that “So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks” [of years]. Jerusalem had been destroyed years before. Daniel was an official in the government of Darius the Mede. There were still other rulers who would come to power before these words would be fulfilled. In 457 B.C., the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, was the one who eventually gave the decree prophesied (Ezr. 7:8). When you add the 483 years of the prophecy to this date, you come out to 26 A.D. when Messiah would appear in Israel. Of course, this coincides with the time frame provided by John 2. It coincides with the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. **Do we have any other candidates for Messiah who publicly appeared on the scene in 26 A.D.?** Is there anybody else from that time period who has affected world history as He has? **Of course, if He appeared publicly to Israel in 26 A.D., and He was 30 years old, then He must have been born in 5-4 B.C., coinciding with the other information we have.**

It was because of the decree of Caesar Augustus, that everyone was to be enrolled. This was a written record of registration of everybody. Everyone knew what that meant. Registrations were not just for curiosity's sake. **A census was a thorough and systematic numbering of all the people. Such an enrollment was used for military conscription, for taxation, and for the planning and allocation of governmental resources.** Instead of sweeping through and counting where people currently were living, the Romans felt that a more accurate number could be obtained if **people were required to register at the city of their birth, or their ancestral home**, where birth records were kept. (Egyptian papyri have documented this practice, vindicating Luke's accurate reporting.) The countries of the Roman Empire were all occupied by Roman troops, and there were often checkpoints where proof had to be shown that a person had been properly registered. It was incumbent upon people, therefore, to comply with the law. Rome was known to deal harshly with lawbreakers. **This was the immediate cause that motivated Mary and Joseph to leave their home town of Nazareth and travel nearly 100 miles during the end of Mary's pregnancy.** They were both of the “house and lineage of David”, so they had to go to the “city of David” to be enrolled. The family records were kept there in Bethlehem, the city of David's birth (1 Sam. 16). There must have been a window of time where they were required to register. Possibly the census-takers moved from town to town, and this happened to be the time that they would be scheduled to be in Bethlehem. Unfortunately, so it seemed, this time frame required that they travel when she was heavy with child.

In addition to the people who had come to be enrolled, if Jesus' birth did take place in the Feast of Tabernacles, or Passover, **there would have been many people traveling to the area around Jerusalem, where the temple was located.** Bethlehem is only 6 miles south of Jerusalem, so the many pilgrims would have inundated that small town with road-weary travelers. **Joseph and Mary may have thought that they would stay with relatives, as they had so many times before.** Feast times were celebrated with great hospitality. **Instead of an “inn”, the Greek word means “guest room”.** (The same word was used to describe the room Jesus had reserved for the last supper [Mk. 14:14; Lk. 22:11]). **Because Mary was in labor, however, they were taken to a cave that was serving as a stable for the host family's livestock. Thankfully, that would have offered a bit more privacy and quiet than they would have had among the bustle of the busy household. It was there, in that stable-cave, that Mary gave birth to her first-born Son, the Messiah, Christ the Lord.** As was customary, they would have rubbed Him with salt, to clean Him off, and they wrapped Him up tight in cloths (Ezk. 16:4). **Instead of a crib, they laid Him in a stone feeding trough, filled with hay.**

(Justin Martyr was a Palestinian Christian, who grew up in Nablus, about 30 miles from Bethlehem. He visited this cave in 150 AD, and documented that this was the site of Jesus' birth. The emperor Constantine commissioned the construction of a church there, which was dedicated as the “Church of the Nativity” in 339. In spite of our traditional imaginings of a stable in a barn, the most common building material in Israel is stone, and caves were often incorporated into sheepfolds, stables, and even houses.)

But the night was not yet over. **There were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.** Shepherds were considered as low-class outsiders, and spiritually unclean. How fitting that on the night Jesus was born, that God commissioned the company of angels to announce His coming to *these* men. “Unto you today has been born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” The angel proclaimed the good news of God's grace to them, ...but they were also instructed to go look for Him. **He gave them a sign to look for: “You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a feeding trough”** (Lk. 2:12). It did not take them long to find Him, because they did not go from house to house, but from stable-cave to stable-cave. **Then, they gave testimony to what they had seen and heard!**