

The Time of Jesus' Birth

The suggestion was made in the last chapter that the Magi presented their gifts to Jesus on December 25, 2 B.C.E. This was not, however, the time of his birth. When the Magi arrived, Joseph and Mary were no longer in a stable with Jesus. They were now residing in a house (Matthew 2:11). Jesus had been circumcised (Luke 2:21) and dedicated at the temple some forty days after his birth (Luke 2:22–24). He was then being called a *paidion* (toddler) and no longer a *brephos* (infant). When the Magi arrived, Jesus was already walking and was able to speak a few words as most normal children would be able to do when several months old. Soon after the Magi left, Herod killed the male children in and around Bethlehem who were two years of age or younger (Matthew 2:16). This does not mean Jesus was exactly two years old at the time. The fact that all children two years and under were slain shows that Herod was taking every possible interpretation of the Magi into account for the time of Jesus' birth.

Since it was not clear in astrological interpretation whether the appearance of a star or planet signified the conception or the birth of a baby, Herod decided to kill the children born within a two-year period in order to cover both possibilities. When all these evidences are considered, it shows that Jesus was certainly a few months old when the Magi presented their gifts.

There is biblical information which could go a long way in helping us understand the general time period for Jesus' birth. Luke gave more chronological data regarding the birth and ministry of Jesus than any other biblical writer. In doing this, Luke began his story with John the Baptist. He gave some chronological indications as to the time of John's conception and birth. Though his statements are general, they are plain enough to indicate the approximate time of John's birth, and consequently that of Jesus himself. This chronological information is found in Luke's first chapter. Note what Luke said,

“There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zechariah, of the course Abijah and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.”

• Luke 1:5

This verse tells us something about the parents of John the Baptist. Zechariah was a priest whose duty it was, on certain occasions, to offer the national sacrifices in the temple at Jerusalem. While he was accomplishing his assigned requirements, Luke said an angel came to him and told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a child. Zechariah could hardly believe what he was told because Elizabeth was beyond the age of childbearing. The angel understood his reason for disbelief; so, Zechariah was struck dumb to prove the certainty of what was prophesied. When Zechariah came out of the inner temple, the people perceived that he had seen a vision and were amazed that he was unable to speak. They realized that something significant had been pointed out to Zechariah.

Luke tells us that all this happened while Zechariah “executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course” (Luke 1:8). He was performing his priestly duties “according to the custom of the priest's office” (Luke 1:9). Zechariah's course was that of Abijah (KJV: *Abia*) (Luke 1:5). What was this course, and when did it serve?

The Twenty-Four Priestly Courses

There were twenty-four priestly courses that administered the services in the temple. These are enumerated in 1 Chronicles chapter 24. Each course had a title associated with

it. These were the names of the leaders who headed each course in the time of David. Samuel and David were the persons responsible for establishing the twenty-four courses of priests (1 Chronicles 9:22). Originally in the time of Moses the priesthood was confined only to Aaron and his immediate sons. But by the time of Samuel and David, that family had grown to such proportions that they could not all officiate together at one time in the temple. That is why Samuel and David divided the priests into twenty-four separate groups, which were called “orders” or “courses.” The course in which Zechariah served was the eighth, that of Abijah (1 Chronicles 24:10). Josephus, the Jewish historian, was also a priest and he mentioned that he was a member of the first course called that of Jehoiarib. [1](#)

The original twenty-four priestly families established by David performed their services in the temple until the Babylonians destroyed the sanctuary in the 6th century B.C.E. When the Jews returned to Palestine, they rebuilt the temple, but they discovered that representatives of only four courses of the original twenty-four were still accounted for (Ezra 2:36–39). Something had to be done to restore the twenty-four courses to their ordained service in the temple as commanded by David. Under the authority of Ezra, the remaining four were divided back into the former number. Thus, a new set of twenty-four courses commenced their administrations in the temple. And though these family courses were different from the ones established by David, it was decided that each course was to retain the name of the family which headed each course back in David’s time. The re-establishment of these twenty-four courses was accepted as proper by the New Testament authorities, because John the Baptist’s father was reckoned to be of this *new* arrangement. The twenty-four elders mentioned in the Book of Revelation also reflected this *new* arrangement.

The Twenty-Four Courses Were Calendar Indications

These twenty-four courses were ordered by Samuel and David (and later by Ezra the priest) to serve once a week in the temple services at two different times each year. The first family of priests commenced their administrations at noon on a Sabbath (Saturday) and they were relieved of duty the following Sabbath at noon. The Bible said they “**were to come in on the sabbath,**” and to serve until they “**were to go out on the sabbath**” (2 Chronicles 23:8; 2 Kings 11:5). The second course then began its service in the second week; the third course the third week, etc.

