The Star of Bethlehem

A Chronology of the Life of Jesus

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Primary Reference: Colin J. Humphreys,
"The Star of Bethlehem - a Comet in 5 BC -
and the Date of the Birth of Christ",
Quarterly Journal of the Royal
Calendars

- **Current Calendars**
  - Pagan (Roman) basis for our calendar
    - Days of week
    - Months of year
  - Early Christians wanted calendar to be based on birth of Jesus

- **Year 1**
  - Set by monk Dionysius Exiguus in AD 525
    - BC and AD: Years before and after Jesus’ birth
  - He got it wrong
    - King Herod died in March, 4 BC (Matt. 2:19-21)

**The Return to Nazareth**

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.
Why Question the Birthdate of Jesus?

- **Origin of Current Birthdate**
  - Current date set (arbitrarily) by Pope Julius I in AD 349
    - Jan. 1 = Date of circumcision of Jesus
    - Dec. 25 = Birth date of Jesus 8 days earlier
  - **Reason? Sol Invictus**
    - Date for Christmas replaced the pagan festival ”Sol Invictus”.
    - Celebrated the passage of the winter solstice & return of sun.

- **What time of year was Jesus really born?**
  - **Biblical clue: Luke 2:8**

  *The Shepherds and the Angels*

  8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

  ... Angels appear to shepherds, shepherds visit baby Jesus ...

  - Shepherds only do this during foaling season (spring).
First Clues: Luke 2


The Birth of Jesus
1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.
2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)
3 And everyone went to his own town to register.
4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.
5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.
6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,
7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
First Clues: *Luke 2*

- **No Help from Census**
  - Censuses of Caesar Augustus
    - Many taken
    - No record of this census
    - Slow process, so no urgency
  - Governor of Syria
    - Quirinius inaugurated in 6 AD
    - Quintillius inaugurated in 6 BC

- **Trip from to Bethlehem**
  - Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth of Galilee
    - Joseph traveled ~90 miles with Mary to register in Bethlehem
  - Jesus was born in Bethlehem
    - Bethlehem is near Jerusalem
    - "There was no room for them in the inn." Why?

Hugo van der Goes
*The Adoration of the Shepherds*
More Clues: The Magi

- **Who were they?**
  - From the east: Persia/ Babylon
    - Not kings but "wise men": Astronomers, Astrologers, and Numerologists
    - Not unusual for Magi to pay homage to kings
  - They knew the Jews
    - Babylonian conquest: Aware of Jewish Messianic prophesy
      - May have had Jewish advisors

- **Distances**
  - Persia and Babylon are approximately 500 miles from Jerusalem
  - Travel time by camel
    - 10-20 miles per day
    - 25-50 days each way
Magi in Jerusalem

- Matthew 2:1-8

The Visit of the Magi

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, **Magi from the east** came to Jerusalem
2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.
5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:
6 "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'[Micah 5:2]"
7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."
Magi in Jerusalem

- The Magi
  - The star had meaning for them
    - Because of "his star", they came to worship "the one who has been born king of the Jews"
  - The Magi traveled toward Israel, *away from the star!*
    - Star in the east
    - Israel is west of Babylon
  - Went first to Jerusalem
    - Asked Herod where to go
    - Herod's priests and advisors quoted prophesy (Micah 5:2)
      - Birth of Messiah in Bethlehem
- Herod
  - Hadn’t noticed the star
    - No Jewish astrologers

Leonaert Bramer
*The Adoration of the Magi*
1634
The Magi in Bethlehem

- **Matthew 2:9-12**

The Visit of the Magi

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.
10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.
12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

- **The Magi**
  - Traveled short distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem at night
    - Bethlehem is 1-2 hours south of Jerusalem

- **The Star**
  - The star finally led the Magi, if only briefly
    - They observed the star “went ahead” of them, over Bethlehem
    - They were "overjoyed" at this agreement between observation and prophesy.
Clues about the Star

- **The Star**
  - The star “appeared” (2:7)
  - It appeared in the east (2:2)
  - The “star” moved through the stars from east to south (2:2,9)
    - Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem
  - The star “stood over” Bethlehem (2:9)
  - Jesus was in a house (2:11), not a stable
    - Some time had passed since birth.
    - Mary & Joseph still in Bethlehem
    - Star was present throughout the Magi’s journey.
What was the Star?

- **It is probably not a**
  - Star
    - Don’t “appear” or move
  - Planetary conjunction
    - Don’t “stand over”
  - Nova or a supernova
    - Don’t move or “stand over”

- **Most likely a comet with a tail**
  - Comet moving away from sun after perihelion
    - First seen in east, morning sky
  - Moved through stars from east to south, typically 1-2 months
    - Babylon to Jerusalem ~1-2 mos
    - Jerusalem to Bethlehem ~2 hrs
  - Do you see what I see?

Giotto di Bondone
*The Adoration of The Magi*
1301
What Year Did the Comet Appear?

- **Earliest Birth year**
  - John the Baptist Prepares the Way
    1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—
    2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.
  
    . . . Ministry of John the Baptist, Baptism of Jesus . . .
  
    23 Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.

