

WHEN THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM APPEARED

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Christianity Today (December 3, 1976), the *Griffith Observer* (December 1980), and Oxford's *Greece & Rome* (April 1981) share the distinction of having published Dr. Ernest L. Martin's false theory concerning the time of Christ's birth. As you may remember, the Martin theory claims that the Star of Bethlehem appeared in 3/2 B.C., that Christ was born in 2 B.C., and that Herod died in 1 B.C.

Since refuting the Martin theory in the *Planetarian* (Spring 1981, Vol. 10, No. 1), I have become aware of more evidence that might interest Dr. Martin, Mr. Billy Graham (founder and Board member of *Christianity Today*) and the publishers of *Christianity Today*, the Griffith Observatory, the publishers of *Greece & Rome* and the many other people fascinated by this subject. And I'm happy to report that my refutation of the Martin theory has received support from two scholars in the United Kingdom.

Dr. E. Mary Smallwood, Professor of Romano-Jewish History at The Queen's University of Belfast, Northern Ireland, gave me permission on August 11, 1981, to publish her following statement:

"I entirely agree with Douglas Johnson's refutation of the Martin theory. All of the evidence points to 4 B.C. as the year of Herod's death.

"There is *no* evidence to support Martin's idea that Antipater was Herod's co-ruler. None of Herod's sons co-ruled with Herod.

"I'm *very* dubious indeed about Martin's re-dating of the reigns of the legates of Syria—a re-dating on which part of Martin's chronology rests. Likewise, I do not accept Martin's conclusion concerning the Tibur inscription.

"In conclusion, I consider the Martin theory to be wholly untenable."

Dr. Frederick F. Bruce, former Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester, England, was previously on record as favoring the Martin theory. Recently, Dr. Bruce changed his position by withdrawing his support for Dr. Martin's dating of Herod's death. Dr. Bruce gave me permission on August 31, 1981, to publish his following statement:

"I have long been on record as accepting 4 B.C. as the date of Herod's death and I have seen *no* reason to change my mind.¹ Though I disagree with his date for Herod's death, I commend Dr. Martin for reopening this issue with his reasoned argument. I think Dr. Martin has made a positive contribution to historical scholarship with his interpretation of the Tibur inscription."

Now let's turn our attention to the evidence giving us a reliable chronological framework for our search for the Star of Bethlehem.

CORRECT CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

After carefully examining the historical evidence, the chronological framework around the rising Star of Bethlehem may be discerned. The following chain of

evidence should be of help to audiences seeking orientation on this subject.

Augustus Caesar defeated the naval forces of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Roman history books, encyclopedias covering Roman history, and detailed dictionaries (like *The American Heritage Dictionary*) confirm the accuracy of this date. Professor E. Mary Smallwood states that the 31 B.C. date for this battle is "absolutely secure."

According to the first century A.D. historian, Flavius Josephus, Archelaus (a succeeding son of Herod) was banished from the throne of Judea 37 years after the Battle of Actium.² It must also be understood that Josephus counted part of a year as a whole year. Thus, Josephus used inclusive reckoning of years and we arrive at 6 A.D. for the banishment of Archelaus.³

Josephus reports that Archelaus was banished "in the tenth year of Archelaus' rule."⁴ Thus, we discover that Archelaus counted his reign from 4 B.C. Only three questions remain:

Did Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip (Herod's three succeeding sons) co-reign with Herod for three years and then begin reigning on their own in 1 B.C.? No, because Augustus Caesar prohibited Herod from allowing anyone to share Herod's kingship; an heir would only become a ruler after the death of Herod.⁵ Also, the three sons were nominated as heirs to the throne too late in Herod's lifetime to have co-reigned with Herod for three years. Archelaus was nominated as an heir just a few days before Herod died.⁶

Was Antipater sole ruler of Judea for three years making it possible for Herod's three succeeding sons to appropriate Antipater's regnal years in 1 B.C.? No, because Josephus refers to Herod as "king" of Judea until Herod's death. (The only situation requiring the three sons to blot out Antipater's rule would be if Antipater had been *sole* ruler of Judea before a severe disgrace. If Antipater had been a co-regent with Herod, the three sons would have merely counted their reigns from the end of Herod's co-reign. However, both of these propositions are false.)