Since each course administered for one week, it follows that there was a twenty-four week period for each of the courses to have its chance of serving. This occupied a span of about six months. When this was accomplished, the series started all over again. In a period of forty-eight weeks, each course would have served for two weeks — with each session being separated from the other by about six months. There are just over fifty-two weeks in each Solar Year. The Jewish calendar, on the other hand, is a Lunar-Solar one. In ordinary years it only has about fifty-one weeks. At particular intervals the Jewish authorities had to add an extra month of thirty days to keep it in season with the motions of the Sun. In a nineteen-year period, seven extra months were usually added. But, as said before, all normal years with the Jews had about fifty-one weeks. The priests served in their courses for forty-eight of those weeks. This means that there were three weeks in the year which were not reckoned in the accounting. What happened with those three weeks? David provided the answer back in his day.

The Courses Served Together at the Three Festival Seasons

Since there were three major holy seasons on the Jewish calendar (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles), and since at those times there were great crowds at Jerusalem, David ordained that all twenty-four courses were to serve together for the week of Passover, the week when Pentecost occurred, and the week of Tabernacles. “**For all the priests that were present [at Tabernacles] did not then wait by course**” (2 Chronicles 5:11). At Tabernacles (and also Passover and Pentecost) the priestly courses were suspended — they “**did not then wait by course.**” In actual fact, all the courses of priests served together during those three holy seasons. But in all other normal weeks, the various courses were doing their assigned work at the temple. In the case of Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist), Luke said he was officiating in his regular office (the eighth course, or the *eighth week*) when the angel said his wife Elizabeth was to have a child.

This is a chronological clue. Luke meant it that way. He was showing his readers the general time of year that Zechariah was serving. We know that Zechariah was not serving at a festival period because the priests “**did not then wait by course.**” Also it was either in the first half of the year when the course of Abijah served, or it was during the second half. Let us look at this course of Abijah, because we can know the approximate times when it served in the temple.

The Chronology of the Twenty-four Courses

It is perfectly reasonable that the priestly courses started their serving with the springtime month of Nisan — the first month of the Jewish ecclesiastical year. This was the customary time ordained in the Bible when priests began their administrations (Exodus 40:1–38). David arranged the twenty-four courses of the priests to coincide with the time when each of the twelve tribes of Israel had their representatives helping in the temple service. Each of the twelve tribes administered a whole month. They “**came in and went out month by month throughout all the months of the year ... the first course for the first month**” (1 Chronicles 27:1–2). The first month for temple services was Nisan. The first month-long course of the twelve tribes started at the beginning of that springtime month. This must also have been the first month for the priests.

The twenty-four priestly courses, however, lasted only for one week (from Sabbath to Sabbath). Their courses started with the Sabbath just before the beginning of Nisan in order for the priests to be on duty to perform their regular ceremonials on Nisan One. The same procedure was also followed for their second yearly tenure commencing six months later on Tishri One. There is even in the New Testament a reference to this second yearly tenure which commenced six months after the first. In Luke 6:1 in some manuscripts we read what appears to be a strange statement (at least it is strange to some scholars). It says that the Sabbath day on which Jesus excused his disciples for picking grain was the “second-first” Sabbath. Many manuscripts and in the writings of several early fathers of Christendom, they state this event was performed on the “second-first Sabbath.” This must be a true reading of the original text and its supposed oddity is what helps to explain its meaning. What in the world was the “second-first Sabbath”? The answer is easy to determine. The truth is, the phrase was a regular calendar indication that all Jews in the time of the temple understood.

The answer is plain. Luke in using the phrase “second-first Sabbath” was simply following the regular order of the twenty-four courses of the priests because this chronological indication was a reference to their *second cycle* beginning with Tishri One and the disciples picked the grain on the first weekly Sabbath of that *second yearly tenure*. The next weekly Sabbath would have been called the *second — second Sabbath*. Of course, during the week of Tabernacles all the twenty-four priests would have attended to the temple ceremonies together, but the next weekly Sabbath after Tabernacles, the routine would have continued and that weekly Sabbath would have been called the *second-third Sabbath*, the next Sabbath after that would have been the second-fourth Sabbath, etc., until the priests reached the “*second-twenty-fourth Sabbath*.” After that, the priests re-started the cycle once again with the first weekly Sabbath associated with the first day of Nisan of the next year. They would have called that first Sabbath the “*first-first Sabbath*,” the second would have been the “*first-second Sabbath*,” etc.

However, when weekly Sabbaths occurred *inside* the festival weeks of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, those intervening Sabbaths (which were not counted in the two cycles each year) were called the “*between Sabbaths*,” and Luke even refers to one of those that occurred during the week of Pentecost. Note Acts 13:42 where the phrase “**the next Sabbath**” as found in the King James Version, really states from the Greek, “**the between Sabbath**.” This means that Luke in the New Testament was well aware of the twenty-four priestly courses and he knew the specifics concerning the weekly Sabbaths in which the twenty-four priestly courses changed their weekly tenures two times a year (separated by a six month period). These indications by Luke are calendar references and they give us important clues to help us understand some New Testament chronological facts.

