

CHRONOLOGY, NEW TESTAMENT. When the chronology in mind is the scientific measurement of time according to the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, it is said to be astronomical; when the chronology refers to particular events occurring among men on earth, it is called historical.

Difficulties of Chronology. The chronology of the NT relates alike to the dates when the several books of which it is composed were written and to the historicity of the facts recorded in their contents. Thus the origin of the Christian era is involved. But the modern chronologist is confronted with considerable difficulty at the very outset to fix the exact date of the birth of Jesus Christ, as the founder of Christianity, which synchronizes with the beginning of the Christian era. This is because he is compelled to base his computation on dateless documents written in a remote antiquity. For neither sacred nor secular authors in those times were at all accustomed to record historical facts under distinct dates. All demands were satisfied when known occurrences were referred to definite periods, as within a certain generation, or under a specific dynasty, or within the reign of a given ruler already familiar to the contemporaries addressed; for our modern method of historical notation according to the calendar was something altogether unknown to the ancients. A fine illustration of the ancient method is furnished in the third gospel, wherein a chronological minute is made of the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, compacting away and synchronizing in a single sentence the names of the ruling Caesar at Rome, the several political rulers of Palestine under that emperor, the territories over which they presided, and even the high priests of the Jewish religion at Jerusalem (Luke 3:1-2). Now it does not follow that because such documents were dateless they were unhistorical, or in any sense to be discredited. Rather, because that practice was the universal custom of the times with historians, a departure from the method would at once justify a suspicion against an ancient document as unauthentic and incredible.

Basis of Computation. The argument relies upon three facts: (1) the star of the ancient wise men, a scientific conclusion; (2) the death of Herod the Great, with special reference to an eclipse of the moon; and (3) the enrollment of the Jewish population at the birth of Christ, by the Roman Quirinius. Edward Robinson states: "The present Christian era, which was fixed by the abbot Dionysius Exiguus in the 6th century, assumes the year of the Christian era as coincident with the year 754 from the building of Rome. Our era begins in any case more than four years too late; i.e., from four to five years at least after the actual birth of Christ. This era was first used in historical works by the Venerable Bede early in the 8th century and was not long after introduced in public transactions by the French kings Pepin and Charlemagne" (Greek Harmony of the Gospels).

Dionysius Exiguus did not give origin to the Christian era, he merely computed it. Considering the data then at his command, his work is as remarkable for its difficulty as for its measure of success. However, the common consensus of eminent biblicists is that he erred in his conclusion by at least four years: that the beginning of the Christian era should properly have been dated at A.U.C. (ab urbe condita, "from the founding of the city" of Rome) 750 instead of 754, which would have been coincident with 4 BC of our present chronology. There are several scientific and historical data now to be considered as determinative of the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, upon which the Christian era is based.

Star of the Wise Men. Matthew alone notes the passage of the magi, who had crossed the deserts of the East, guided by the presence of a strange star, to the feet of the infant Jesus. They ask of Herod, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him" (Matt 2:2). The appearance of a star was the predicted sign of the Messiah's birth as made by Balaam, the Moses of the Midianites. It reads: "A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel. . . . One from Jacob shall have dominion" (Num 24:17,19).

In reference to the star of the magi Schaff remarks: "The Savior was not without a witness among the heathen. Wise men from the East-i.e., Persian magi, of the Zend religion, in which the idea of a Zoziash, or redeemer, was clearly known-guided miraculously by a star or meteor created for the purpose, came and sought out the Savior to pay Him homage" (Smith, Bib. Dict., 2:1349, Hackett's ed.).

Jewish Intimations. With reference to Balaam's prediction, the Jewish rabbis wrote in their Talmud: "When the Messiah shall be revealed there shall rise up in the east a star flaming with six colors" (R. Frey, Messiah, p. 137). "The star shall shine forth from the east, and this is the star of the Messiah. It shall shine forth from the east for fifteen days, and if it be prolonged it will be for the good of Israel" (Edersheim, Jesus of Nazareth, 1:212).

