



Christmas

Was Jesus really born on December 25th?



Was Jesus (Yeshua) really born on December 25th, as the Western Christian Tradition maintains, or does Scripture allow us to infer a different time for His advent here on earth? Two cases will be presented below: one case for a Tishri (Sukkot) birth, and the other for the traditional late December date.

Background: The “Courses” of Temple Service

As you will see, the crux of the arguments both for and against the late December dating of the birth of Yeshua depend upon the date assigned to the “course of Abia” and the precise time that Zacharias -- John the Baptist’s father -- was in the Temple when he was visited by the angel Gabriel. But what is the “course of Abia” and why is it important?

King David (1 Chr 28:11-13) divided the sons of Aaron into 24 “courses” or groups (1 Chr 24:1-4) to create an orderly schedule by which the Temple of the Lord could be staffed for the year. Once these courses were established, lots were drawn to determine the sequence each group would serve in the Temple (1 Chr 24: 7-19). Each of the 24 courses of priests would begin and end their service on the Sabbath for a tour of duty of one week (2 Chr 23:8, 1 Chr 9:25).

The issue turns on the date assigned to the “course of Abia” and the precise time that Zacharias was in the Temple when he was visited by the angel Gabriel.

The Jewish calendar begins in the Spring (Nisan), so the first course of priests (Jehoiarib) would serve for seven days. The second week would then fall to the family of Jedaiah. The third week would be the festival of Passover, when all priests would be present for service, so the schedule would resume with the third course of priests (Harim) on the fourth week. By the tenth week, since both Passover and Shavu’ot had occurred, the 8th course of Abia (Abijah) would be called for temple service. By means of this arrangement, after the 24th course was completed, the cycle of courses would repeat, so that in a given year each group of priests would serve in the Temple twice per year (in addition to the three major festivals).



Argument for a Tishri (Sukkot) Birth

There are several reasons to believe that Yeshua was born during the Fall, in particular, during the festival of Sukkot. Among the reasons cited are as follows:

1. Yeshua's cousin, John the Baptist, was conceived in mid Sivan (May/June) and born 40 weeks later on Nissan 15, the Passover.
 - a. John's father (Zacharias) was a Levite who was assigned to serve in the temple during the course of "Abia," the 8th course of the year. (Luke 1:5, 1 Chr 24:10)
 - b. Since the cycle of service began on the first Shabbat of Nisan but both Passover and Shavu'ot require all priestly courses to serve, the actual time the 8th course would serve would be during the 10th week of the year. This places Zacharias' service in the Temple as beginning on the second Sabbath of the month of Sivan (May/June).
 - c. It is written that John was conceived shortly after this tour of duty (Luke 1:23-4). Therefore, John the Baptist was probably conceived shortly after the third Sabbath of the month of Sivan (i.e., late Sivan).
 - d. Therefore John the Baptist was born around Passover (Nisan 15). (Recall that Yeshua said that John the Baptist was a type of Elijah the prophet (Matt 17:10-13, cp. Luke 1:17). Even today it is customary for Jews to set out a special cup of wine during the Passover Seder meal in anticipation of the arrival of Elijah for the festival.)

2. Yeshua was conceived in late Kislev (Nov/Dec) and born 40 weeks later during Sukkot.
 - a. Yeshua was conceived six months after John the Baptist (Luke 1:24-27, 36). Note that the "sixth" month refers to Elizabeth's pregnancy, *not* the month of Elul (cp. Luke 1:36).
 - b. Six months added to late Sivan is late Kislev, which is the time of the conception of Yeshua (note that the first day of the Jewish festival of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated on the 25th day of Kislev, and Yeshua is called the Light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5, 12:46)).
 - c. From the 15th day of Nisan (John's birthday), we add six months to arrive at the 15th day of the 7th month, Tishri - the first day of the festival of Sukkot.

If the day of his birth were the first day of Sukkot, the day of his circumcision would be the eighth day, Shemini Atzeret/Sinchat Torah, which, like the first day, is a day of sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:39). On this day the Jews complete their annual cycle of



Torah readings and start again from *Bereshit* (Genesis). Simchat Torah is considered to be a time of "fulfillment" of the Torah. The circumcision of Yeshua at this time indicates how he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17-18).

3. Circumstantial Evidences:

- a. John 1:14 states that the "Word became flesh and "dwelt" with us. The Greek word "dwelt" [*skeinao*] comes from the word *skeinos*, which the LXX (Septuagint) uses for the *mishkan* (tabernacle). The name given for the feast of Tabernacles itself is called *Herotei Skeinon* in the LXX.
- b. King Herod most likely would use the opportunity of the Festival of Sukkot (in Jerusalem) to perform the census (certainly not Chanukah, since he detested and feared the Hasmoneans).
- c. Shepherds would not be out with their sheep in the dead of winter in Israel. The angel who appeared to the shepherds said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of *great joy* that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Since Sukkot was known as both a festival of joy and also as the "Festival of the Nations," the angel was actually giving them a greeting for the Festival of Sukkot. This is the only festival where the nations are positively encouraged to participate (Zech. 14:16-19).
- d. After Yeshua returns and sets up His kingdom on earth, it is written that only one festival will be celebrated by the nations: *Sukkot* (Zechariah 14:16) Why is that? Could it be that this will be a worldwide birthday party for Yeshua? (all the other festivals would have been fulfilled - Passover, FirstFruits, Pentecost, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, but the remembrance of His birth would remain as a celebration).
- e. The Catholic church (in 336 AD) declared December 25th (on the Julian calendar) to be Yeshua's birthday in order to replace a pagan Roman holiday, Saturnalia. Ironically, December 25th was a celebration of the birthday of the sun god. The early church, in an attempt to get rid of the pagan holiday, declared December 25th to be the birthday of the Son of God.
- f. We know that Yeshua was 30 years old when He started His ministry (Luke 3:23), and, assuming (as many Bible scholars do) that He ministered for 3 1/2 years, we can count backwards from the crucifixion (during Passover in Nisan) 6 months to discover his birthday in Tishri.

