

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #32: WHEN WAS JESUS BORN? (CLASS NOTES)

By John Temples

1. PRETTY MUCH EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT JESUS WAS NOT BORN ON DEC 25, BUT THEY KEEP OBSERVING THAT DATE ANYWAY.
 - a. Part of the reason for that is that Dec 25 has been designated as the birthday of Christ since AD 336, some 1,683 years.
 - b. The Roman Catholic church took a pagan holiday, the birthday of the sun, and “Christianized” it.
 - c. Since the NT is silent on the subject, it’s a pretty safe assumption that observance of the Lord’s birthday is not part of NT Christianity.
 - i. But the timing of the Lord’s birth is something we naturally are curious about; so why did God not tell us?
 - ii. Well, maybe He did. Not directly, but by implication.
 - d. Not every fact is stated directly in Scripture--there are some things God left for us to figure out by reasoning.
 - e. Several lines of reasoning from the Scriptures in regard to the Lord’s birth converge on a particular month. (Finding out the day is pretty much out of the question, but we can be fairly certain about the month.)
 - f. Let us do some “detective work” with our Bibles and find out what that month is.
2. THE FIRST CLUE INVOLVES WEATHER AND CLIMATE CONDITIONS AT THE TIME OF HIS BIRTH.

- a. **Luke 2:8**--"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."
- i. Notice that the shepherds were actually *living* out in the fields, not just taking the sheep out by day and bringing them in at night.
 - ii. Many historical sources tell us that shepherds would not be doing that in December; the weather was cold and it was the rainy season.
 - iii. What might this suggest? That Jesus was born in either the spring, summer, or fall of the year, but not in December.
- b. This line of reasoning is the weakest clue we have, though, for two reasons:
- i. One, many modern scholars are beginning to question the historical validity of the assertion that shepherds didn't stay out year-round in Palestine.
 - ii. Recent studies I have done suggest that certain shepherds around Bethlehem did keep their flocks out year-round, because those flocks were sacrificial animals which would be needed every month in the temple.
- c. The second reason to question this line of reasoning is that the weather in Israel in winter is not exactly what we would call brutal.
- i. The average temperatures in Bethlehem in December are highs of mid-50s and lows in the low to mid 40s.
 - ii. Cold yes, but not unbearable.
 - iii. One website I checked said the temperatures in December in Bethlehem are about the same as Lake City in north Florida.
 - iv. I don't hear of people not venturing outside in Lake City just because it's in the 40s.
- d. So, about all we can say is that this clue suggests, but does not prove, that Jesus was not born in the winter.
- e. Other clues, however, are much more definite.

3. NEXT CLUE: THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE EARTHLY MINISTRY OF JESUS.

- a. **Daniel 9:24-27** is a prophecy of the timing of the coming of Christ, the Messiah.
 - i. V 26 states that the Messiah would be “cut off” (that suggests a violent death).
 - ii. V 27a has to do with how long Christ’s ministry would last.
 - iii. It says, “Then He shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering.”

- b. All these verses speak of weeks or seven-day periods; but we learn from Numbers 14:34 and Ezek 4:6 that in prophecy, a day is a year.
 - i. Num 14:34--”According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years; and you shall know My rejection.”
 - ii. Ezek 4:6--”I have given you a day for each year.”

- c. So the prophecy of Daniel 9 is saying:
 - i. The Messiah would come after a certain number of weeks (prophetic seven-year periods);
 - ii. He would confirm the covenant during one of those weeks (a reference to His teaching and miracles).
 - iii. In the middle of that prophetic week He would be cut off, and in doing so would “put an end to sacrifice and offering.” These terms point to Christ’s atoning death.

- d. “The middle of the week” is 3-½ days. But remember, in prophecy a day is a year; so “the middle of the week” would be 3-½ years. Almost all scholars agree the ministry of X lasted 3-½ years.

- e. Brother Burton Coffman says in his commentary, "The prophecy in Daniel 9:27, to the effect that Christ should make the covenant firm with many for one week, is a clear reference to the public ministry of Jesus Christ. It is here called 'a week,' indicating a seven year period; but with this limitation: He the Messiah was cut off 'in the midst of the week,' that is after three and one half years, which corresponds exactly to the facts."