Did Antipater co-reign with Herod for three years making it possible for Herod's three succeeding sons to appropriate Antipater's regnal years in 1 B.C.? No, because Antipater was only an heir who acted "as if" he were a ruler while the burden of office fell upon Herod alone. Antipater never reigned in Judea. (For detailed evidence, see below.)

Therefore, Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip *actually* began reigning in Judea in 4 B.C. (not in 1 B.C.) after the death of their father, Herod.

Since Christ was born while Herod was still alive (Matthew 2:1), Christ was born no later than 4 B.C.

Because Christ was "about thirty years of age" when he was baptised in 28 or 29 A.D. (Luke 3:1, 23), Christ was born no earlier than 7 B.C. If Christ was born in 6 B.C. and was baptised in 28 A.D., he would have begun his ministry at the age of 33 (a reasonable conclusion permitted by Luke's clue).

Therefore, the Star of Bethlehem heralding the birth of Christ must have risen in the sky between 7 B.C. and 4 B.C.

HEROD'S RECONCILIATION

Dr. Martin claims that Herod was disgraced and demoted by Augustus Caesar in 4 B.C. and that this event led to the reign of Herod's son, Antipater, in Judea. This is simply false.

Herod's disgrace in 8/7 B.C. was of little consequence because, after a short period of time, Herod regained the favor and confidence of Augustus through the diplomatic efforts of Nicolaus of Damascus.⁷ Josephus emphasized the fact of Herod's reconciliation with Augustus by reporting it three times in *Jewish Antiquities*. This reconciliation was achieved no later than 7 B.C. because at this time Saturninus was governor of Syria. (Saturninus governed immediately before Varus and coins prove that Varus governed Syria from 7/6 to 5/4 B.C.⁸)

Thus, Herod's disgrace (incorrectly dated by Martin) simply meant that Herod temporarily lost his favorable designation as a "friend of Caesar." There is no evidence suggesting that Herod ever lost or shared his kingship. Herod reigned as king of Judea until his death.

ANTIPATER NEVER REIGNED

Dr. Martin claims that Antipater had three regnal years which were later appropriated by Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. This claim is false and Antipater had no regnal years for the following reasons:

1. Augustus Caesar the Roman Emperor overseeing Herod's "client kingdom," commanded Herod to never relinquish his kingship. Such a transfer of power would only occur upon the death of Herod.⁹

According to Josephus, Herod received this order from Augustus concerning Herod's eventual choice of a successor to the throne of Judea, "And when Herod was disposed to make such a settlement at once, Augustus said that he would not give him leave to deprive himself, while he was alive, of the power over his kingdom, or over his sons."¹⁰

As long as Herod was alive, there would be no "co-regents" with Herod—only "heirs" to the throne nominated in Herod's last will and testament to rule *after* Herod's death and *after* appointment by the Roman Emperor.

2. After receiving the order from Augustus, Herod made a speech to the people of Judea. According to Josephus, Herod told the people that his sons were to reign "after him."¹¹ Herod named Antipater first among the three sons he chose to succeed him. Then Herod reminded the people that "he desired that they should all pay court to himself, and esteem him king and lord of all . . ."¹²

Herod's position as king and Antipater's position as favored heir are clearly described by Josephus in *The Jewish War*, I, 23, 5 (Loeb) when he offers us the following portion of Herod's speech,

"I must require these persons . . . to rest their hopes on me *alone*; for it is not the kingdom, but the *mere honours of royalty*, which I am now delivering over to my sons. They will enjoy the pleasures of power, *as if actual rulers*, but upon me, however unwilling, will fall the burden of office" (emphasis added).

