THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTMAS AND THE DATE OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

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The origins of Christmas and the date of Christ's birth are separate but related questions. However, Christmas is usually assumed to have no connection with the actual date of Christ's birth. Discussions regarding the origins of Christmas typically omit reference to the birth of Christ, unless it is to affirm it is unlikely he was born December 25th. This is unfortunate because it has skewed discussion and taken it in directions which tend to impugn the legitimacy of Christmas itself. However, chronological evidence strongly favors December 25th being the actual date of the nativity, such that the assumption that Christmas is unconnected with the date of Christ's birth is no longer academically defensible or sound.

I. GENESIS OF THE DISCUSSION

Discussion regarding the origins of Christmas stems largely from the Reformation. Although many Reformers took no exception to Christmas, various Calvinist sects, including Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians, saw it as a piece of fiction, and went so far as to prohibit its observance in England, Scotland, and the American Colonies. The sentiments of John Knox were typical of the time:

> By contrary Doctrine, we understand whatsoever men, by Laws, Councils, or Constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as be vows of chastity, foreswearing of marriage, binding of men and women to several and disguised apparels, to the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat for conscience sake, prayer for the dead; and keeping of holy days of certain Saints commanded by men, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the Feasts (as they term them) of Apostles, Martyrs, Virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our Lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil Magistrate.[1]

Although both Protestants and Catholics are likely to take exception to at least some things listed above, few today would include Christmas. *Christmas an*

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[1] John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland* (ed. William Croft Dickinson; New York: Philosophical Library, 1950) 2.281. Cf. John Knox, *Works* (ed. David Laing; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895) 2.190.

abomination to be punished by the civil magistrate? Surely that is going a bit too far. Yet, such was the animus that gave birth to the dispute over the origins of Christmas.

However, Christmas was not without its defenders; many tracts were produced during the Puritan Commonwealth in England (1641–1660) and the Colonies in America defending Christmas on various grounds. Probably the most notable defense came from John Selden, a member of Parliament and reputed to be one of the most learned men of the seventeenth century. Such was Selden's fame that his funeral was preached by no less than Archbishop James Ussher. Selden's tract argued from the error of the Julian calendar, which caused it to lose one day every one hundred twenty-eight years. This eroded the centuries-old correlation between the vernal equinox and March 25th, causing them to grow ever further apart until the Council of Nicaea, to establish the uniform observance of the Pasch ("Easter"), was compelled in AD 325 to relocate the equinox to March 21st. Because the equinoxes and solstices stand in fixed relation to one another, this meant that the winter solstice was moved from December 25th to December 21st. Selden argues that, since the nativity was historically associated with the solstice, the association must have risen long before the Council of Nicaea, during Jesus' ministry and apostolic times, before the gap between December 25th and the winter solstice had occurred and was commonly known or understood.

> Whence also it is to be concluded, that this Feast-day was receiv'd as to be kept on the 25th day even before the Apostles' time, and that among the Disciples of our Saviour, while he was yet on earth, that is, while in common reputation the 25th day of December was taken for the Winter-solstice: Otherwise what colour were there why the consent of the Fathers should denote it by that civil Winter-solstice which was out of use in the Church, both in their time, and been so likewise from the times of the Apostles? … But it being commonly received, out of the account and Calendar of the Gentiles, that the 25th of December was the Solstice, and that on the same day our Saviour was born, it grew familiar, it seems, and so was delivered down to those Fathers, that the birth-day was on the very Winter-solstice, which they so often inculcate.[2]

So stood the debate concerning Christmas in the seventeenth century; today it has taken different shape entirely.

II. THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS THEORY

Today discussion regarding the origins of Christmas has settled into two camps: the History of Religions Theory and the Calculation Theory. The History of Religions Theory dates to the seventeenth century and is the ideological descendant of Puritan and Presbyterian dissenters. Roll provides the most thorough history of the view, of which the works of Usener and Botte have proved the most influential

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[2] John Selden, *Theanthropos, or God made Man, a Tract Proving the Nativity of our Saviour to be on the 25th of December* (London, 1661) 30–31. For readability's sake, a very few slight and non-substantial adjustments have been made to the quotation to update archaic language conventions.

and enduring.[3] The History of Religions Theory argues in sum that, in AD 274, following his victories in the east, the emperor Aurelian built a temple and instituted quadrennial games on behalf of *Sol Invictus*, a pagan sun god to whom he attributed his victories. An illuminated codex manuscript produced for a wealthy Christian named Valentinus contains in part six a calendar for the year AD 354 (the *Chronography of 354*). This calendar bears the following inscription for December 25th: "N INVICTI CM XXX." N = Natalis ("birthday/nativity"). INVICTI = "Of the Unconquered one." CM = Circenses missus ("games ordered"). XXX = 30. Thus, for the birthday of the "unconquered one" that year, thirty games were ordered. The same codex in part twelve, in a section set in calendrical order devoted to annual commemoration of the martyrs, contains reference to the birth of Christ. The first entry given in the *Depositio Martirum* reads: *VIII kal. Ian. natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae.* Eight Kalends of January is December 25th.

It is generally agreed that the *Depositio Martirum* originally dates to AD 336 but was updated to AD 354 for inclusion in the codex. The *Depositio Martirum* is arranged from December 25th to December 25th, indicating that at Rome in AD 336 the nativity of Christ marked the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. This is the earliest undisputed evidence we possess for celebration of Christ's nativity on December 25th; discussion regarding the origins of Christmas therefore typically begins here. Advocates of the History of Religions Theory infer from the coincidence that both the *Natalis solis invicti* and the Nativity of Christ appear in the *same codex*, shared the *same date*, and were both *kept at Rome*, that the latter was derived from the former. Moreover, dating as it does within the reign of Constantine, and considering his program to make Christianity the religion of the empire, it is argued that Christmas was instituted at Rome by Constantine. Finally, advocates also argue that use of sun symbolism vis-à-vis the Nativity and winter solstice by patristic writers evidences a type of "solar-syncretism," confirming Christmas was adopted from *Sol Invictus*.

In fairness, it must be admitted that the notion that Christmas is derived from the pagan solstice is not entirely without basis. There are many traditions and dates that have grown up and been adopted by the church—the Roman Catholic Church in particular—which have no basis in historical fact and are widely perceived as being derived from pagan sources. This perception more than anything else is what has lent the History of Religions Theory the broad acceptance it enjoys. The notion that Christmas is derived from the pagan solstice presents an all-too-familiar scenario and meets with many people's skeptical estimation of the church, which they therefore accept all too uncritically.

However, just because some traditions may derive from pagan sources does not mean they all do. The inference may suggest a hypothesis to us, but the hypothesis must be demonstrated by proof. And it is precisely here that the History

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[3] Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Liturgia Condenda 5; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995); Herman Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest* (Bonn: Cohen, 1889); Bernard Botte, *Les origines de la Noël et de l'Épiphanie* (Textes et études liturgiques 1; Louvain: Abbaye du Mont César, 1932).

of Religions Theory comes up short: although the charge that Christmas is an adaptation of the Saturnalia[4] or pagan winter solstice has been around since the time of the Reformation, no direct evidence—no epistle, historical account, decree by council, nothing—has ever been produced indicating that Christmas was derived from these sources. The whole theory rests upon inference and the unhappy history and reputation of the Roman Catholic Church vis-à-vis accommodating and appropriating pagan traditions.