Before we look at the chronological indications of the priestly courses to determine the time of the year John the Baptist was born (and consequently the nativity period for

Jesus), let us find the proper year for Jesus' birth. We can then know what year to apply the chronological clues within the cycle of priestly courses for the month of John the Baptist's birth, and also that of Jesus. The year for the birth of Jesus is not difficult to determine if we allow all of the biblical and historical information to be used in our appraisal. What was the precise year of Jesus' birth?

Was Jesus Born in 3 or 2 B.C.E?

If the simple chronological statements of Luke are accepted, the nativity of Jesus must be placed in 3 or 2 B.C.E. The historical evidences I have presented in this book support this conclusion. However, there is a problem that is not solved by Luke's narrative alone. He said that Jesus began His ministry in Tiberius' 15th year when He was "*about 30 years of age.*" I will show in a moment what Luke meant by the phrase *about* 30 years of age. But for now, let us note that Luke does not inform us whether Jesus was "about 30" near the beginning, the middle or near the end of Tiberius 15. Further, we are not told whether it was the Roman method of reckoning Tiberius' 15th year, or that which people in Judaea and Syria were accustomed to, which antedated the reign of kings and emperors to Tishri One of the previous year.

In spite of this, it will not be difficult to determine that Luke was using the ordinary method of dating Tiberius' 15th year as was common among easterners in the Empire. ² This is an important thing to understand in identifying the Star of Bethlehem. This is because we must know the year in which Jesus was born to see if the celestial pageantry of 3 to 2 B.C.E. would fit the chronological indications in the New Testament. Indeed, it fits remarkably well. The method of reckoning the 15th year of Tiberius is an interesting one, but very understandable and consistent. It simply means that in the eastern part of the Empire, the whole of the year in which Tiberius became emperor of Rome (August 19, 14 C.E.) is awarded to Tiberius as his first year. It means that New Year's Day for the beginning of that year begins the first year of Tiberius. This would have been on Tishri One (the first day of Tishri) in the year in which Tiberius came to rulership. Thus, the whole first year was from Tishri One in C.E. 13 to Tishri One in C.E. 14. Consequently, Tiberius' 15th year would have been from Tishri One in C.E. 27 to Tishri One in C.E. 28. I will have more information showing this matter in a later chapter.

Jesus Was Born in the Year 3 B.C.E.

If Jesus was about 30 years old near the commencement of the emperor's 15th year (as reckoned by people in the east), then His birth was in 3 B.C.E. Recall that Luke tells us that Jesus was born at the time of a Roman census or enrollment. If we can determine the period of that registration, this will help to pinpoint the year of the nativity. This is where the new historical information offered in this book becomes essential. We now know that an Empire-wide citizen registration took place for the award of the *Pater Patriae* upon Augustus in early 2 B.C.E. ³ This was the census Luke meant. I will give a full account of this registration (a census) in a further chapter of this book titled "The Census of Quirinius" (Chapter 12). But let me briefly rehearse some of the evidence that shows when the census mentioned in the New Testament took place.

The Census of Quirinius

This registration took place in 3 B.C.E. Lewin points out that Augustus was already being called the *Pater Patriae* on one or two inscriptions by 3 B.C.E. ⁴ In late 3 B.C.E. he was offered the title by a deputation of people who met him at Antium ⁵ though he refused it until the Senate bestowed it upon him on February 5, 2 B.C.E. (the Day of Concord). This is good evidence that "all the Roman people" must have started to give him this most prestigious title sometime in 3 B.C.E. And interestingly, our historical reconstruction as shown in this book shows that an oath of obedience to Augustus was demanded of all people in Judaea in 3 B.C.E. ⁶ This oath would have been required of Joseph and Mary.

More than that, a Paphlagonian inscription shows that an oath of obedience was required of all Roman citizens and non-citizens in exactly the same year, in 3 B.C.E. Moses of Khorene, the early Armenian historian, quoted sources which related that the census

mentioned by Luke was also administered by Roman agents in Armenia (a neighbor country to Paphlagonia) in 3 B.C.E. and the wording of Moses of Khorene about the event was very similar to that of the Paphlagonian inscription. Orosius in the 5th century also said that in 3 B.C.E. an oath/census was commanded of all nations at the time Augustus was honored as “the first of all men” — an appropriate description of the title *Pater Patriae*. Remarkably, Orosius said this was the Empire-wide census mentioned by Luke in his Gospel.

This information strongly suggests that the census which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was conducted in the summer or early autumn of 3 B.C.E. A census by the Romans would hardly have been ordered in very early spring or late autumn — and certainly not in winter when the rainy season was in evidence. Ramsay expressed confidence that the normal time for Roman censuses was from August to October. ⁷ Thus, the latter part of 3 B.C.E. makes sense.

The Birth of John the Baptist

Let us now return to consider the chronology of the priestly courses. This will help us arrive at a general period for the birth of John, and also of Jesus because John was born about six months before Jesus (Luke 1:36). This would indicate that the conception of John as well as that of Jesus was most probably in 4 B.C.E. Luke mentioned that Zechariah was serving at his regular time of administration during the week when the eighth course of Abijah served. This course had duty two times each year, once in late spring and again in late autumn. Look at the spring session.