3. Josephus offers additional evidence in *Jewish Antiquities*, XVII, 1, 1 (Loeb) that Antipater was *not* a co-regent or king when he writes that Antipater found it "hopeless to obtain the throne" because he was hated by the people and the army.

When Josephus makes the paradoxical statement in the same section that, in spite of Antipater's "hopeless" condition, Antipater was "at least co-ruler with his father and in no way different from a king," Josephus is measuring the honors of royalty allowed to Antipater by "concession" from King Herod; he is not referring to a change in Antipater's legal status from favored heir to legal king.

If Antipater had been a co-regent, Josephus would have said so straight out. Because Antipater was *not* a co-regent (but a favored heir), Josephus described Antipater as "*at least co-ruler*" in an effort to *measure* his honors of royalty. Antipater had *de facto* influence, not *de jure* power.

Dr. Timothy D. Barnes, Professor of Classics at the University of Toronto, Canada, translates the relevant passage in *Jewish Antiquities*, XVII, 1, 1, as, "Nevertheless [Antipater] ruled with his father *just as if* he were king."

This proves that Antipater was not a co-regent or king, but merely an heir to the throne who acted "as if" he were king because of Herod's favor toward him.

It's important to note that this description of Antipater by Josephus in *Jewish Antiquities* exactly matches his earlier description in *The Jewish War*, I, 23, 5 (see 2. above). Notice especially the decisive identical phrase, "as if."

4. Whatever authority was given to Antipater was allowed only as a "concession" from his father, King Herod, who remained king.¹³ Josephus refers to Herod as "king" in the section of *Jewish Antiquities* mentioning the concession. A "concession" is a privilege granted by the controlling authority; in this case, King Herod was the controlling authority.

5. After being named heir to the throne in his father's last will, Antipater left Jerusalem with the last will and lived in Rome with his friends.¹⁴ While living in Rome for at least seven months, Antipater continually sought to have his father murdered.¹⁵ This leads us to ask two very important questions:

- a. Could Antipater have ruled Judea as king or co-regent while he was living in Rome? The answer is obvious: no. And,
- b. Why did Antipater continually try to have his father, Herod, murdered if Antipater were already king? Again the answer is obvious: Antipater was merely an anxious heir to the throne who was trying to kill the king in order to speed up his inheritance. (In fact, Antipater was such an anxious heir that he lamented King Herod's long life and complained that if he *ever* gained the throne of Judea from his elderly father, he would be too old to enjoy it.¹⁶)

Antipater's plan was to have Herod murdered by others and then Antipater would have gained the throne of Judea with the last will in his possession and, through his absence from Jerusalem, remained free of suspicion.

6. Herod learned of Antipater's plan to murder him and invited Antipater to return to Jerusalem from Rome. Varus, the governor of Syria, was visiting Herod when Antipater arrived from Rome and Varus assisted Herod in Antipater's trial the next day.¹⁷ As proved earlier, Varus governed Syria from 7/6 to 5/4 B.C. Therefore, Varus assisted in this trial no later than 4 B.C.; 5 B.C. is a likely year. Antipater was accused and soon convicted of conspiring to murder Herod. Antipater was immediately imprisoned and later executed five days before Herod's death.¹⁸
7. Josephus makes it clear in *The Jewish War*, I, 32, 2 (Loeb) that at the time of Antipater's trial before Herod and Varus, Antipater had been nominated in Herod's last will as "heir to the throne," but he progressed no further. For all of these reasons, Herod the Great was king of Judea until his death and Antipater never reigned in Judea.

8 STADIA

In a single and uncorroborated report, Josephus tells us that a lunar eclipse immediately preceded Herod's death.¹⁹ Herod's funeral and its attendant events were then accomplished before the following Passover. In view of the evidence establishing the date of Herod's death as 4 B.C., the lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 B.C., is a reasonable choice to fit Josephus' report.