Those Jews who are still looking for their Messiah to come confidently expect a star to appear as the sign of His Advent. So it was also in the early centuries of Christianity; and this explains why that celebrated messianic imposter succeeded so well in the reign of Hadrian, A.D. 132-35, who assumed the name Bar-Kokheba, i.e., "the son of a star," and issued coins bearing a star in allusion to Balaam's prediction. In his open rebellion against the Romans he found a large following of the Jews, but when made a prisoner he promised that if his captors killed him he would prove his messiahship by rising from the dead. The Romans took him at his word and cut off his head. Because he did not rise as he had promised, the Jews became disgusted and named him Bar-Kozibar, i.e., "the son of a lie!" (see Schaff, Hist. Christ. Church, 1:402).

Schaff also mentions the learned rabbi named Abarbanel, or Abrabanel, as authority for the tradition of the Jews, "There was a conspicuous conjunction of planets . . . three years before the birth of Moses, in the sign Pisces," and that another "would occur before the Messiah's birth." This was fifty years before Kepler published his discovery of the conjunction of the planets Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars, in the sign Pisces, at the birth of Jesus. Kepler's discovery has since been verified by other eminent astronomers, "including Schubert, of Petersburg; Charles Pritchard, of London, honorable secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society; and Ideler and Encke, of Berlin." "Dean Alford accepts this view. . . . The mathematical calculation of Wieseler, placing the date of the appearance of the star at A.U.C. 750 is coincident with 4 BC, the time of the corrected chronology of the nativity." "It is pronounced by Pritchard to be 'as certain as any celestial phenomenon of ancient date.'" OQ If we accept the results of these calculations of astronomers, we are brought to within two years of the nativity, viz., between A.U.C. 7486 BC (Kepler) and 7504 BC (Wieseler). The differences arise, of course, from the uncertainty of the time of the departure and length of the journey of the magi" (Hist. 1:115-16, 119).

Chinese Notations. Edersheim mentions the astronomical tables of the Chinese as being honored by Humboldt, which contains an account of this star; and that "Pingre and others have designated it as

a comet," whose appearance was coincident with the visit of the magi, which would "seem to go before (them) in the direction of, and stand over, Bethlehem." "And here the subject must, in the present state of information, be left" (Jesus the Messiah, 1:213).

Death of Herod the Great. He was sometimes known as Herod I (see article Herod). The first gospel relates that "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (Matt 2:1; cf. Luke 1:5). Josephus, the celebrated Jewish priest and historian, born A.D. 37 AD, affirms in both his historical works that Herod died in Jericho, in the valley of the Jordan, A.U.C. 750, or 4 BC It is known that his death occurred just before the Jewish Passover, on March 13. This writer further remarks that on "that very night there was an eclipse of the moon" (Ant. 7.7.6.4.; Wars 1.1.8). The fact of the eclipse is conspicuous for the reason that it is the only one mentioned by this writer and that this circumstance furnishes a certain astronomical datum for determining the nativity, since Herod was then alive and sought the child's life.

When the magi inquired of Herod respecting Him "born King of the Jews," it filled him with consternation. "Herod the king . . . was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Fearing that the royal infant would be his supplanter, he "sent and slew all the male children . . . from two years old and under." Joseph meanwhile had fled with the holy family into Egypt, "until the death of Herod," when an angel directed him to return to the land of Israel, "for those who sought the Child's life are dead" (Matt 2:2-20). Now, Josephus relates that Herod, just five days before he died, killed his own son Antipater, which reveals his horrible character. This fact seems to have been confused with the account of the massacre of the infant children at Bethlehem when the report reached the emperor at Rome. Thereupon Macrobius states that Augustus Caesar, recalling Herod's Jewish hatred of swine, said, "It is better to be Herod's hog than to be his son" ("Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium," Saturnalia Convivia 2.4).

It is obvious that Jesus was born at least several months before the death of Herod; that the murder of the innocents occurred between the birth of our Lord and the death of Herod; and withal, the moon's eclipse on that "very night" of his death renders it scientifically certain and ascertainable by mathematical calculation that Herod departed this life on March 13, A.U.C. 750, which is identical with the year 4 BC the year assumed as that of the nativity.

Enrollment of Cyrenius (Quirinius). Schaff gives Franciscus Junius as the authority for the historical statement that "the agent through whom Saturninus carried out the census in Judea was the governor Cyrenius, according to Luke, ch. 2."