We must find out when the first day of Nisan occurred in 4 B.C.E. This is not a simple task in some years. Since the calendar of the Jews in the 1st century was dependent upon the state of the crops around Jerusalem (in order that certain ritualistic duties could then be performed regarding the first fruits), it was necessary for the priests to observe the ripeness of the barley before they would allow any ecclesiastical year to begin. If twelve lunar months had passed from the beginning of the previous year, it was the normal custom to start the next year with the thirteenth month — which, of course, would have been reckoned as Nisan, the first month of the new year. But if the barley was not yet ripe enough, the priests often postponed the start of the year for one month.

Thankfully, in 4 B.C.E. this agricultural requirement is no problem. The month of Nisan began on March 29. That is always late enough in the year to allow no quibbling over the state of the crops. ⁸ This date was also Nisan 1 on the Babylonian calendar. However, a

“new moon was visible at Jerusalem thirty-seven minutes before it was visible at Babylon and therefore upon occasion the new month could begin a day earlier in Jerusalem.” ⁹

In the year 4 B.C.E. this factor was a definite possibility. But in this reckoning, I will follow the date given by Parker and Dubberstein (the noted authorities regarding the calendars of the Babylonians and the Jews in this period). Yet even if Nisan 1 were a day earlier in Jerusalem it is of no consequence to our present question. Recall, also, that when we say Nisan 1 was March 29, it must be understood that the day actually commenced the previous evening at sundown on March 28 because all Jewish days start at sundown.

To illustrate how this information can help us arrive at the approximate time of John the Baptist's birth, understand that the first of Nisan in 4 B.C.E. was March 29. The priestly courses began their administrations on the Sabbath near the first of Nisan. ¹⁰ And while there was a belief among some of the Dead Sea sects that the duties of the first course started on Nisan 12, ¹¹ the people of Qumran were out of the mainstream of Jewish thought. This reference need not be taken as reflecting normal Jewish practice. But even if it were, there would be only a two-week discrepancy, and this is not enough to seriously upset the general chronological indications associated with the course of Abijah to which we are referring. ¹² The main Jewish custom, however, had the first priestly course commencing its duty on the Sabbath before Nisan 1. The Sabbath just prior to March 29 was March 24. This indicates that the week of service for the course of Jehoiarib (the first course) was from Sabbath noon, March 24 to Sabbath noon, March 31. The second course began March 31 and served to April 7. The third course started April 7 (but its week was

interrupted by the period of Passover when all priests officiated together). This caused the third course not to end its administration until the Sabbath after Passover, April 21. Then the weekly courses started once again in their regular order of service.

The Eighth Course of Abijah

The period for the eighth course of Abijah would have been from May 19 to May 26. If it were in this springtime administration when the angelic messenger came to Zechariah about his wife having a child, then we have a chronological hint of the period for John the Baptist's conception — because it must have happened immediately after that time. Indeed, because Zechariah was struck dumb during his administration, he was disqualified at once from exercising the priest's office (Leviticus 21:16–23). He no doubt left very soon for home. Thus, somewhere near May 26 to June 1, Elizabeth must have conceived. The human gestation period is about 280 days — nine months and ten days. This shows the birth of John the Baptist near March 10, 3 B.C.E.

The Birth of Jesus

Let us now look at the birth of Jesus. From what we have observed about the approximate time of John's birth, it should be easy to compute that of Jesus. Luke said that Jesus was conceived sometime in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (Luke 1:26, 36). Five full months had passed and Elizabeth was then in her sixth month. Since John the Baptist was probably born some time around March 10, 3 B.C.E., Jesus' birth would be near September in 3 B.C.E. We will soon see from other astronomical data that this is the only year that will satisfy all the facts. It must be admitted that it is impossible to arrive at an exact birthday for either John or Jesus based on the priestly courses, yet the information provided by Luke helps us to pick the approximate periods with some confidence. Two or three weeks each way would be the outside limit.

There is, however, a possibility that Luke was referring to Zechariah's late autumn session in the temple instead of the springtime one. If so, we would have a six-month displacement for the time of John's and Jesus' births. John would then have been born near the middle of September and Jesus would have been born early the following March. Yet, there are reasons for not accepting this. Luke said that Jesus was born at a time when his parents went to Bethlehem in response to Caesar's command for a census. Ramsay showed that considerable confidence can be placed in the belief that the general time of the year for the start of a census was from August to October. ¹³ The September period for Jesus' birth we are suggesting fits this well. There are also other reasons.

A late summer or early autumn date for Jesus' birth has also been suggested because Luke said the shepherds were tending their flocks at night at his nativity (Luke 2:8). Many have believed this precludes a wintertime birth (either early winter on December 25th or a late winter in early March) because it would have been too cold for the flocks to be out in the open at that time. But this evidence is very problematic. In exceptionally cold winters this may have been the case, but in mild winters sheep are often out of doors in Palestine all night. ¹⁴ Since no one knows what kind of weather there was in Palestine the year of Jesus birth (either severe or mild), this factor can be of no chronological value.