To the contrary, the strong opposition of the early church toward any form of paganism, coupled with the complete absence of any hint by period writers that the Christmas date was received other than by tradition of the fathers, renders the hypothesis improbable.[5] If anything, the fact that reference to *Sol Invictus* and the Nativity occurs in the same codex argues *against* the latter being derived from the former. If the intention was to Christianize the festival *Sol Invictus* by offering the Nativity as a substitute, we would expect reference to *Sol Invictus* to be suppressed to conceal it as the source. That both appear in the codex shows that the owner who commissioned the work felt there was nothing to hide by the coincidence of these occurring the same day.

In fact, that Christmas and *Natalis sol invictus* occur on the same day is just as capable of the opposite inference; *viz.* that Aurelian chose December 25th for the festival *Sol Invictus* because it was already popular with Christians. Tighe argues:

> The pagan festival of the "Birth of the Unconquered Sun" instituted by the
> Roman Emperor Aurelian on 25 December 274, was almost certainly an attempt

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[4] The Saturnalia ran from December 17–23, and therefore is not the source of the Christmas date (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.10.23, 24).

[5] According to Augustine, whatever was practiced universally throughout the church in the whole world was presumably set in place by the apostles or by a general church council. But as no council established the feast of the Nativity, it exists by tradition, and this presumably by either "word or epistle" (2 Thess 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2, 23) handed down from the time of the apostles:

> Those feasts concerning which we have no express scripture, but only traditions, which are now observed all the world over; we ought to know that the keeping of them was commended unto us, and instituted either by the Apostles themselves, or general Councils, of which there is a most wholesome use in the church of God; such are the feasts of our Lord's Passion, Resurrection, Ascension into heaven, and the coming down of the Holy Ghost, which are now kept holy with a yearly solemnity. (Augustine, Ep. 54. English translation from Allan Blayney [Pastor Fido, pseud.] "*Festorum Metropolis*. The Metropolitan Feast, or the Birth-day of our Saviour Jesus Christ" [London: Matthew Simmons, 1652], 11–12; note that Blayney uses an edition of Augustine which numbers Ep. 54 and 55 as Ep. 118 and 119.)

In a subsequent epistle, Augustine commends observing Christmas: "It chiefly behooves us that upon the day of our Lord's nativity, we should receive the sacrament in remembrance of him that was born upon it, and upon the return of the year to celebrate the very day with a feasting devotion." (*Hic primum opportet, ut Die Nativitatis Domini Sacramenta celebremus, & ipsum revolutum anni Diem festa devotione celebrare.*) (Augustine, *Ep. 55* [Blayney]). The date of the nativity Augustine gives as December 25th: "He was born, according to tradition, upon December the twenty-fifth" (Augustine, *Trin.* 4.5 [Haddan]).

to create a pagan alternative to a date that was already of some significance to Roman Christians.[6]

Tighe is not alone in this conclusion. According to Nothaft:

> In any case, since the *Chronograph of 354* remains our earliest quotable source for *both* "invictus" and the birth of Christ being celebrated on this particular date, it must be admitted that the question of which of these festivals preceded or influenced the other cannot be answered on its basis. Indeed, it is altogether possible to turn the tables on Usener and assume that a "supposedly ancient festival of Sol was 'rediscovered' by pagan authorities in response to the appropriation of the winter solstice by Christianity."[7]

In short, the erection of a temple and celebration of quadrennial games at Rome simply cannot account for the celebration of Christ's nativity in such diverse and remote places as Cadiz (Spain) and Thrace (Turkey) as testified by Chrysostom in AD 387. Moreover, the charge that Christmas began to be kept in the fourth century is refuted by the same author, who says that it was kept at Rome "from the beginning" by "ancient tradition."[8] And regarding Constantine being responsible for the institution of Christmas at Rome, Talley has shown that Constantine was not present in Rome at the relevant time, and that his instituting Christmas there cannot be reconciled with its absence in Constantinople during the whole of Constantine's lifetime. If instituting Christmas was part of Constantine's program to make Christianity the religion of the empire, we would certainly expect Christmas to have been celebrated in the city bearing his name. Yet, Christmas was not celebrated in Constantinople until AD 380 when it was introduced there by Gregory Nazianzus.[9]

III. THE CALCULATION THEORY

The Calculation Theory of the origin of Christmas was first articulated by Louis Duchesne in the late 1800s. Duchesne proposed that the December 25th birth of Christ was calculated from the annunciation and conception, which in turn was obtained from the supposed date of Christ's passion. Rabbinic tradition embraced a fiction referred to as "integral age," which had it that the great patriarchs and prophets of Israel died on the same day as their birth, typically Passover or Tabernacles. Noting that early Christian writers believed Jesus died on March 25th,

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[6] William J. Tighe, "Calculating Christmas," *Touchstone Magazine* 16/10 (December 2003) 27.

[7] C. P. E. Nothaft, "The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research," *Cambridge Journal* 81/4 (December 2012) 908, quoting Steven Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas: A Contribution to the Modern Construct of Late Antique Solar Syncretism," in *Hermann Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie* (ed. Michel Espagne and Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn; Kultur- und sozialwissenschaftliche Studien 7; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011) 150. Cf. Anselme Davril, "L'origine de la fete de noel," *Renaissance de Fleury: La revue des moines de Saint-Benoit* 160 (1991) 9–14.

[8] John Chrysostom, *On the day of the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.*

[9] Thomas J. Talley, "Constantine and Christmas," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings for the Liturgical Year* (ed. John Francis Baldovin and Maxwell E. Johnson; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 265–72.

Duchesne reasoned that the idea of integral age would place the annunciation on March 25th, which in turn would place Christ's birth nine months later on December 25th.[10]

Although Duchesne presented his theory as a brief statement in a larger work and could cite no direct evidence to support it, his theory received considerable initial attention arguing against it. Some years later it was revived and given academic standing by Talley, a top-notch liturgical historian who developed the argument at length. Talley argues that following a so-called Johannine chronology, which seems to place Jesus' death on the day the Passover lamb was slain, the first Jewish believers would likely have observed the Pasch at the same time as their unbelieving counterparts on the evening of Nisan 14, rather than on the Sunday following as it is now. These Jewish believers, being dispersed during the Jewish war with Rome (AD 66–70), would have resettled abroad, particularly in Asia, including the churches mentioned in Revelation. Since following the destruction of Jerusalem there was no central authority to announce the time of the Pasch, Tally argues that the Quartodeciman Christians in Asia eventually chose April 6th in their version of the Julian calendar as the equivalent of Nisan 14. Nine months from this date brings us to January 6th, the date of Epiphany when the Nativity was originally celebrated in the East. In the West, where March 25th was identified with the passion of Christ, the idea of integral age produced a date of March 25th for the conception of Christ, followed later by a birth date of December 25th.[11]

Talley's lead argument that the Quartodeciman date of April 6th for Passover is the source of January 6th for Christ's Nativity in the East, which in turn suggests the like relationship between March 25th and December 25th in the West, assumes that April 6th was observed before January 6th was observed—a point Talley does not prove.[12] The earliest source Talley cites is Sozomen, a fifth-century writer who described the sect of Montanists of his day and their use of April 6th for the Pasch.

