

The birth and crucifixion date of Jesus

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Birth date

An article in New Scientist Journal (Henbest 1992) discussed computer models of events in the heavens that could have led to the Bible description of a 'star' that led three 'wise men from the east', to visit King Herod in Jerusalem.

The article points out that these 'wise men' were most likely astrologers from Babylon and such men believed that movements of planets, events in the sun and moon, and their relationship to the signs of the Zodiac, could be interpreted as heralding great events on earth.

In the year 7 BC there was a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces. This event happens only once in 139 years. To the Babylonians Pisces was the

sign of the Zodiac that represented the Jews, Jupiter was the king of the gods, while Saturn represented both the principle of justice and the land of Palestine.

It is suggested that the Wise Men watched the first conjunction from Babylon in May of 7 BC, but delayed traveling until the end of the long, hot summer. On their way to Jerusalem they observed the astrologically important moment when Jupiter and Saturn were rising at the instant of sunset. It is suggested that the phrase used in the Bible “we have seen his star rising in the east” means that they saw this event as the sun was setting.

As an aside, it is interesting that God seems to have used the astrological beliefs of Babylonians to direct them to Bethlehem. This is food for thought for those who like to tie God down to rules. This is an example of how God meets people where they are at in their beliefs and then directs them to greater truth.

Another aspect of importance is the date of King Herod’s death in March 4 BC. This helps to narrow down possible celestial events. The Bible account in Matthew’s gospel notes that Herod ordered the death of all boys in Bethlehem under two years old. In other words, it seems that the Wise Men convinced Herod that the actual birth had taken place a year or more before they reached Jerusalem.

If Herod died in 4 BC (suggested by historical records), and if the wise men spoke to Herod one or two years before his death, the fact that Herod ordered killing of all boys of 2 years old and younger, suggests that he knew that the birth of Jesus took place two years earlier than the visit of the three wise men.

Early Christians believed in the 7 BC birth date but in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII introduced the Gregorian calendar rather than the Julian calendar and the birth date of Jesus was changed to 1AD.

It took time for various countries to change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian. In Ethiopia, years are still calculated according to a similar system to the Julian calendar. They still hold to the belief that Jesus was born in 7 BC. For instance, celebration of the year 2000 only took place in Ethiopia in our year 2007.

We may ask how the Wise Men knew the ‘star’ was directly overhead when they reached Bethlehem. At that time the water supply in Bethlehem was a well and when you look down into this well you can still see the water. If the ‘star’ was directly overhead then the Wise Men would have seen its reflection in the well water.

The crucifixion date

This leads us to a consideration of how old was Jesus Christ when he was crucified. The Bible suggest that he was crucified on the 14th of the Jewish month Nissan (the Jewish Passover date). But there has been debate about the exact year of his crucifixion.

3.



An article in the scientific journal *Nature* (Humphreys & Waddington 1983) looks in detail at various lines of evidence, including astronomical events. The crucifixion took place on the Jewish celebration of the Passover, which could only take place on the 14th or 15th of the Nissan month.

For various reasons the crucifixion had to be somewhere within 30 AD and 33 AD.

A computer simulation shows that 14 Nissan fell on a Friday only in 30 AD and 33 AD. If the crucifixion occurred on 14 Nissan then Jesus would have died at the same time that the Passover lamb was killed, according to Jewish custom.

Luke's account states that John the Baptist began his ministry in the 'fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar'. Since John the Baptist subsequently baptised Jesus, from known dates for Tiberius Caesar we can conclude that, allowing for the three years of Jesus' ministry, the 30 AD date for the crucifixion is too early.

Furthermore, historical records of the date of Paul's conversion to Christianity, give 34 AD. This adds further strength to the 33 AD date.

For various reasons, some of which are listed above, the most likely year for the crucifixion was 33 AD. Friday 14 Nissan in 33 AD fell on our calendar date of 3 April.

We now look at the scientific evidence that might explain the biblical description of the moon being 'turned to blood'. In the book of Acts we read that Peter explained to the people the meaning of recent events leading up to Pentecost (50 days after Passover). He refers to an ancient prophecy by Joel (Joel 2: 30-31) that 'the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood' as evidence that 'the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come'.