Some have thought that Jesus was born at the period of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles because John in his Gospel said that he “**tabernacled** [Greek] **among us**” (John 1:14). Tabernacles in the year 3 B.C.E. was from September 26 to October 3 B.C.E. But Jesus' birth at this time is not possible. Actually, there is clear proof that Jesus' birth could not have been at any of the three holy periods of Passover, Pentecost or Tabernacles. These were times when all Jewish men were required by biblical law to be in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 16:6, 11, 16). Yet Luke tells us that during the time of Jesus' nativity “**everyone went into his own city**” (Luke 2:3). Besides, the Romans would not have selected the three primary festival seasons for a census when most of the Jews in Palestine were required to be in Jerusalem.

The reason there was no room at the inn was not because the people were crowding into the Jerusalem area for ceremonial purposes, but, as Luke tells us, they were there to be registered for the census. Also, since our new history shows that the census and the oath

of allegiance to Augustus (for his award of the *Pater Patriae*) were one and the same, it then makes sense that even Mary who was in biblical law able to bear a king of the Jews would also be expected to swear that she and her offspring would remain loyal to the existing government. And this census no doubt occurred in the latter part of 3 B.C.E. (as I will show in detail), not in the late winter or early spring of 3 B.C.E.

There is another reason for placing Jesus' birth in September, and it is a powerful one. This is because the New Testament itself gives a precise chronological sign that identifies the exact day Jesus was born (and within a period of an hour and a half on that day). It is now time to look at this New Testament indication.

An Exact Date Can Be Picked

There are only three places in the New Testament that record events connected with the birth of Jesus. They are in Matthew's Gospel, Luke's Gospel and chapter twelve of the Book of Revelation. This latter book has some information about Jesus' birth that should be considered, though it must be admitted that all data in the Book of Revelation are highly symbolic. Yet the figurative nature of the book may contain the very clue we need to precisely date the birth of Jesus.

People of the 1st century were very prone to use astronomical signs as having bearing on historical and religious events. They were especially important regarding the births of eminent people, and kings in particular. Because of this, the section about Jesus' birth in the Book of Revelation may have been significantly related to particular heavenly signs that Jesus had formerly told his disciples to be aware of (Luke 21:11). Let us look at Revelation 12:1–5. It gives us precise indications as to the hour and the day that Jesus was born. This section should be read carefully.

“And there was a great wonder [sign] in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: and she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. And there appeared another wonder [sign] in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his head. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron.”

● *Revelation 12:1–5*

The scene just described is symbolic. Certainly, this could hardly be a description of the virgin Mary. This “woman” had the heavens associated with her — the Sun, Moon and the Twelve Stars. John said that the display was a wonder (a sign) and that it was “in heaven.” What did he mean by the phrase “in heaven”?

The Bible speaks of three “heavens.” The first is the heaven in which the birds fly and all weather phenomena occur (Jeremiah 4:25; 1 Kings 18:45). The second is that of the Sun, Moon, planets and stars (Genesis 1:17). The third heaven is that where God lives (2 Corinthians 12:2). Which of these heavens is meant?

People of the 1st century would have had no difficulty in interpreting the proper “heaven” that was intended by the apostle John. The Sun, Moon, and stars are not located in our atmosphere where the birds and the clouds exist. They are also not found in the heaven where God has His abode because John himself tells us that the Sun or Moon are not needed in that region (Revelation 21:23). The only “heaven” that is reasonable is that where the Sun, Moon and the Twelve Stars are located. The Book of Genesis revealed that the celestial bodies were made by God to give signs (Genesis 1:14). Jewish opinion included among these “signs” the astronomical associations between the Sun, Moon, planets, stars and constellations. ¹⁵ There can hardly be a doubt that such astronomical “signs” as these are referred to in the Book of Revelation. ¹⁶ With these points in mind, we may have some interesting clues that will provide us with the exact time of Jesus' birth.

Astronomy and the Birth of Jesus

The essential factor in interpreting the symbol of Revelation 12:1–5 is the identification of the woman. What is John signifying by mentioning her? This much is certain: the woman in the first three verses is featured as being *in heaven* and both the Sun and the Moon are in association with her. After the dragon casts down a third of the stars of heaven (Revelation 12:4), the woman is then found on earth (verses 6 and 14). But the important factor is the birth of the man-child and the Woman's relationship with the heavenly signs while she is symbolically in heaven. (The first three verses of Revelation 12 shows the Sun clothing her, the Moon under her feet and the Twelve Stars on her head).