But Dr. Martin claims that there is not enough time between March 13 (the eclipse) and April 11 (the beginning of Passover) of 4 B.C. for the funeral of Herod and its attendant events. The *Griffith Observer* (December 1980) considers this proposition to be Dr. Martin's "main contribution" to the resolution of this issue.

First, Dr. Martin is not the first person to make this proposition. And second, this proposition is false.

When William Whiston translated the works of Josephus in 1737, he suggested in a footnote that Herod's funeral procession traveled 8 stadia (about one mile) each day for 25 days to cover the 200 stadia between Jericho (where Herod died) and Herodion (Herod's burial site).

The Loeb Classical Library, published by Harvard University, contains the works of Josephus. The volume of *Jewish Antiquities* containing the account of Herod's funeral also contains a footnote suggesting that Herod's funeral procession traveled 8 stadia "each day" to cover 200 stadia.

If these footnotes are correct, there may be insufficient time between the eclipse and Passover of 4 B.C. for the events described by Josephus.

However, these two footnotes (and Dr. Martin's claim that Herod's funeral procession required 28 days) are false.

Josephus simply says Herod's funeral procession "went eight stadia toward Herodion."²⁰ The phrase "each day" does *not* appear in Josephus' text. Therefore, Josephus recorded "eight stadia" as a *total extent of travel*, not as a *rate* of travel.

Herod's ceremonial funeral procession traveled about one mile through the streets of Jericho for the benefit of the onlooking Jericho population. Hundreds of mourners did *not* walk one mile each day for 25 miles through the desert wilderness.

There are practical reasons why the procession walked only one mile as reported by Josephus.

1. After its 8 stadia march (requiring about 1/2 hour) each day through the desert, the procession would have spent the remainder of the day baking in the sun.
2. The procession would have required a huge caravan loaded with provisions for food and lodging for 25 days.
3. With a large portion of the army off-duty for almost a month to walk in the procession, the kingdom's security would have been weakened.
4. There would have been no audience in the wilderness, as there was in Jericho, to appreciate the jeweled splendor of the procession. And,
5. If Lazarus "stunk" after four days in a cave shortly before Passover (John 11:39, 55), imagine the condition of the deceased king after 25 days of exposure to the sun shortly before Passover. Predators from land and air would have caused serious problems for the procession in the desert.

I'm not the first person to realize that the procession traveled only eight stadia. Emil Schurer, a 19th century historian, confirms this understanding of Josephus' text.²¹

Therefore, I conclude that Herod's funeral procession walked only eight stadia for the benefit of the onlookers in Jericho. The deceased king was then likely transported the remaining 192 stadia to Herodion in a horse-drawn wagon escorted by a company on horseback. The funeral required no more than two days and was probably accomplished in one day.

Perhaps it's interesting to note how Dr. Martin's own calculation makes the 4 B.C. eclipse a possible choice. Dr. Martin claims that a minimum of 54 days were required for the events between the eclipse and Passover. He adds that the funeral procession required 28 days.

So, take his 54 days, subtract 26 days (because the procession required no more than two days), and 28 days remain to accommodate the events between the eclipse and Passover. There just happen to be 28 days between March 13, 4 B.C. (the eclipse) and April 11, 4 B.C. (Passover).

Thus, after correctly understanding Josephus' text, we see that there is no compelling reason to dismiss the 4 B.C. eclipse as the one reported by Josephus. In fact, after considering all of the evidence, this eclipse is the *only* logical choice.

Acceptance of the March 5 B.C. eclipse would mean Herod's succeeding sons began reigning in 5 B.C. The evidence shows that the sons began reigning in 4 B.C.

Acceptance of the September 5 B.C. eclipse would mean Herod's succeeding sons waited nearly seven months after Herod's death before traveling to Rome (after Passover) to have their inheritance confirmed by Augustus. This simply isn't likely.

Acceptance of the January 1 B.C. eclipse would mean Herod died in 1 B.C. The evidence proves that Herod died no later than 4 B.C.

Therefore, the lunar eclipse of March 4 B.C. is the one reported by Josephus. Herod died in the spring of 4 B.C.