Another chronological datum for determining the year of Christ's birth is furnished by the third gospel: "Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary. . . . And she gave birth to her first-born son" (Luke 2:1-7).

Method of Registration. This was a Roman registration conducted by the Jewish method. Every person was required to resort to his own tribal territory in order to be entered in the registry. By this simple but most significant circumstance Joseph and Mary left their residence in Galilee and came to their ancestral Bethlehem, in the territory of Judah, where Jesus was born; and Micah's prediction of the Messiah's birth was circumstantially realized: "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah . . . from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel" (Mic 5:2).

A head tax was imposed upon all men and women between the ages of fourteen and sixty-five (Schaff). Edersheim says: "In consequence of the decree of Caesar Augustus, Herod (the Great) directed a general registration to be made after the Jewish rather than the Roman manner. . . . All country people were to be registered in their own city; meaning thereby the town to which the village or place where they were born was attached. In so doing the house or lineage of each was marked. According to the Jewish mode of registration the people would have to be enrolled according to tribes, families, or clans, and the house of their father. . . . In the case of Joseph and Mary, whose descent from David was not only known, but where, for the sake of the unborn Messiah, it was most important that this should be distinctly noted, it is natural that in accordance with Jewish law they should go to Bethlehem" (Jesus the Messiah, 1:182-83).

The Two Registrations. There has been in the past an interesting question: How could Cyrenius conduct an enrollment of the Jews at the birth of Christ, 4 BC when it is a known fact that he was appointed governor of Syria and made a registry ten years later, namely, in A.D. 6 AD? The answer is that Cyrenius was twice appointed to this service. In the first instance it was a census of the population, taken with a view of replacing their tribute to the empire in produce by a head tax in money; and in the second it was a registration of their property. The census occurred 4 BC to A.D. 1 AD. It was begun by Sentius Saturninus, was then continued by Quintilius Varus until 4 BC and concluded by Cyrenius from the year 4 BC to A.D. 1 AD, the time of the nativity. Luke expressly says, "This was the first census" (Luke 2:2). The second enrollment by Cyrenius occurred A.D. 10 AD - 14 AD, according to the correct chronology.

Now, Luke makes historical notation of both enrollments in a way that indicates a perfect understanding of them on the part of his contemporaries. He refers to the first as a principal fact connecting it with the birth of Jesus; he refers to the second enrollment incidentally, in narrating what Gamaliel said in defense of the apostles before the Sanhedrin. In recounting different rebellions against the Romans in that country, Gamaliel said, "After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census" (cf. Luke 2:1-3; Acts 5:37). It is of this registration that Josephus says: "Under his administration [Cyrenius's as procurator of Judea] it was that a certain Galilaean whose name was Judas prevailed with his countrymen to revolt" (Wars 2.8.1); "I mean that Judas who caused the people to revolt when Cyrenius came to take an account of the estates of the Jews" (Ant. 20.5.2). The latest word on these enrollments is that of the eminent Augustus W. Zumpt, the classical scholar and archaeologist of Berlin, whose researches have secured us "full historical probability; and whose conclusions of the date of the birth of Christ at the time of the census taken 4 BC by Cyrenius is endorsed by the scholarly Mommsen, and accords with the view of Ideler, Bergmann, Browne, Ussher, and Sanclemente" (Schaff).

Patristic References. These have their evidential value, coming from those who were so near in the succession of the apostles and corroborating the historical character in the common understanding of their contemporaries respecting the census taken by Cyrenius at the time of the nativity. Manifold strength is added to these references in that they appeal directly to the registries of the Roman government for the truth of what they say. Justin Martyr (born A.D. 105 AD) says: "Now there is a village in the land of the Jews, thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Christ was born, as you can ascertain also from the registries of the taxing under Quirinius [Cyrenius] your first procurator in Judea" (First Apology, chap. 34). Now, as Justin was defending the Christians from persecutions by the government, nothing could have been more unfortunate and fatal to his claim if the appeal to the public registries was false; but nothing could be stronger in evidence if the appeal was verified by the registration. This remark applies alike to Tertullian of Carthage (born A.D. 160 AD) who was a highly gifted lawyer, and who, writing with a different design from a different country, refers to the same enrollment, and the same period, when he says: "There is historical proof that at this very time a census had been taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus, which might have satisfied their inquiry respecting the family and descent of Christ" (Marcion 4.19).