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[10] Louis Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien* (1st ed., Paris: Thorin, 1889; 5th ed., Paris: Fontemoing, 1920); Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* 88–90.

[11] Thomas J. Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986) 5–13, 91–97.

[12] Talley's argument also assumes without proof that March 25th had significance before December 25th, a point Engberding disputes:

> Engberding concedes that the calculations involved most likely represent an attempt to justify the celebration of Christ's birth on a date already established by tradition or by other means, and believed to be historically accurate already in 336, the date of the source material for the *Chronograph*. … Engberding's primary piece of evidence … is the aforementioned tractate *De solstitiis et aequinoctiis*; from this text he delineates a set of coincidences pertaining to the December 25 birthdate, all of which tend to indicate that the feast itself was not established due to calculations which pointed irrefutably to this date, but rather that the calculations were devised after the date was already established and instead served to act as arguments for God's perfect plan of salvation, the underlying rationale for the patristic-era interest in number symbolism. In other words, first the birthdate came into being and was widely accepted, then somewhat later, perhaps in tandem with popular liturgical celebrations of that date and perhaps not yet, was the rationale for the date consciously constructed and defended.

Susan K. Roll, "The Origins of Christmas: The State of the Question," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* 286.

The sect of Montanists first appeared in the latter part of the second century. When the sect first employed April 6th for paschal celebrations is not known. Talley cites no evidence that anyone other than the Montanists observed April 6th, which may certainly be questioned as this would have entailed disregarding the full moon, which had determined the time of Passover since it was instituted under Moses.

This, plus the fact that the sect of Montanists was heretical, makes it difficult to accept the argument that a widely kept date like January 6th could have originated from such a source. To the contrary, that January 6th had significance early on from sources unconnected with Montanist solar Quartodecimanism is clear from Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), who reports that the followers of Basilides kept the Egyptian date Tybi 11th (= January 6th) as the date of Christ's baptism (*Strom.* 1.21). The association of January 6th with the nativity of Christ derives, in turn, from a misreading of Luke 3:23, which was thought to teach that Jesus turned thirty on the very day of his baptism—a fact Talley acknowledges elsewhere.[13] In addition to Christ's nativity and baptism, Epiphanius (AD 315–403) reports that the arrival of the magi and the water miracle at Cana were also assigned to January 6th—none of which can fairly be said to derive from calculations based on an April 6th Pasch (*Pan.* 2.22.12, 17; 29.7–30.2). Thus Talley's lead argument comes up considerably short of proof.

However, that we are not dealing with the notion of integral age in the chronologies of the patristic writers is apparent from the fact that they do not use the two-point approach of birth and death, but a three-point approach, which adds the annunciation and conception, and often substitutes the resurrection in place of the passion. Where we would expect a December 25th birth and death, instead we have a March 25th conception, December 25th birth, and a March 25th death. This shift from a two-point to three-point approach has never been explained by advocates of the Calculation Theory. How can it be argued that we are dealing with the rabbinic fiction of integral age when the patristic writers do not adhere to its two-point approach, and, indeed, never articulate the concept at all? A better explanation for the March 25th–December 25th–March 25th triad in patristic chronologies is that they are driven, not by the concept of integral age or calculations based upon the date of Christ's death, but tradition regarding the date of Christ's birth, confusion regarding the year of his death, and symbolic associations between salvation history and the increase/decrease of light connected with solstices and equinoxes.

1. *Symbolic association and use of solstices and equinoxes by patristic writers.* The symbolic importance of the solstices and equinoxes to the early Fathers is seen in the fact that they uniformly attempt to make the various events of salvation history, including the first day of creation and the passion and resurrection of Christ, correspond with these astronomical events. Since in the mind of the early Fathers God would have divided light from darkness perfectly, which for them meant *equally,* they cause the first day of creation to coincide with the vernal equinox, where day and night are equal. And because they mark the new creation and triumph of light

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[13] Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* 119.

and life over darkness and death, the Fathers also assign Jesus' passion and resurrection to the equinox.

Julius Africanus (AD 160–240) is credited as the earliest Christian chronographer. Although his *Chronographiae* is now lost, fragments have come down to us culled from the manuscripts of later chronographers. Evidence from fragments and the statements of later writers indicate that Africanus believed the first day of creation was Sunday, March 22nd, which day he characterized as "intelligible" to distinguish it from the fourth day, when the sun and celestial bodies were made or arranged, which Africanus equated with March 25th, the vernal equinox in the Roman calendar. Africanus also equated March 25th with Passover day, the fifteenth day and full moon of the first lunar month. This is the date Africanus assigned for Jesus' resurrection.

According to Africanus, Jesus died in the 5531st year from Adam (AD 31), but rose again the 5532nd year upon the ostensible basis that March 25th marked the commencement of a new year.[14] Leading scholars in the field also believe that Africanus assigned Jesus' conception and incarnation to March 25th, and therefore should be numbered among those who date the nativity of Christ to December 25th nine months later.[15] Thus, with Africanus, we have the March 25th–December 25th–March 25th triad, marking the conception, birth, and resurrection of Christ.

Note, however, that in order to place the resurrection on Nisan 15, Africanus must place the passion two days *prior* to the equinox. Yet, according to Jewish custom the earliest Passover can occur is the first full moon *on or after* the vernal equi-

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[14] Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae*, *The Extant Fragments* (ed. Martin Wallraff; trans. William Adler; New York: de Gruyter, 2007) 23, 25, 277, 289; Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origins of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 328–29, 419–21. Following Africanus, it became standard for the works of creation and redemption to correspond one with another, as seen in the so-called *Acta synodi*, or *Acts of the Council of Caesarea,* attributed by Bede and Hospinian to Theophilus of Caesarea, though deemed pseudepigraphical by modern scholars: "'Therefore, how do we find the world was made?' They responded: 'On the Lord's day, in spring time, at the equinox, that is, March 25, and the full moon.' The bishops said: 'Just as in the beginning the world was created, at precisely the same time it was redeemed from sin by the Lord's resurrection: For our Lord Jesus Christ rose again on the Lord's day, in spring time, at the equinox, on the full moon'" (translation mine). Cf. Bede, *De temporum ratione* 242; Rudolph Hospinian, *De festis Christianorum* (Geneva: Samuelis de Tournes, 1674) 168–69; Bruno Krusch, *Studien zur christlich-mittelalterlichen Chronologie: Der 84jährige Ostercyclus und seine Quellen* (Leipzig: von Veit, 1880) 303–10.