Summary: Since Zacharias served during the tenth week and Elizabeth conceived shortly thereafter, we can place the date of Yeshua's birth during the festival of Sukkot.



Argument for a late December Birth

The argument for assigning late December as the rightful date of the birth of Yeshua is based on further reflection on the time Zacharias was told that Elizabeth would conceive a child.

1. Yeshua's cousin, John the Baptist, was conceived just after Yom Kippur (Tishri 10) and born 40 weeks later in Tammuz (June/July).
 - a. John's father (Zacharias) was a Levite who was assigned to serve in the temple during the course of "Abia," the 8th course of the year. However, the 8th course would serve both on the 10th week of the year (see above) as well as on the 34th week: 24 (first complete cycle) $+ 2$ (festivals) $+ 8 = 34$.
 - b. This places Zacharias' service in the Temple as during the High Holiday of Yom Kippur, and this agrees with the description given about how Gabriel spoke to Zacharias in the narrative (Luke 1:8-23).
 - c. It is written that John was conceived shortly after this tour of duty (Luke 1:23-4), perhaps on 17 Tishri. Therefore, John the Baptist was probably conceived shortly after the Yom Kippur and would have been born on the 17th of Tammuz (June/July).
2. Yeshua was conceived in Nisan (Mar/Apr), near Passover, and born 40 weeks later during late December.
 - a. Yeshua was conceived six months after John the Baptist (Luke 1:24-27, 36). Adding 6 months to Tammuz 17 leads us to Nisan 17 (two days after Passover).
 - b. Since Yeshua was born six months after John, we add six months John's birthday (the 17th of Tammuz) to arrive at the 17th Tevet (late December).
3. Circumstantial Evidences:
 - a. Church history since the time of the late first century has attested to a late December birth. Hippolytus, in the second century AD, argued that this was Christ's birthday. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom (347-407) argued that December 25th was the correct date. Chrysostom taught that Zechariah received the message about John's birth on the Day of Atonement and John the Baptist was born sometime in June or July, and the birth of Yeshua took place six months later, in late December (or early January). There was never a question about the period of Yeshua' birth either in the East or in the West; only in the recent years this date was challenged.



- b. Early Jewish sources suggest that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside year-round. In the normal traffic of shepherds they move around and come near Bethlehem from November to March of the year. But then these were a special class of Levitical shepherds who kept the sacrificial lambs. They do not move around because they supply the lambs for daily sacrifice from whom people bought their approved lambs, which are blemishless. The fact that the Angels announced the arrival of the perfect sacrificial lamb to these shepherds indicates this.
- c. Alfred Edersheim, a Messianic Jew, wrote, "There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date. The objections generally made rest on grounds which seem to me historically untenable."

Edersheim wrote that the 1st century AD document called *Megillat Ta'anit* (i.e., "the scroll of fasts") refers to the 10th of Tevet as the day of Yeshua's birth (i.e., sometime during late December in our Gregorian calendars). Note that Jewish history regards the month of Tevet to be one of national tragedy, marking the beginning of the destruction of the Holy Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (in 587 BC). After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, the early sages might have associated the birth of Yeshua as yet another reason for mourning the loss of the Temple on this date.

Summary: Since Zacharias served during Yom Kippur and Elizabeth conceived shortly thereafter, we can place the date of Yeshua's birth during the month of Tevet, in late December.

Conclusion

Besides the two arguments given above, you are likely to hear of other arguments for the "exact date" of Yeshua's birth. For example, while reading up on this subject, I came across an article that insisted that Mary brought Yeshua into the Temple to be purified on Yom Kippur; I read another article that purported to "prove" (by means of Bible Codes) that Yeshua was born on Rosh Hashanah; and I read several others arguing for a Fall birth date based on various forms of astrological and astronomical evidences.

It is apparent, however, that since we cannot definitively date the time of Zacharias' service in the Temple, we cannot be dogmatic regarding the date of our LORD Jesus. And even if we could decide if Zacharias was visited by Gabriel during his first course of service (during the 10th week), we are faced with the textual ambiguity regarding the statement "after those days" (given in Luke 1:24). How much time is meant by this phrase? Is it a day? a week? a month?



In light of these uncertainties, it is perhaps advisable to take a humble attitude and confess our ignorance of the matter. The important thing, of course, is that our LORD was indeed born and ransomed us from the wages of our sins.

In other words, Scripture seems to be more focused on the life, death, and resurrection of the LORD Jesus, rather than His birth. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (1 Cor 15:3-5)

Every day, then, may we celebrate the Life of our LORD and Savior, Yeshua the Mashiach! Amen.



Postscript: Some people try to "blend" Christmas and Chanukah into "Christnukkah" or "Messiahmas," but strictly speaking the birth of the Messiah and the Zionist holiday of Chanukah are two different things. Personally, I am persuaded that Yeshua was conceived around Chanukah and born during Sukkot (in other words, I think that Zacharias heard from Gabriel during his first course of service at the Temple). And since Christmas occurs close to Chanukah, I consider it to be a valid time to remember the Incarnation of Yeshua the Messiah and to rejoice with others over the miracle of the love of God for us all. Among other things, that means that my family celebrates both Chanukah and Christmas!

Regarding these matters, I find the quote Augustine of Hippo to be helpful:

In necessariis unitas, (in essentials unity),

In dubiis libertas, (in doubtful things liberty),

In omnibus autem caritas. (but in all things love).