The “birth” of the Messiah is associated with this heavenly spectacle. Since some noted heavenly bodies are a part of the picture, it could well be that John intended the woman to represent a constellation that the two primary luminaries transverse, and that she was a part of the zodiacal system which gives headship to the signs (the Twelve Stars were a “crown” upon her head). Recall that interpreting astronomical signs dominated the thinking of most people in the 1st century, whether the people were Jews or Gentiles. Indeed, the word “sign” used by the author of the Book of Revelation to describe this celestial display was the same one used by the ancients to denote the zodiacal constellations. [17](#)

This is made clearer when one looks closely at the text. Since the Sun and Moon are amidst or in line with the body of this woman, she could be, in a symbolic way, a constellation located within the normal paths of the Sun and Moon. The only sign of a woman which exists along the ecliptic (the track of the Sun in its journey through the stars) is that of Virgo the Virgin. She occupies, in body form, a space of about 50 degrees along the ecliptic. The head of the woman actually bridges some 10 degrees into the previous sign of Leo and her feet overlap about 10 degrees into the following sign of Libra, the Scales. In the period of Jesus' birth, the Sun entered in its annual course through the heavens into the head position of the woman about August 13, and exited from her feet about October 2. But the apostle John saw the scene when the Sun was “clothing” or “adorning” the woman. This surely indicates that the position of the Sun in the vision was located somewhere mid-bodied to the woman, between the neck and the knees. The Sun could hardly be said to clothe her if it were situated in her face or near her feet.

The Sun Clothed the Woman

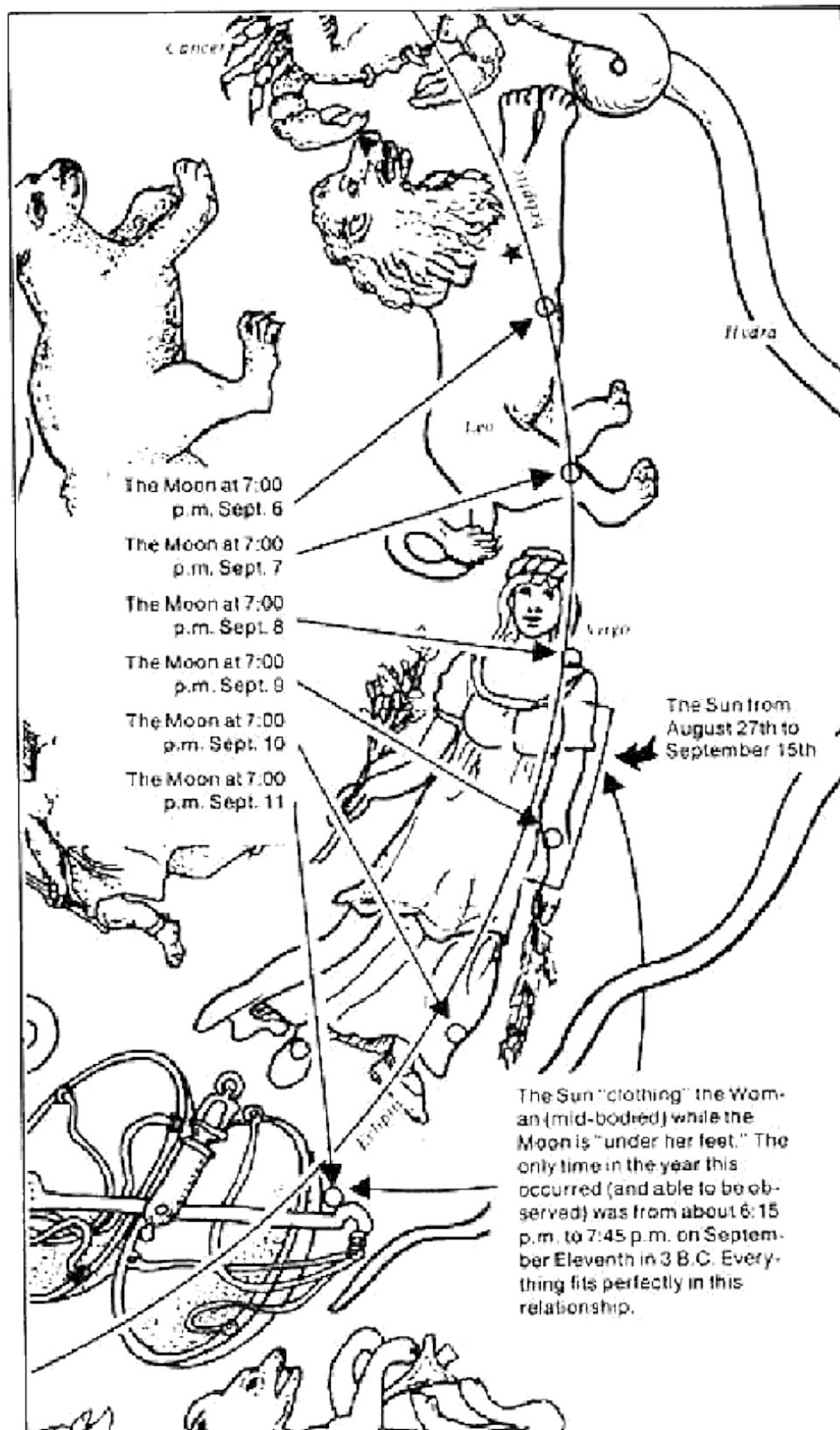
The only time in the year that the Sun could be in a position to “clothe” the celestial woman called Virgo (that is, to be mid-bodied to her, in the region where a pregnant woman carries a child) is when the Sun is located between about 150 and 170 degrees along the ecliptic. This “clothing” of the woman by the Sun occurs for a 20-day period each year. This 20 degree spread could indicate the general time when Jesus was born. In 3 B.C.E., the Sun would have entered this celestial region about August 27 and exited from it about September 15. If John in the Book of Revelation is associating the birth of Jesus with the period when the Sun was mid-bodied to this woman called Virgo (and this is no doubt what he means), then Jesus would have to be born within that 20-day period. From the point of view of the Magi who were astrologers, this would have been the only logical sign under which the Jewish Messiah might be born, especially if He was to be born of a virgin. Even today, astrologers recognize that the sign of Virgo is the one which has reference to a messianic world ruler to be born from a virgin. [18](#)