[15] Paul de Lagarde, "Altes und Neues über das Weihnachtsfest," in *Mittheilungen* (Goettingen: Dieterich, 1889) 316–17; Venance Grumel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958) 22–24. Gregory Thaumaturgus (AD 205–265), a contemporary of Africanus, also places the annunciation at Passover: "'And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house and lineage of David; and the virgin's name was Mary'; and so forth. And this was the first month to the holy Virgin. Even as Scripture says in the book of the law: 'This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month among the months of the year to you.' 'Keep ye the feast of the holy Passover to the Lord in all your generations.' It was also the sixth month to Zacharias" ("Second Homily on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885; repr., Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886] 6.63).

nox.[16] How Africanus was able to place the passion before the equinox without completely fictionalizing his account, we learn from Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis (AD 320–403). By blending a so-called Johannine chronology, in which the Last Supper seems to *precede* Passover, with the Synoptic Gospels, in which Jesus *eats* the Passover with his disciples the night before his crucifixion, Epiphanius is able to place the resurrection on the night of the equinox, arguing that the Jews ate Passover two days early based upon an intercalation of the calendar:

> Jesus suffered on the thirteenth before the Kalends of April, the Jews meanwhile having skipped one evening, that is, at midnight on the fourteenth of the month. For the Jews came ahead of time and ate the Passover, as the Gospel says and I have often remarked. They thus ate the Passover two days before its proper eating. … The dawning of the Lord's day was the end of the nighttime of the fifteenth of the month. That was the illumination of hades, earth and heaven, and the time of the equality [of] the night and day reckoned both because of the Jewish fifteenth of the month and because of the course of the sun; for the resurrection and the equinox came at midnight on the eleventh before the Kalends of April.[17]

Epiphanius associates eleven Kalends before April (the night of March 21st/22nd) with the equinox, because by his time the Council of Nicaea had adjusted the error in the Julian calendar that caused it to lose one day in one hundred twenty-eight years, necessitating relocation of the equinox from March 25th to March 21st. Thus, although he uses different dates, Epiphanius follows the chronology of Africanus as determined by astronomical points of the year, setting the resurrection at the equinox.[18] Like Africanus, Hippolytus (AD 170–235) sets creation on March 25th.[19] Hippolytus sets Christ's death on Nisan 14, the night the Passover lamb was slain, saying he did not eat, but suffered the Passover.[20] Christ's birth Hippolytus sets on December 25th, as appears from his *Chronicon*:

> From Adam until the transmigration into Babylon under Jeconiah, 57 generations, 4,842 years, 9 months. And after the transmigration into Babylon until the generation of Christ, there was 14 generations, 660 years.[21]

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[16] Josephus, *Ant.* 3.248; Philo, *Spec.* 2.27–28; cf. "The Canons of Anatolius on the Pascha," in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 7.32.

[17] Epiphanius, *Pan.* 26.1–4 [Williams]; cf. 27:4. Cf. Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae* 277: "For the Hebrews celebrate Passover on Luna 14, and what happened to the Savior occurred one day before the Passover."

[18] Jewish confusion of the calendar following the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 resulting in Passover sometimes occurring before the vernal equinox is attested by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria ("Fragments from the Writings of Peter" 5.1–6 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885; repr., Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886] 6.280–82). Thus Africanus's and Epiphanius's assertion that the Jews took Passover two days early in the time of Christ may reflect conditions prevailing among the Jews in their time.

[19] Susan Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* 87.

[20] Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* 9, 10

[21] Hippolytus, *Chronicon* 686–688 (trans. Thomas C. Schmidt, to whom I am also indebted for calling attention to the December 25th birth of Christ implicit in this passage).

Fifty-five hundred two years and nine months[22] from creation March 25th places the birth of Christ on December 25th.

Thus, again we have the March 25th–December 25th–March 25th triad. In all these and other cases it is the equinoxes and solstices that figure in the chronologies, not rabbinic notions of "integral age." In addition to the astronomical points of the year, confusion and uncertainty among the early fathers regarding the year of Jesus' death was a contributing factor to the triad. Had the fathers clearly understood that Jesus died in AD 33, the fiction that he died March 25th could never have grown up. For the years AD 29 through 33, Passover occurred as follows:

Table No. 1
Dates of Passover (Hillel II's Calendar)

Passover AD 29	Passover AD 30	Passover AD 31	Passover AD 32	Passover AD 33
April 14	April 3	March 24	April 12	April 1

From the table above, we see that in AD 31 Passover occurred on March 24th. However, the Hebrew calendar was reformed in the fourth century by Hillel II and contains elements not present in Jesus' day. Hillel II's reforms feature postponement of Rosh Hashanah (Tishri 1, the Jewish New Year) to keep it and other feast days from falling on or next to the Sabbath to prevent consecutive days of forced rest. To accomplish this, Rosh Hashanah is made to occur only on set days and the length of the year adjusted accordingly between 353, 354, and 355 days in regular years, and 383, 384, and 385 days in leap years. Because these postponements did not exist in Jesus' day, the present-day Hebrew calendar is not a totally reliable guide to ancient dates. For example, Jewish tradition dating 80 years from the event tells us that the 9th of Ab fell on a Sunday in AD 70, when the temple was destroyed by the Romans (*b. Taan.* 4; *S. Olam* 30.86–97). However, Hillel II's calendar causes this day to fall on a Saturday, one day off. Scripture indicates Jesus died on Good Friday, Nisan 15, AD 33, but Hillel II's calendar places Nisan 15 on a Saturday, again one day off. Thus, there is good reason to believe Hillel II's calendar is wrong for AD 31, and that the correct date of Passover was March 25th as affirmed by patristic writers, who mistook this for the date of Jesus' death based upon the "short" chronology of Jesus' life (one year and several months public ministry based upon a misreading of the synoptic gospels), giving rise to the March 25th–December 25th–March 25th triad.[23]

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[22] 4842 years, 9 months + 660 years = 5502 years, 9 months.

[23] Tertullian places Christ's death on March 25th in the consulate of *Geminio et Geminio*, which the tables of consuls we presently possess give as AD 29. But as Passover that year fell on April 14th, this is plainly wrong. Epiphanius places Christ's death in the eighteenth year of Tiberius (AD 32); he assigns the consulate of *Geminio et Geminio* to the preceding year, AD 31. As this is the only year in the range of Christ's ministry in which Passover fell on or near March 25th, this is manifestly the year Tertullian, Africanus, and other fathers had in mind (Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 8; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 22.24.1–25.8). Other early writers who followed the "short" chronology include Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 1.21) and Origen (*Princ.* 4.5). Since the "short" chronology of Jesus' ministry places his crucifixion on March 25th,

2. *Astronomical phenomena and the conceptions and nativities of John the Baptist and Christ.* Appeal to astronomical phenomena was not a form of solar syncretism as advocates of the History of Religions Theory argue. The prophets symbolically associated the coming of Christ with natural phenomenon involving the increase of light. Malachi called Christ the "Sun of righteousness" (Mal 4:2); Luke called him the "Dayspring from on high" (Luke 1:78); Jesus referred to himself as the "bright and morning star" (Rev 22:16); others have found allusion to Christ's resurrection in the Psalmist's characterization of the sun as "bridegroom coming out of his chamber" (Ps 19:5). Taking their lead from these sources, the patristic writers applied events in salvation history to astronomical points in the calendar based upon assumptions about how things should have come about, often quite in opposition to how they actually did.