HEROD'S CRUELTY

Dr. Martin claims that Herod would not have killed two prominent Jewish teachers on the last day of the festival of Purim. (Josephus reports that Herod killed the teachers on the night of the lunar eclipse. March 13, 4 B.C., was Adar 15 of the Jewish year—the last day of Purim.)

The opposite is true. Killing two teachers on the last day of Purim was entirely consistent with Herod's pathological cruelty. For the same reason that Herod planned to kill hundreds of Jewish nobles immediately before his death, Herod also killed the teachers on the last day of Purim: Herod sought "vicarious mourning" from the Jewish nation who hated him. (Herod's family released the nobles unharmed immediately after Herod's death.)

MARTIN THEORY DISMISSED

For all of the above reasons, the Martin theory is false and may be dismissed. Now that the correct chronological framework for Christ's birth has been established, let's bring some additional considerations into view.

ASTRONOMY

Since we're looking for the Star of Bethlehem between 7 and 4 B.C., the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. (followed by a three-planet grouping in early 6 B.C.) becomes an interesting candidate. Herod and all of Jerusalem were surprised by the wise men's report of the star. Thus, the appearance of the star was not obvious.

Because Jupiter and Saturn rose together as "morning stars" on May 27, 7 B.C., we may be reminded of God describing to Job the creation of the world "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). The wise men also expressed "great joy" upon seeing the star.

The Jupiter-Saturn conjunction on October 5, 7 B.C., coincided with the holiest day of the Jewish year—the Day of Atonement.²² This "star" may have signaled the birth of the promised Redeemer—the one who brings forgiveness and eternal redemption.²³

The time between the rise of the "star" in May 7 B.C. and its setting in February 6 B.C., as part of a three-planet grouping, is equal to a normal period of time between a woman's conception and her giving birth. Does this suggest Christ was born in the spring of 6 B.C.?

The fact that these three conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn took place in the constellation of Pisces (the Fish) brings to mind the "sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:38–41). Maybe this prophecy mentioned by Christ refers to both the birth and resurrection of Christ. The prophet, Jonah, was in the fish for three days before he was delivered; the "star" in the "fish" was prominent to the wise men on three days before Christ was born; and Christ was in the "fish" of the tomb for three days before he was resurrected to eternal life.

PROPHECIES FULFILLED?

God's conversation with Job may hold further clues to the birth of Christ. God speaks of a birth "out of the womb" at Job 38:8 (Mary giving birth to Jesus?); "my decreed place" at Job 38:10 (Bethlehem?); and the garment of "a swaddling band" at Job 38:9 (the swaddling clothes around Jesus mentioned at Luke 2:7?). These are probably the only two passages in the Bible mentioning swaddling clothes.

And have you ever considered the amazing Book of Esther (a Bible story centered in the Babylonian region where the wise men are thought to have begun their journey)? The story of Esther mentions "wise men who knew the times"; two victorious *cousins*—Esther and Mordecai (remember, Elizabeth and Mary who gave birth to John the Baptist and Jesus were *cousins*); and the wicked Haman who had *ten sons* (Herod, who tried to kill Jesus, also had *ten sons*²⁴). The Jewish festival of Purim has its origin in Esther. Is the story of Esther a prophecy suggesting that Christ was born near the time of Purim?

The Jewish month of Adar was the last month of the year. It's interesting to note that Christ is called the "last Adam"—the last member of Adam's generation (1 Corinthians 15:45). And Christ was resurrected to new life in the first month of the Jewish year, Nisan (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Was Christ born in Adar and resurrected in Nisan to confirm that he is the last member of the former age and the first member of the new age—the "First and Last"?

ETERNAL LIGHT

In the beginning, God created his light to shine into the world. The wise men saw the light unto the Gentiles. And the star forever reminds us of that light shining through the birth and resurrection of Christ.

Jesus was born in a hillside cave used to shelter sheep near Bethlehem when no room was found for him at the inn. He was later reborn from a cave "hewn out of rock" near Jerusalem.