Peter is actually saying that, his listeners had just witnessed these events concerning the sun and moon. The 'great and glorious day of the Lord' would therefore seem to relate to the resurrection event.

The article in *Nature Journal* then looks at computer simulations that might relate to the moon, namely an eclipse. Regarding the sun being darkened, this has happened a few

4.

times in recorded history, due to a Khamsin dust storm in the upper atmosphere. Normally this originates from very strong winds over the Sahara desert. This could also relate to the moon being turned blood red.

However, a completely independent event took place, relating to the moon. A computer simulation shows that there was an eclipse of the moon on 3 April 33 AD. The start of the eclipse at 3.40 p.m. was invisible from Jerusalem, being below the horizon. The moon rose above the Jerusalem horizon at about 6.20 p.m. (the start of the Jewish Sabbath and also the start of Passover day in 33AD).

Although at moonrise only 20% of the total area of the Moon's disc was eclipsed, this 'umbral' shadow was positioned close to the top of the moon. As a result about 65% of the visible area of the rising Moon would initially have been seen as fully eclipsed and such areas are blood red in colour.

So, even if the blood red colour of the Moon was partly caused by remnants of the dust cloud that earlier had darkened the sun, the red colour was also independently caused by this eclipse of the Moon.

The significance of numbers in the Bible

Maybe this helps us to see the value of using scientific discoveries to throw light on biblical texts. It also raises an interesting conclusion relating to the age of Jesus when he was crucified. If we accept the likely date of April/May 7 BC for his birth, and the likely crucifixion date of 3 April 33 AD, this indicates that Jesus was 39 and just entering his 40th year when he died.

This is calculated by adding 7 years BC to 33 years AD = 40. However, there was no year '0', so in fact he was 39 years old and just entering his 40th year. We calculate our age in like manner. When I had my 70th birthday this meant I had lived a full 70 years and was now entering my 71st year.

For those of us who have studied the significance of numbers in the Bible, it is interesting that 40 is often associated with the completion of a time of testing. We have Moses spending 40 years in exile before he was called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses was on mount Sinai for 40 days and forty nights. The Israelite nation being 'tested 40 years in the wilderness'. King David ruled for 40 years. Jesus was tempted for 40 days and 40 nights, and there are other biblical examples.

The recorded events around the crucifixion and resurrection tell us that Jesus died at 3 p.m. on the Friday and it is recorded that it was at sunrise on the First day of the week that an angel rolled back the heavy stone from the cave tomb, to tell us that Jesus had risen and to reveal that the tomb was empty.

A computer simulation for sunrise on this date in 33 AD gives this as between 6-30 and 7.00 a.m. **This would mean that Jesus had been dead for about 40 hours !**

Jesus was not in the tomb for three days and three nights, as is believed by many. The Bible references are as follows:

The phrase '**On the third day** he will be raised to life' is repeated in Matthew 20:19, Matthew 16:21, Matthew 17:23, Luke 18: 33, Luke 24:7. Mark uses the phrase 'after three days (Mark 9:31,10:34,).

It is only in Matthew 12:40 that we read '*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*'. (NIV Bible translation).

We must remember that Matthew was previously a tax collector for the Romans. He was therefore used to thinking according to Roman time keeping. **The Romans started each day at Midnight while the Jews started at sunset.**

According to Roman timing Jesus died on Friday afternoon, was dead Friday night up to midnight = Day One and Night One.

He was then dead the whole of Saturday up to midnight (Day Two and Night Two).

He was then still dead on Sunday night (from midnight to dawn = Night Three) and rose from the dead on this Sunday (Day Three).

The NIV Study Bible notes on Matthew 12: 40 states 'Three days and three nights, including at least part of the first day and part of the third day, was a common Jewish reckoning of time'.

In other words it need not be a problem to accept that Jesus was dead for 40 hours, not a full three days and three nights!

It is also significant that there were 40 days between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus to heaven (Bible: Acts 1:3).

This probable connection of events with the numeral 40, often denoting completion of a spiritually significant event, is often overlooked by biblical scholars. It is scientific analysis that has thrown new light on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

References:

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