4. ONE MORE CLUE IS FOUND IN **LUKE 3:23a**--"NOW JESUS BEGAN HIS MINISTRY AT ABOUT THIRTY YEARS OF AGE."

- a. A man's 30th birthday was significant to the Jews.
- b. According to Num 4:3, a Jewish priest could not begin his service as a priest until his 30th birthday.

5. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE FACTS IN RELATION TO THE QUESTION, WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

- a. We know that His earthly ministry lasted about 3-1/2 years.
- b. We know that He began His ministry at, or close to, His thirtieth birthday.
- c. We know from the gospels that His ministry ended, and His death occurred, during the Jewish feast of Passover.
- d. The Passover was in the Jewish month of Nisan, which in our calendar is about mid-March to mid-April.
- e. So His death was out of synch with His birthday by some six months.
- f. If you count back a half year (six months) from late March, you come to about the end of September.
- g. This is strong proof that the birthday of Jesus was around the end of September.

6. THERE IS ANOTHER FASCINATING LINE OF REASONING THAT HAS TO DO WITH THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

- a. You need to read **Luke 1:5-38** re: John's birth.

- b. Vs 26 & 36 tell us something very important: that Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived.
- c. Since we know that John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus, if we can determine when John was born, we can extrapolate and figure out when Jesus was born.
- d. Look at **Luke 1:5**.
 - i. That tells us that John's father was named Zacharias and that he was a priest.
 - ii. AND...he was of the course or division of Abijah.
 - iii. What does that mean?
- e. Refer to 1 Chron 24:1-19. From the time of David, the Jewish priesthood was divided into 24 courses or divisions.
 - i. Each course of priests served for a week in the temple, from one Sabbath day to the next.
 - ii. The first course began serving at the beginning of the Jewish religious year, which was in the month of Nisan (mid-March to mid-April).
 - iii. Confirmation that the Jewish religious year began at the time of Passover is found in Ex 12:1,2--"Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, 'This month shall be your beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.'"
 - iv. Each priestly course served twice a year, and all the courses served together at festivals. (These facts we learn from Jewish scholars.)
- f. So, the first course of priests started their service around April 1.
 - i. But John the Baptist's father was of the eighth course, Abijah.
 - ii. Taking into account that all the courses served at festivals, that means he would have begun his service around mid-June.

- g. It was during his week of temple service that an angel told Zacharias that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child (**Luke 1:8-13**).
- h. After Zacharias completed his service and returned home, Elizabeth conceived (**Luke 1:23-24**).
- i. A reasonable assumption, then, would be that John the Baptist was conceived around the last week of June.¹
- j. That would mean he was born around Passover, or the end of March of the next year.
- k. But remember what we learned from Luke 1:26: Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived.
- l. So...
 - i. John the Baptist was conceived about the third week of June and was born about the end of March.
 - ii. Six months into Elizabeth's pregnancy, or about mid to late December, Mary became pregnant with Jesus. (Yes! Jesus was conceived--not born, but conceived--about December 25! Right time, wrong event.)
 - iii. Jesus was conceived, and therefore born, six months later than John (**Luke 1:26, 36**).
 - iv. So if Jesus was conceived in December, all we have to do is add nine months to arrive at His probable birth month: **SEPTEMBER!**
- m. That is the same conclusion we came to when we did the math on Daniel's prophecy about the Messiah, which is strong circumstantial evidence that September is the birth month of Jesus.

7. DOES ALL THIS MATTER?

¹ For a more detailed and technical analysis of this point, see:
<https://smoodock45.wordpress.com/2016/04/12/the-course-of-abijah/>

- a. Well, not in the grand scheme of things; and again, if God had wanted us to formally observe Christ's birthday, He obviously would have told us.
- b. But it's something that is interesting, even fascinating. We want to know all we can about Jesus, both what is stated in Scripture and what can be inferred.
- c. And also, this is a great exercise in drawing conclusions and reasoning logically from Scripture. --John Temples