Accounts of Historians. Schaff cites with approval several high authorities as historians on this subject. He says: "Cassiodorus and Suidas expressly assert the fact of a general census, and add several particulars which are not derived from Luke; e.g., Suidas says that Augustus elected twenty commissioners of high character and sent them to all parts of the empire to collect statistics of the population. . . . Hence Huschke, Wieseler, Zumpt, Plumptre, and McClellan accept their testimony as historically correct. . . . Wieseler quotes also John Malala, the historian of Antioch, as saying . . . that 'Augustus in the thirty-ninth year and tenth month of his reign (i.e., 5 or 6 B.C.) issued a decree for a general registration throughout the empire.' Julius Caesar had begun a measurement of the whole empire, and Augustus completed it" (Hist. Christ. Church, 1:124-25, n. 4).

Affirmation of an Enemy. It is greatly to our advantage in the investigation of the truth of the gospels to cite the testimony of a conspicuous adversary of Christianity who lived in the early centuries of the era, touching this census taken by Cyrenius at the time of the nativity-Julian, born 331, a Roman emperor, known as "the Apostate," because, having been brought up a Christian, he repudiated this religion when he came to the throne. When in possession of all the archives of the empire he wrote against the Christians as one so conscious of the certainty of his source of information that he adopted a defiant tone, especially in reference to the enrollment of Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem, as mentioned by Luke. There is absolutely no known record of evidence that Jesus was "enrolled as one of Caesar's subjects," unless it was at the time which Julian affirms. He says: "Jesus, whom you celebrate, was one of Caesar's subjects. If you dispute it, I will prove it. . . . For yourselves allow that He was enrolled with His father and mother in the time of Cyrenius." "But Jesus having persuaded a few among you, and those the worst of men, has now been celebrated about three hundred years, having done nothing in His lifetime worthy of remembrance, unless anyone thinks it a mighty matter to heal lame and blind people, and exorcise demoniacs in the villages of Bethsaida and Bethany" (Lardner, Works, 7:626-27).

Monumental Inscription. A monument has been unearthed at Rome between the Villa Hadriani and the Via Tiburtina. The name of him to whom the monument was dedicated is obliterated. Bergmann, Mommsen, and Merivale refer it to Cyrenius. Then it reads: "Quirinius as proconsul obtained Asia

as his province. As legate of the deified Augustus a second time, he governed Syria and Phoenicia" (see Schaff, *Hist. Christ. Church*, 1:122-23).

Christ's Confirmation. There is a direct implication of Christ's loyalty, as "one of Caesar's subjects," to "the powers that be," as on the notable occasion when He met the Jews with the answer "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt 22:15-22). This wonderfully wise reply that silenced His adversaries is a record that is exactly accordant with the witness of the emperor, who as the head of the imperial government had in his possession, for reference, all the registrations of the Jews.

These, then, are the three principal arguments respecting the birth of Jesus, and therefore dating properly the Christian era at least four years earlier, namely: (1) that based upon the science of astronomy relating to the star of the magi, as developed by Kepler and improved by other astronomers; (2) the death of Herod the Great, dated by the eclipse of the moon; and (3) the argument based on history due to the researches of Zumpt in regard to the date of Cyrenius's registration of the Jews. Respecting this census, in distinction from a later registration by the same person as indicated by Luke, the patristic appeals made by Justin and Tertullian to the documents in the possession of the government; the assumption of fact in the declaration by the emperor Julian, who directly connects Christ with the census-taking of Cyrenius and His parents' registration; the confirmatory testimony of the secular historians Cassiodorus, Suidas, and John Malala of Antioch to a universal registration throughout the world; the monumental reference at Rome to the same transaction of Cyrenius; and Christ's own conduct in holding Himself to be "a subject of Caesar" by paying the usual imperial tribute to the receivers, are all so many facts corroborating the statement of Luke as historical and fixing the beginning of the Christian era at least four years earlier than our present chronology does.

(from *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*. Originally published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois. Copyright (c) 1988.)