However, they did not act purely arbitrarily or deliberately fictionalize their accounts. Rather, they were probably driven by the tradition of Christ's birth at the winter solstice December 25th, which would naturally place his conception on or near the vernal equinox. Believing the passion/resurrection occurred on the vernal equinox, the temptation to place the conception *exactly* on the equinox to achieve a type of symbolic symmetry simply proved too great. Add to this that John the Baptist was six months older than Christ, placing his conception near the autumnal equinox and his birth at or near the summer solstice (both marking the decrease of light),[24] and the paradigm was complete: all four points in the astronomical year were represented. It was only a matter of time before these things found their way into the chronologies of early writers, not for the approximations they almost certainly were, but as dogmatic statements of fact they believed testified to the wisdom and providence of God. This is evidenced by the fourth century tractate *De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri Iesu Christi et Iohannis Baptiste,* or more briefly *De solstitiis.*

The argument of *De solstitiis* is anchored to the conception of John the Baptist, which is affirmed to have occurred at the time of the autumnal equinox, when Zachariah was fulfilling his priestly duties during the feast of Tabernacles in the month of Tishri. Since Elizabeth was in the sixth month of gestation at the time of the annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:36), the conception of Christ would have been at the vernal equinox, and his birth nine months later at the winter solstice. *De solstitiis* comments regarding the conception and passion of Christ on the same day as follows:

AD 31, and since Gregory Thaumaturgus (note 15 above) was Origen's student and placed the conception of Christ at Passover, which he almost certainly equated with March 25th, it is probable that the March 25th–December 25th–March 25th triad was established in the church by this time, a hundred years before the *Chronography* of AD 354.

[24] Augustine found poetic allusion to Christ's and the Baptist's births at the respective solstices in John's statement, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Augustine, *Sermon 194.*

> Therefore, our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the calends of April in the month of March, which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on the day that he was conceived on the same he suffered.[25]

Talley believes the above comment validates the Calculation Theory; however, it does not. *De solstitiis* notes the *coincidence* between the asserted date of Christ's conception and that of his passion, yes. However, the nativity is not reckoned from the passion in *De solstitiis*; it is derived from the date of John the Baptist's conception. The argument in *De solstitiis* is framed around the astronomical points of the year as the title suggests, not rabbinic notions of integral age. There is no evidence that patristic writers subscribed to the notion of integral age, or based their chronologies upon it.

Neither the History of Religions nor Calculation theories can give an adequate account for the origin of the Christmas date; both face serious obstacles in moving their respective positions from historical theory to historical fact. As a matter of logic, if the origin of the date cannot be shown to derive from other sources, then its reception by tradition as attested by patristic writers cannot be ruled out.[26] We propose with Engberding[27] instead that first the birthdate of December 25th came into being and was widely accepted, and then the artificial construct based on March 25th was erected around it. In the space that remains, we will investigate original evidence tending to authenticate Christ's December 25th birth.

IV. THE PRESENTMENT OF THE CHRIST-CHILD AND THE CHRONOLOGY OF HEROD'S FINAL ILLNESS

1. *The magi arrived after the presentment of the Christ-child.* Our primary sources for events surrounding Christ's birth are the Gospels. The law imposed a forty-day period of ritual impurity upon women following birth of a male child, and required a sacrifice in token of their purification at the period's end (Lev 12:2–6). Moreover, firstborn sons were to be redeemed in token of God's deliverance when he slew the firstborn in Egypt (Exod 13:3, 13; Num 3:46–47). These time factors figure into the chronology of Christ's birth: Luke tells us that following Mary's forty-day period of ritual impurity, the holy family went to Jerusalem, where the required sacrifices were made for Mary and her firstborn son, then returned home to Nazareth (Luke 2:39).

Turning to Matthew's Gospel, we find that after Jesus was born, magi came to Jerusalem from the east, asking, "Where is he who is born king of the Jews?" (Matt 2:1–2). Word of this reached Herod, who called together the chief priests and scribes to ascertain where Christ would be born. Herod then called the magi, and inquired when the star they had seen in the east first appeared. Herod then sent them to Bethlehem, asking the magi to bring him word when they had found the

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[25] For an edition of *De solstitia et aequinoctia*, see the appendix to Bernard Botte, *Les origines de la Noël et de l'Épiphanie* 88–105.

[26] Augustine, *Sermon* 202; St. Jerome, *Homily 88: On the Nativity of Christ*.

[27] See note 12 above.

Christ-child so he could worship him also (Matt 2:4–8). Matthew reports that when the magi departed, the star they had seen in the east went before them till it came and stood over where the child was (Matt 2:9). Popular assumption has it that the magi found the holy family at Bethlehem. However, Bethlehem is only about ten miles from Jerusalem. Since the magi hardly required the star to find Bethlehem and Herod had directed them there in any event, the better view is that the star was interposed by heaven to lead the magi to where the Christ-child had relocated; *viz.* Nazareth, about seventy miles north, where Luke tells us the holy family returned following the customary sacrifices at the temple. This may be alluded to by Matthew, when he says that the magi entered "the house," not "an inn" as we would expect if they were still in Bethlehem, but "the house," *viz. the family home* (Matt 2:11).

That the magi found the holy family in Nazareth is confirmed by the flight to Egypt. Matthew informs us that after presenting their gifts, the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and that they therefore departed home another way (Matt 2:11–12). Joseph, being warned in a dream that Herod would seek the child to destroy it, rose by night and fled to Egypt, where the holy family remained until Herod's death (Matt 2:12–15). However, when Joseph heard that Archelaus reigned in Judea in place of his father Herod, he "was afraid to go there," and being warned in a dream, "turned aside" into Galilee, avoiding Judea entirely (Matt 2:22).

Taking the accounts of Matthew and Luke together, there are only two times when the presentment of the Christ-child could have occurred: either before the flight to Egypt or following the family's return from exile. Since Matthew makes clear that Joseph bypassed Judea upon return from Egypt, the presentment of the Christ-child could not have occurred then. Therefore, it could only have occurred *before* the flight to Egypt, which means that the magi almost certainly found the holy family in Nazareth forty-odd days following the child's birth and that the flight to Egypt originated from there, not Bethlehem as so often assumed. So Methodius (AD 260–312):

> Therefore the prophet brought the virgin from Nazareth, in order that she might give birth at Bethlehem to her salvation-bringing child, and brought her back again to Nazareth, in order to make manifest to the world the hope of life. Hence it was that the ark of God removed from the inn at Bethlehem, for there He paid to the law that debt of the forty days, due not to justice but to grace. … The holy mother goes up to the temple to exhibit to the law a new and strange wonder, even that child long expected.[28]

2. *The magi arrived before Herod departed from Jerusalem for the mineral springs at Callirrhoe.* By the time the magi arrived, Herod would have been in the final weeks

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[28] Methodius, "Oration Concerning Simeon and Anna," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885; repr., Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886) 6.385. Epiphanius is in accord: "He was born in Bethlehem, circumcised in the cavern, presented in Jerusalem, embraced by Simeon, openly confessed by Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, and taken away to Nazareth" ("De Incarnatione," in *Pan.* 1.4 [Williams]).

and months of his life. Antipater, Herod's son by Doris, had been tried for treason before Quintilius Varus, who succeeded Saturninus as president of Syria. It was most likely under the presidency of Saturninus that the registration, which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, had occurred.[29] But with the new year came the new administration of Varus. Condemned, Antipater was held in the palace prison at Jericho, and Herod sent letters and ambassadors to Augustus Caesar to accuse Antipater and learn Caesar's pleasure concerning his son (*Ant.* 17.83–145). However, the trial and revelations about his son were apparently too much for Herod, who now fell gravely ill. This was the seventieth year of his life; despairing of recovery, Herod amended his will, temporarily settling the kingdom upon his youngest son, Herod Antipater. Hated by the Jews until the bitter end, sedition now broke out.

