

This being the Christmas season it might be fun to look at that old historical chestnut, the date of Jesus' birth. You might say, that's easy: 25 December, end of 1 B.C. Christmas Day, however, is not supported directly by anything in the Bible and was not established by the Church until the fourth century. Moreover, the actual number of years since the nativity was not reckoned officially until the end of the fifth century. Before that people referred to the years of an emperor's reign. The monk who was responsible for the calculations, one Dionysius Exiguus, made an error of at least four years. Until recently most historians have thought that Jesus was actually born in the year 7 Before Christ, an anomaly that puts him in the odd position of being born before himself! Recently, however, the evidence has been re-examined and new conclusions have allowed the nativity to be re-dated to the end of 2 B.C.; Dionysius was not so far off after all.

The problem of the historian is to reconcile the contradictions in our evidence. St. Matthew and St. Luke both indicate that the nativity occurred in the days of Herod the Great, king of Judaea, whose death is placed (apparently) by the Jewish historian Josephus in 4 B.C. Luke gives other, very precise indications: that Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem to be registered because of a decree of Augustus; that the governor of Syria was Quirinius; and that Jesus began his ministry at about the age of thirty in the fifteenth year of Tiberius' reign, A.D. 28-29. This last fact is in direct contradiction with the accepted date of Herod's death, since it implies a nativity in 3-2 B.C. Moreover, Quirinius was not governor of Syria until A.D. 6.

Most have assumed that Luke was careless, and owing to certain events in the heavens of 7 B.C. that might have given rise to the story of the star of Bethlehem, place the nativity in that year. Yet Luke was an educated man writing not too long (thirty years) after the events for an educated friend, in the first instance, in the second instance for the whole Graeco-Roman world. It is unlikely that he should be so careful to give these indications, yet get them hopelessly wrong.

A way out of the difficulties has recently been suggested: what if Herod did not die in 4 B.C.? Josephus' account of the period is full and consistent; on closer examination it seems that the date of 4 B.C. involves various assumptions that cannot be reconciled with his narrative. Too little time is allowed for all the events between the lunar eclipse after Herod's execution of two rabbis (12/13 March) and the Passover after his death (11 April). Moreover, Varus, the governor of Syria, is said to have recently arrived in the autumn before Herod's death; yet his tenure began in 7 B.C., two full years before.

It has been argued by Ernest Martin that Herod actually died in 1 B.C. The lunar eclipse mentioned by Josephus would be the full eclipse of 10 January 1 B.C., not the partial eclipse of the earlier year. This allows four months before Passover for the events described by Josephus. Varus, it turns out, was governor of Syria again from 2 B.C. to A.D. 1; and Quirinius was actually procurator (as Justin Martyr calls him) in late summer, not governor, for a

short period before Varus arrived. Augustus' decree for universal registration is not known from any source for either date; but there are some not insubstantial bits of evidence that something of this sort was in fact going on in the summer of 2 B.C.

We can be even more precise if you are willing to bet on the accuracy of star-gazers' analysis. There were some impressive events in the heavens of 7 B.C. that might have induced the Wise Men to travel west; but those of 2 B.C. were even better. From August to December there were a number of conjunctions involving Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Regulus and Leo. On the morning of (mirabile dictu!) 25 December, Jupiter was stationary at a point due south of Jerusalem, over Bethlehem. Would anyone be bold enough to suggest that knowledge of this fact affected the setting of Christmas Day?

Martin goes further: a comparison made by Luke between the birthdays of Jesus and John the Baptist make a day in September likely for the former's entry; and a bold interpretation of an astrological passage in Revelation 12:1-5 allows him to give the exact day and time as 1 September between 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. Few will follow him here; but his suggestion for the year, though not free of assumptions, has the virtue of reconciling the evidence with minimal violence. Whoever is right, though - Martin or the traditional view - by the time you read this Christmas 1983 will have come and gone, so you can stop worrying on that account.