As an infant, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes (strips of linen also called "swaddling bands") by his mother. Years later, Joseph and Nicodemus wrapped the body of Jesus in "strips of linen."

When Jesus was born, wise men came from the east to present him with frankincense and myrrh. On the day of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene brought spices to anoint Jesus.

The birth of Jesus was heralded by a rising star while his resurrection was proclaimed by the day star—the rising sun.

Angels proclaimed the birth and resurrection of Jesus.

Eight days after his birth, Jesus was circumcised in Bethlehem. Eight days after his resurrection, Jesus "circumcised" the heart of Thomas to remove his doubts.

Forty days after his birth, Jesus ascended to Jerusalem from Bethlehem with his parents to be presented in the temple of God. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended to the "Jerusalem above" from Bethany to be presented in the temple of Heaven.

And at least fifty days after his birth, Jesus was revealed to the wise men who had journeyed so far to find him. Fifty days after his resurrection, Jesus was revealed to everyone by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

After the debate concerning the time of the Star of Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus has spawned its last remark (or perhaps sooner), we may realize that the "star" of God is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the eternal reign of the Holy Spirit.²⁵

As we are so powerfully and joyfully reminded by the words of God and George Frederick Handel's "Messiah"—

And He shall reign forever and ever.²⁶ Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Appendix B—Computation of Sidereal Time

For computation of the local sidereal time to an accuracy of one second, a complete account is given in *Practical Astronomy With Your Calculator* by Peter Duffett-Smith. These computations involve:

1. Counting the number of days in the year since January 0, 0.
2. Multiplying this integer by .065709.
3. Subtracting from this product a constant B peculiar to the year in question (for 1980, B = 17.411473).
4. Converting the current Greenwich mean time to hours, multiplying by 1.002743 and adding this product to the result from step 3.

5. To the result from step 4, add your longitude hours (will be — if you are west of Greenwich). The final number will be the local sidereal time in hours.

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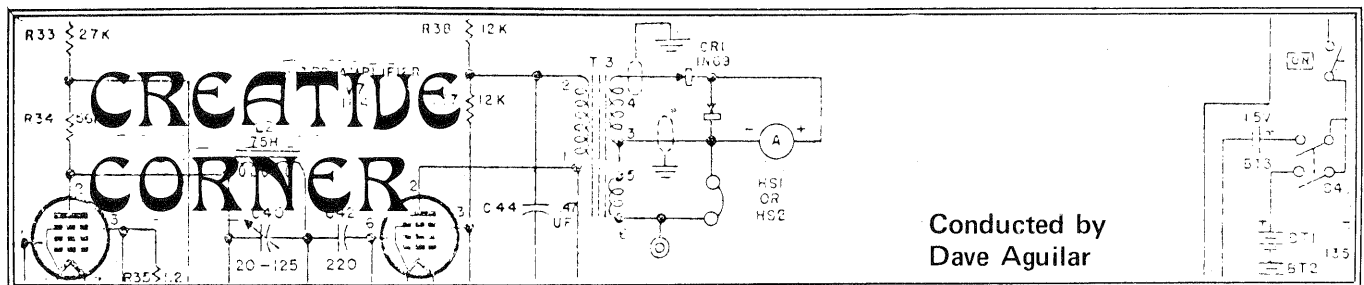
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5. *Ibid.*, XVI, 4, 5.
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16. *Ibid.*, XVII, 4, 1.
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25. The star of God—Numbers 24:17; the star is fulfilled in the birth of the person, Jesus Christ—Matthew 2:2 and Revelation 22:16; and the star inspires us forever—Mark 16:2 and 2 Peter 1:19.
26. Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 1:33; Revelation 11:15.



NOTE:

The Creative Corner page is being printed in the format of the Special Effects Handbook (soon to be published), so that you can xerox the page for insertion therein if you wish.

Pages from The Planetarian will be sequenced alphabetically so you may order them in future handbook indices.