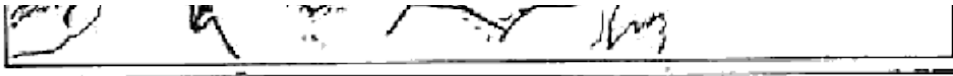
This heavenly woman called Virgo is normally depicted as a virgin holding in her right hand a green branch and in her left hand a sprig of grain. In the Hebrew Zodiac, she at first (in the time of David) denoted Ruth who was gleaning in the fields of Boaz. She then later became the Virgin when the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 was given in the time of King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah. This Virgin held in her left hand a sprig of grain. This was precisely where the bright star called Spica is found. Indeed, the chief star of the constellation Virgo is Spica.

Bullinger, in his book *The Witness of the Stars* (pp. 29–34), said that the word “Spica” has, through the Arabic, the meaning “the branch” and that it symbolically refers to Jesus who was prophetically called “the Branch” in Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12. And Bullinger (and Seiss in his book *The Gospel in the Stars*) maintains that this sign of Virgo designates the heavenly

witness for the birth of the Messiah (Jesus). They say that Virgo should actually begin the zodiacal signs which give the story of the Messiah. This may be. The apostle John may have given the same indication as far as the first full sign of the zodiac is concerned. He depicted the woman of Revelation as having a crown of Twelve Stars on her head.

This could well show that the woman (Virgo) is the constellation of headship for all the twelve signs. The "head" position of Virgo is located within the last ten degrees of Leo. It was in this very region where the story of the career of the Messiah would begin that Bullinger and Seiss referred to. Thus, the story of Jesus and his mission on earth, as related by these heavenly symbols, should logically begin with his birth from a virgin and conclude with him being crowned king in the final sign of Leo the Lion (with its chief star being Regulus — the King star). This is no doubt what the apostle John was trying to show through the symbols found in Revelation 12.





The birth of this child in Revelation 12 (whom John identified with Jesus) should have occurred while the Sun was “clothing” the woman, when the Sun was mid-bodied to Virgo. This period of time in 3 B.C.E. covered 20 days (August 27 to September 15). If Jesus were born within that 20-day period, it would fit most remarkably with the testimony of Luke (relative to the birth of John the Baptist and the eighth course of Abijah). Indeed, the chronological indications associated with the priestly course of Abijah place Jesus’ birth exactly within this period. But there is a way to arrive at a much closer time for Jesus’ birth than a simple 20-day period. The position of the Moon in John’s vision actually pinpoints the nativity to within a day — even to within a period of an hour and a half (within 90 minutes) on that day. This may appear an absurd assessment on the surface, but it is quite possible.

The key is the Moon. The apostle said it was located “*under her feet.*” What does the word “under” signify in this case? Does it mean the woman of the vision was standing on the Moon when John observed it or does it mean her feet were positioned slightly above the Moon? John does not tell us. This, however, is not of major consequence in using the location of the Moon to answer our question because it would only involve the difference of a degree or two. The Moon travels about 12 degrees a day in its course through the heavens. This motion of one or two degrees by the Moon represents on earth a period of only two to four hours. This difference is no problem in determining the time of Jesus’ birth. What is vital, however, is that this shows the Moon as a New Moon.

The Precise Position of the Moon is Important

Now note this point. Since the feet of Virgo the Virgin represent the last 7 degrees of the constellation (in the time of Jesus this would have been between about 180 and 187 degrees along the ecliptic), the Moon has to be positioned somewhere under that 7 degree arc to satisfy the description of Revelation 12. But the Moon also has to be in that exact location when the Sun is mid-bodied to Virgo. In the year 3 B.C.E., these two factors came to precise agreement for about an hour and a half, as observed from Palestine or Patmos, in the twilight period of September 11th. The relationship began about 6:15 p.m. (sunset), and lasted until around 7:45 p.m. (moonset). This is the only day in the whole year that the astronomical phenomenon described in the twelfth chapter of Revelation could take place.