  - John the Baptist started ministry in AD 28 or 29 (Luke 3:1-2, 23)
    - Probably used by Dionysius Exiguus to set 1 AD
    - Jesus “about 30” (between 26-34) when baptized
    - Jesus born between 7 BC - 3 AD

- **Latest Birth year**
  - Herod died in March, 4 BC (Matt. 2:19-21)

- **Jesus was born between 7 BC and 4 BC**
Which Comet was it?

- **Chinese Astronomy Records**
  - Comet in 5 BC
    - Appeared in constellation Capricorn
  - Appeared in “second month”
    - March 9 - April 6
    - In March/April, Capricorn rises in the east before dawn
  - Seen for > 70 days

March Pre-Dawn Sky
Why Follow this Comet?

• **Basic Babylonian Astrology**
  - **Planets**
    - Saturn = Divine Father
    - Jupiter = Son of Divine Father
    - Mars = Powerful or mighty one
  - **Comets = Change**
    - Change = uncertainty & fear
    - Comets in East = Change imminent
  - **Constellations**
    - Capricorn = House of Saturn
    - Pisces = The Jews

• **Numerology**
  - Rarity
  - Patterns
  - Threes

Comet Hale-Bopp
1997
Why Follow this Comet?

- **7 BC: Triple Conjunction**
  - Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces
    - Happens once every ~900 years
    - Divine King to be born in Israel

- **6 BC: Three-way Conjunction**
  - Mars, Jupiter, Saturn in Pisces
    - Happens once every ~800 years
    - A mighty king would be born in Israel

- **5 BC: Comet appeared**
  - Comet Appeared in Capricorn
    - Capricorn in East in Spring
    - Third sign: Imminent, important birth
    - Consistent with OT prophesy regarding the Messiah
The Escape to Egypt
13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."
14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."[Hosea 11:1]
16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

• Further Evidence
  • Herod asks for "the exact time the star appeared" (Matt. 2:7)
    • Herod orders the execution of all first born sons < 2 yrs old (Matt. 2:16)
    • Herod's orders based on "the time he had learned from the Magi"
  • Bethlehem was a small town
    • ~1000 residents, ~20 boys under age of 2
Jesus’ Birthday

- Jesus was born in Spring, 5 BC
  - But what month? what day?
  - Assume Jesus was born around the time of the appearance of the comet

- Earliest Birth Date
  - Comet appeared during Chinese “Second Month”
    - March 9 - April 6, 5 BC
  - Other spring time clues
    - Spring is lambing season
    - Flocks would be watched by night

**Comet Appears**

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Why did Mary and Joseph stay in Bethlehem?

- **To fulfill Jewish law**
  - *Luke 2:21-24, 39*

### Jesus Presented in the Temple

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord" [Exodus 13:2,12] ),

24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." [Lev. 12:8]

... Story of Simeon and Anna ...

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.

- Jesus circumcised: 8 days old
- Mary: Unclean for 40 days
- After Mary purified: Jesus presented to the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem
Possible Birth Dates

- **Latest Birthdate**
  - Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem only for a while
    - At least 40 days after birth
    - They would have left Judah soon thereafter
  - Comet still visible when Magi arrived in Bethlehem
    - Earliest possible Magi visit: March 9 + 40 days = April 18
    - Latest possible Magi visit: April 6 + 70 days = June 15
  - Latest birthdate of Jesus
    - June 15 - 40 days = May 4, 5 BC
Possible Birth Dates

- Jesus was born between March 9 and May 4, 5 BC
  - *Magi may have begun trip before Jesus was born!*
  - Can we narrow this further?
- Possible Birthdate near Passover
  - All adult males went to Jerusalem at Passover
    - Jerusalem was crowded
    - Bethlehem was also crowded
  - Joseph may have registered for census during Passover
    - *Birth: April 13-27, 5 BC*
  - John: Jesus is “Lamb of God”
    - Passover lambs chosen: April 14-15, 5 BC
Chronology: Life of Jesus

- **7 BC**
  - Triple Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn

- **6 BC**
  - Conjunction of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn

- **5 BC**
  - March or April
    - Comet appears
    - Magi depart Babylon
    - Birth of Jesus (April 13-27?)
  - May or June
    - Magi visit Herod in Jerusalem
    - Magi visit Jesus in Bethlehem
    - Jesus taken to Jerusalem, Temple
    - Joseph, Mary, and Jesus flee to Egypt

- **4 BC**
  - Herod dies (March)
  - Jesus returns from Egypt

- **AD 29**
  - Jesus is Baptized

- **AD 33**
  - Jesus is Crucified (April 3)
Believers: Mary and Joseph
- Traveled to Bethlehem during Passover
  - She was pregnant, and they knew it would be crowded
- Followed OT laws and customs
  - Passover, Circumcision, Presentation at the Temple

Non-Believers: Magi
- God spoke to them in a way they could understand
  - Agreement between astrology and OT prophesy
  - He would be a king (gold), a priest (frankincense), and a prophet (myrrh)
- They traveled 3-5 months, away from star
  - May have left before Jesus born
  - They were “overjoyed” when “star” seen “over” Bethlehem

Matthew 2
11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.
12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.
### Hebrew Calendar, 5BC

| Month | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
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Hebrew Calendar, 5BC