Herod had placed a large Roman eagle above the gate of the temple, which the Jews considered an affront to their nation and religion. Taking the opportunity of Herod's impending death, several prominent rabbis moved the young men to cut the eagle down. When rumor came that Herod was dead, the young men assaulted the temple and eagle in broad daylight. However, soldiers came upon them suddenly, capturing many of them. Herod then had the young men and rabbis sent to Jericho, where the leaders were burned alive. Josephus reports that the night of the rabbis' execution there was an eclipse of the moon (*Ant.* 17.146–167). This lunar eclipse is important for dating Herod's death. For many years, it was supposed to be the partial lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 BC. But this has been challenged in recent years, and the weight of current scholarship now agrees that it was the full lunar eclipse of January 10, 1 BC.[30]

Herod's final illness now grew worse; he thus travelled beyond the Jordan River to bathe in the mineral springs at Callirrhoe. However, when this failed to improve his health, Herod returned to Jericho, dying shortly thereafter, never to return to Jerusalem again (*Ant.* 17.168–179). Matthew tells us that Herod was still at Jerusalem when the magi arrived (Matt 2:1). Therefore, the magi had to arrive *before* Herod left Jerusalem for the mineral springs beyond the Jordan, probably sometime after the rabbis' execution, toward the middle of February, 1 BC.

3. *The slaughter of the innocents and the execution of Antipater.* Matthew says that when Herod realized the magi were not going to return, he ordered the slaughter of all male children two years old and under in Bethlehem and the neighboring towns (Matt 2:16–18). Although Mark and Luke do not mention the slaughter of the innocents, John alludes to it in the Apocalypse (Rev 12:1–4), and thus becomes a witness to the verity of Matthew's record. The witness of Matthew and John is also

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[29] Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.19.19; cf. Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 1.34.46; *Dial.* 78. See also Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 302–6; F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882) 62–64.

[30] W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *JTS* 17 (1966) 283–98; Earnest L. Martin, "The Nativity and Herod's Death," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989) 85–92; idem, *The Star that Astonished the World* (2d ed.; Portland: ASK, 1996) 119–55; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 298–301; Andrew E. Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?," *NovT* 51 (2009) 1–29.

corroborated by a pagan writer named Macrobius. Macrobius wrote an encyclopedic account of Roman culture entitled the *Saturnalia,* in which he records the legends and lore of the holidays marking the Roman calendar. In book two, Macrobius records some of the witty sayings of Augustus Caesar and there reports:

> On hearing that the son of Herod, king of the Jews, had been slain when Herod ordered that all boys in Syria under the age of two be killed, Augustus said, "It's better to be Herod's pig than his son."[31]

Macrobius' report is sometimes read to include Antipater among those who perished in the slaughter of the innocents, which obviously would be incorrect. However, Macrobius probably only intended to indicate that Antipater was executed at the *same time* the slaughter of the innocents was being carried out, not that he died with or among them. We need not enter into a discussion which is correct, for by either reading the death of Antipater and slaughter of the innocents were contemporaneous events. The timing of Antipater's death therefore allows us to establish the time of the slaughter of the innocents and the approximate time the magi arrived. Herod outlived the death of Antipater by only five days, dying shortly before Passover (April 8), 1 BC (*Ant.* 17.188–192). Hence, the slaughter of Bethlehem's innocents, like the death of Antipater, would have been one of Herod's last acts, the magi arriving a few weeks before.

We know the magi arrived *after* the presentment of the Christ-child at the temple forty days following Jesus' birth, but *before* Herod left Jerusalem and travelled to the mineral springs at Callirrhoe. Therefore, assuming there was no extended period between the return to Nazareth and the arrival of the magi, and the arrival the magi and Herod's departure from Jerusalem, we should be able to reckon backward from Passover following Herod's death to his departure from Jerusalem, and from there to find the approximate time of the nativity. Here are the events recorded by Josephus following the eclipse of January 10th until Herod's death just before Passover, 1 BC, and the approximate time for their accomplishment as given by Andrew Steinmann:[32]

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[31] Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.11 (Kaster, LCL). The credibility of Macrobius's report was recently defended: "It seems relatively implausible that Macrobius, who held a very high position in one imperial administration—perhaps even praetorian prefect of Italy—should simply have fabricated memorable sayings that were then subsequently ascribed to those of an earlier imperial administration" (Barry J. Beitzel, "Herod the Great: Another Snapshot of His Treachery?," *JETS* 57 [2014] 309–22).

[32] Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?" 15–16.

Table 2. Chronology of Herod's Final Illness and Death

Event	Days Elapsed	Total Minimum Days Elapsed
Herod's physicians tried many remedies	1 day minimum (more likely 2–3 weeks)	1 (more likely 14–21)
Travel from Jericho to Callirrhoe (about 50 miles)	3 days minimum	4
Treatment at Callirrhoe	1 day minimum (more likely 1 week or more)	5 (more likely 11 or more)
Return to Jericho	5 days minimum	8
The Jewish elders throughout Herod's realm are summoned	6 days minimum	14
Herod receives permission to execute Antipater and has him executed	1 day minimum	15
Herod's death five days later	5 days	20
Funeral arrangements and funeral	5 days minimum	25
Seven days of mourning	7 days	32
Feast in Herod's honor	1 day	33
Archelaus' initial governance	7 days	40
The Passover	1 day	41 (more likely 62)

Steinmann mistakenly has Herod depart from Jericho for Callirrhoe, when in fact it is clear that Herod was at Jerusalem when the rabbis were executed. Josephus expressly states that Herod "sent the rabbis to Jericho," showing Herod was still at Jerusalem (*Ant.* 17.160). The assumption Herod was at Jericho is based upon a misreading of Josephus where he says that, when the treatment at Callirrhoe failed, Herod *returned* to Jericho. But this merely refers to Herod's passing through Jericho on the way to Callirrhoe, and does not indicate Herod originally set out from there. A second mistake Steinmann makes is that he places Passover in 1 BC on April 11th, when in fact Passover was on April 8th. According to Finegan: "If the death of Herod was in 1 B.C. … the relevant eclipse of the moon was a total eclipse on the night of Jan 9/10, and the full paschal moon of Nisan 14 was on Apr 8, twelve and a half weeks later."[33] April 11th was the date of Passover in 4 BC, which Steinmann was arguing against; he thus appears to have carried it over to 1 BC from there.

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[33] Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 299.