This also shows one other important point. The Moon was in crescent phase. It was a New Moon day, the start of a new lunar month. (See plates one and two below which show early depictions of the celestial scene of Revelation 12:1–3 and how the Moon is shown to be in its crescent phase.)

Modern Man and Astronomical Motions

While ordinary people in modern times who are not professional astronomers have little knowledge of the solar, lunar, planetary and stellar motions, the people from the 1st century up to the Industrial Revolution were well accustomed to them. Even people of little education were generally knowledgeable of the main motions of the astronomical bodies — even more than most college-educated people today. When anyone of early times read Revelation 12:1–3, an astronomical relationship was realized at once. There was no doubt that a New Moon display was being shown to them. And when the woman of the sign was interpreted as Virgo the Virgin, and with the Sun mid-bodied to the Virgin, they clearly saw a New Moon day occurring sometime in late summer.

The apostle John said this heavenly relationship occurred at the time of Jesus’ birth. And in 3 B.C.E. this exact combination of celestial factors happened just after sunset only on one day of the year. It was on September 11th. It could not have occurred at any other time of the year. Indeed, even one day before — on September 10 — the Moon would have been located above the Virgin’s feet with the crescent not visible, while one day farther — on September 12 — the Moon had moved too far beyond the feet of the Virgin, at least 25 diameters of the Moon east of her feet. Thus, only one day applies. That day was just

after sunset on September 11th, 3 B.C.E.





The Exact Day of Jesus' Birth

The apostle John is presenting to his readers something of profound significance in a symbolic way. Revelation 12:1–3 shows a New Moon day that could only be observed from earth just after sunset, and the day was September 11th. This fits well with Luke's description of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Recall that,

“there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over the flock by night ... and the angel said ... unto you is born this day [which began at sundown] in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

• *Luke 2:8–11*

Jesus was born in early evening, and Revelation 12 shows it was a New Moon day.

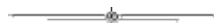
What New Moon could this have been? The answer is most amazing. It is almost too amazing! September 11, 3 B.C.E. was Tishri One on the Jewish calendar. To Jewish people this would have been a very profound occasion indeed. Tishri One is none other than the Jewish New Year's day (*Rosh ha-Shanah*, or as the Bible calls it, The Day of Trumpets — Leviticus 23:23–26). It was an important annual holy day of the Jews (but not one of the three annual festivals that required all Palestinian Jews to be in Jerusalem).

What a significant day for the appearance of the Messiah to arrive on earth from the Jewish point of view! And remarkably, no other day of the year could astronomically fit Revelation 12:1–3. The apostle John is certainly showing forth an astronomical sign which answers precisely with the Jewish New Year Day. John would have realized the significance of this astronomical scene that he was describing.

In the next chapter I will show the symbolic and religious meaning of this New Year's day

as interpreted by the Jews (and consequently by the apostles and early Christians) as it relates to the Messiah and his kingship. The information may provide a better understanding why the early apostles of the 1st century, and many Jews and Gentiles, so quickly came to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Whatever the case, the historical evidence supports the nativity of Jesus in 3 B.C.E., at the beginning of a Roman census, and (if we use the astronomical indications of the Book of Revelation) his birth would have occurred just after sundown on September 11th, on *Rosh ha-Shanah*, the Day of Trumpets — the Jewish New Year Day for governmental affairs. There could hardly have been a better day in the ecclesiastical calendar of the Jews to introduce the Messiah to the world from a Jewish point of view; and no doubt this is what the apostle John clearly intended to show by the sign he recorded in Revelation 12.



- [1](#) Josephus, *Life* 1–3.
- [2](#) For an excellent description of this type of regnal reckoning, see Harold W. Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 34–35.
- [3](#) *Res Gestae of Augustus*, VI.35.
- [4](#) T. Lewin, *Fasti Sacri*, 135.
- [5](#) Ovid, *Fast.*, 2.119; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 58.
- [6](#) Josephus, *Antiquities* XVII.41–45.
- [7](#) William F. Ramsay, *Born at Bethlehem*, 193.
- [8](#) The barley was always early near Jericho, but usually the crops were judged in the region of Jerusalem.
- [9](#) Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology*, 25.
- [10](#) J. Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars*, 274.
- [11](#) *Ibid.*
- [12](#) The Qumran sects were not in charge of the Temple and their opinions should not lead the way in our inquiries on the course of Abijah.
- [13](#) William F. Ramsay, *Born at Bethlehem*, 193.
- [14](#) Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 182.
- [15](#) Philo, *Op. Mund.*, 55; Rashi, *Commentary*, I.5.
- [16](#) *Lange's Commentary*, X.34.
- [17](#) Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 1448.
- [18](#) Devore, *Encyclopedia of Astrology*, 366.

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