Otherwise accepting Steinmann's numbers as good approximations, let us say that forty-one days was the minimum period from the point where Herod's illness worsened until Passover, but sixty-two days is more likely. Using this latter figure, we find that sixty-two days from Passover, April 8th, brings us to February 5th. This would be the point at which Herod's final illness ostensibly worsened before departing Jerusalem for Callirrhoe. If we then reckon backward three days (the period needed for the holy family to travel from Jerusalem to Nazareth) we arrive at February 2nd, the traditional date of the presentation of Christ at the temple. If we reckon backward forty days more (the period of ritual impurity before the presentation of Christ at the temple) we arrive exactly at December 25th, the traditional date of Christ's birth.

It must be acknowledged that Steinmann's estimate of sixty-two days is extremely fortuitous: It brings us exactly to December 25th with no gaps between the events associated with the birth of Christ and death of Herod. However, although the result would not have worked out quite as conveniently, another number would hardly be fatal. Nothing requires that the events associated with the nativity be immediately adjacent to one another. In fact, nothing could be more natural and expected than for brief intervals to come between them. By allowing a short time between the holy family's return home, the arrival of the magi, and the worsening of Herod's final illness, the nativity will still fall on or near December 25th even if we use the minimum number of days Steinmann proposed.

4. *Estimates of other scholars.* Steinmann is not the only writer to estimate the time needed to complete the events described by Josephus between the eclipse preceding and Passover following Herod's death. Barns, defending the view that Herod died in 4 BC, thought the twenty-nine days between the eclipse of March 14, 4 BC, and Passover, April 11th, that year was too short, and thus opted for the eclipse of September 15, 5 BC. However, this creates far too much space (seven months) and, other than Bernegger, no one has followed him. Maier, on the other hand, rejecting Barns's suggestion, felt that the twenty-nine days was adequate.

Martin, who argues for the 1 BC death of Herod, originally gave fifty-four days as necessary for the events, but later expanded this to a minimum of ten weeks, though he preferred nearer to twelve. These longer periods are based largely upon Martin's interpretation of Herod's funeral procession, which he believed marched eight furlongs (one Roman mile) a day, for twenty-five days, from Jericho to Herodium where Herod was buried. The actual language of Josephus is "So they went eight furlongs to Herodium; for there, by his own command, he was to be buried" (*Ant.* 17.199 [Whiston]). The better view, however, is that the entourage *assembled* eight furlongs from Herodium, where it then proceeded ceremoniously on foot the remaining mile to the final resting place of Herod, not that they marched a mile a day for twenty-five days. We will therefore assign seventy days (ten weeks) to Martin, rather than the full twelve weeks he prefers.

Finegan agrees that twenty-nine days is too short for the events described, but does not state the minimum he felt would be necessary. However, as Steinman and Martin have each provided two numbers, we will include these to help us obtain an

average. Excluding Barns who is virtually alone in placing the eclipse on September 15, 5 BC, we get the following results:[34]

Table 3. Estimated Length of Herod's Final Illness until Passover

Maier	29 days
Martin	54 days
Martin	70 days
Steinmann	41 days
Steinmann	62 days
Total	256 days
Average	51.2 days

The average of fifty-one days suggests Steinmann's estimate of sixty-two days is quite sound. The shortest (twenty-nine days from Passover) would bring us to March 10th; this compresses the final illness of Herod into an implausibly narrow space, but leaves December 25th reasonably within reach. The longest (seventy days) would make January 29th the point at which Herod's final illness ostensibly grew worse. If we allow a week during which his physicians treated him before quitting Jerusalem for Callirrhoe, this would bring us to February 4th, two days after the traditional date of the presentment of the Christ-child at the temple and the holy family's return home—again leaving our general chronology intact. Thus, whether we adopt Steinmann's estimate or one of the others, the December 25th birth of Christ is clearly plausible, if not probable.

Table 4. Chronology of Christ's Birth and Death of Herod the Great

Birth of Christ – Presentment at temple – Return to Nazareth	43 days
Arrival of Magi – Herod travels to Callirrhoe – Death – Passover	62 days
Total	105 days
Passover (April 8) 1 BC > 105 days > Dec. 25th, 2 BC	

5. *No gaps in the chronology.* The basic assumption underlying our chronology is that the events described were closely connected, so that laying them end to end we can measure the span they bridge, reckoning backward from Passover, 1 BC, to

[34] Timothy D. Barns, "The Date of Herod's Death," *JTS* 19 (1968) 204–9; Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Pasadena: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980) 29–33; idem, *Star That Astonished the World* 124–137; P. M. Bernegger, "Affirmation of Herod's Death," *JTS* 34 (1983) 526–31; Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos* 113–30; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 300.

discover the time of Christ's birth. There are two periods involved. The period from Herod's final illness until his death and burial just before Passover 1 BC has been provided by Steinmann, whose results we have adopted. Similarly, Luke has told us the time involved between Christ's birth and the return of the holy family to Nazareth. The question here is the relative continuity between the two periods. How can we know many months did not elapse between them? We have assumed that the time of Christ's birth can be established by reckoning backward from Passover following Herod's death. Can the time of Christ's birth and relative continuity of events be demonstrated by other means? We believe they can.

a. *The chronology of Jesus' baptism and first disciples.* The chronology of Jesus' baptism and first disciples confirms that his birthday occurred in late fall to early winter, precisely as predicted by the chronology of the presentment of the Christ-child and Herod's final illness. Luke tells us that Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday when baptized by John in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21, 23). Therefore, identifying the time of Jesus' baptism will help identify the time and season of his birth. This in turn will allow us to determine its proximity to the events of Herod's final illness. Although most patristic writers do not provide a date for Jesus' baptism, one exception is Epiphanius, who gives it as November 8th (*Pan.,* 51.16.1; 24.4). Unfortunately, Epiphanius does not tell us how he arrived at this date. However, based upon the generally accepted three-and-a-half-year (forty-two lunar month) ministry, beginning with Jesus' baptism and ending with his crucifixion Nisan 15, AD 33,[35] and allowing for one thirteen-month leap year in AD 32, Jesus would have been baptized Heshvan 15, AD 29, which corresponded that year with November 8th, the date given by Epiphanius.[36] Finegan is in accord. After surveying climatic, religious, and other factors, Finegan agrees Christ would have been baptized in the autumn: "There is every reason to believe Jesus was baptized and began his public ministry in the fall of A.D. 29."[37]

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[35] Jesus' three-and-one-half-year ministry is attested by the succession of feasts recorded in the Gospel of John (John 2:13, 23; 4:35; 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22; 11:55, spanning four Passovers). "Since the baptism and beginning of the public ministry preceded the first Passover in the outline, with the baptism perhaps coming in the preceding fall, it seems that a total ministry of three years plus a number of months is indicated" (Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 352). It is also attested by Daniel's statement that Messiah would be "cut off" (crucified), causing the legal termination of the temple ritual in the "midst" of the final prophetic week (Dan 9:26, 27; cf. Isa 53:8): "On the ordinary Christian interpretation, this applies to the crucifixion of our Lord, which took place, according to the received calculation, during the fourth year after his baptism by John, and the consequent opening of his ministry" (J. E. H. Thomson, "Daniel," in *The Pulpit Commentary* [ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell; 1909–1919; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1980] 13.275). See also Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 10.

[36] Epiphanius equates November 8th the year of Jesus' baptism with Heshvan 7, but there is no year in the possible range of Jesus' ministry where this was true, nor is it clear how he arrived at it. For the years AD 27–32, Hillel II's calendar gives November 8th as follows: AD 27 = Heshvan 22; AD 28 = Cesleu 4; AD 29 = Heshvan 15; AD 30 = Heshvan 26; AD 31 = Cesleu 6; AD 32 = Heshvan 17.

[37] Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 342.

Table 5
42 Lunar Months Comprising 3 1/2 years between Christ's
Baptism and Crucifixion

Nisan 15, AD 33 (Crucifixion) Adar, Shevat, Tebet, Cesleu, Heshvan, Tishri, Elul, Ab, Tammuz, Sivan, Jyar	Nisan 15, AD 32 Adar II, (leap year) Adar, Shevat, Tebet, Cesleu, Heshvan, Tishri, Elul, Ab, Tammuz, Sivan, Jyar	Nisan 15, AD 31 Adar, Shevat, Tebet, Cesleu, Heshvan, Tishri, Elul, Ab, Tammuz, Sivan, Jyar	Nisan 15, AD 30 Adar, Shevat, Tebet, Cesleu, Heshvan 15 (Nov. 8), AD 29 (Baptism)

The formula for determining leap years is to multiply the Jewish year from creation × 235 (number of lunations equal to 19 solar years, the time in which lunar and solar years are synchronized), subtract 234, and divide by 19. If the remainder is larger than 12, it is a leap year, if less, it is a regular year. For the year AD 32 the formula is $3792 \times 235 = 891120 - 234 = 890886 \div 19 = 46888.73684$. $.73684 \times 19 = R14$. Thus, AD 32 was a leap year.

The AD 29 baptism of Christ is confirmed by Luke, who tells us it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius when Jesus was baptized (Luke 3:1, 21). Roman emperors dated their reigns by calendar years or from January 1st to December 31st following their accession. Augustus died August 19, AD 14. The fifteenth regnal year of Tiberius would therefore have been January 1st–December 31st, AD 29.[38] A survey of the early Fathers shows that most placed the nativity in the year 2 BC.[39] A person born in 2 BC will turn thirty years old by December 31st, AD 29. Luke's statement that Jesus was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday when baptized in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (Luke 3:1, 23) therefore also points to a 2 BC birth. Assuming, therefore, Jesus was baptized November 8th, AD 29 (the only date simple chronological reconstruction will produce), there would have been only *fifty-three* days remaining to the year in which Jesus' thirtieth birthday would have occurred. This without more means that a late fall/early winter nativity is already a distinct possibility.

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[38] Ibid. 340–41. Daniel's 69 prophetic weeks (483 years) until the appearance of the Messiah at his baptism (Dan 9:25), counted from Artexerxes Longimanus's decree on behalf of Nehemiah in 454 BC, also brings us to AD 29 (483 – 454 = 29). Cf. James Ussher, *Annals of the World* (rev. ed.; Green Forest, AR; Master Books, 2003) §§1177, 1228.

[39] Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 284–89.

The reason Luke reports Jesus' age at his baptism is because Jewish custom required men to attain thirty years of age before undertaking active public teaching. Following his baptism and in preparation for his ministry, Jesus undertook a forty-day fast. This was followed by a period of temptation of unstated length (Luke 4:1–13). Since preaching was Jesus' life-work, it seems safe to assume he would not have interposed an unnecessary barrier to beginning his public ministry by a protracted period of fasting and temptation following his thirtieth birthday. The better view, therefore, is that Jesus' fast and temptation were timed to conclude on or before his thirtieth birthday, so that he could begin preaching immediately upon attaining thirty years of age. November 8th plus forty days brings us to December 18th. The events comprising the temptation of Christ—to turn stones to bread, to travel to a high mountain where he was tempted with the kingdoms of the world, then to Jerusalem and a pinnacle of the temple—may well have fulfilled a week, bringing us to December 25th, though this is unclear.

However, Luke does tell us that following his fast and temptation, Jesus began preaching and teaching, showing that he was now in fact thirty years old (Luke 4:14). After his fast and temptation, Jesus returned to John at Bethabara, where he made disciples of Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Bartholomew (Nathaniel) (John 1:28–51). Philip calls Jesus "rabbi," demonstrating again that he is now of age to make disciples. In the words of Irenaeus:

> For how could he have had disciples, if He did not teach? And how could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed thirty years of age (for thus Luke, who has mentioned His years, has expressed it: "Now Jesus was, as it were, beginning to be thirty years old," when He came to be baptized).[40]

b. *The miracle at Cana.* A close reading of John reveals that seven days were fulfilled between Jesus' return to Bethabara and the wedding at Cana (John 1:26, 29, 35, 43 [four days] plus John 2:1 [three days] = seven days). As we have seen, the wedding at Cana was traditionally marked by Epiphany, January 6th. Other events associated with Epiphany include the nativity, arrival of the magi, and Christ's baptism. The fact that so many events came to be associated with Epiphany suggests that, although the date and general meaning of the feast was fixed early on in the mind and memory of the church, the actual event commemorated was somehow lost, the different events put forward thus representing attempts to recover its original meaning. Surveying the possibilities, January 6th will not work for the nativity because the 2 BC birth indicated by Luke requires that Jesus have turned thirty after his fall baptism, but before December 31st, AD 29. Thus January 6th is too late. It will not work for Christ's baptism either, as this would be too long for a three-and-a-half year ministry beginning January 6th, AD 29, and too short if baptized January 6th, AD 30. Nor will the arrival of the magi fit chronologically. As we have seen, the flight to Egypt occurred after the presentment of the Christ-child at the

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[40] Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.4.5 [Roberts, *ANF*].

temple. If the magi arrived January 6th, Christ would have to have been born no later than November 27th forty days before. Although this does not contradict Luke and a November 8th baptism, it is a date for which we have no historical basis, and which would place Christ's birthday in the middle of his wilderness fast, a scenario that seems implausible. However, the miracle at Cana works perfectly. It was at this wedding that Christ performed his first miracle, turning water into wine, and "manifested" his glory to his disciples (John 2:11; cf. 1 Tim 3:16). The term used by John is from the Greek *phaneroō*, which is related to the word "epiphany." Thus, the account of the miracle at Cana not only fits chronologically, but describes the event as a "manifestation," or an "epiphany."

Seven days prior to January 6th is December 31st, the day Jesus ostensibly returned to John at Bethabara having already turned thirty. Following the wedding at Cana, Jesus, his disciples, and his mother and brethren moved to Capernaum where they remained "not many days" (John 2:12). This was followed by the first Passover (April 3rd) of Jesus' ministry (John 2:13–25). Naturally, the historical accuracy of January 6th for the date of the wedding at Cana can be disputed. However, it is consistent with the overall chronology based upon a November 8th baptism and Passover April 3rd following. But that Jesus had turned thirty by the end of his fast and temptation before he began publicly teaching is beyond question. Thus, whether we consider the events described in the opening chapters of the Gospel of John, or confine ourselves to the chronology of Christ's baptism and the opening of his public ministry as described by Luke, Jesus' birthday would have occurred in the late fall/early winter by either scenario. This in turn corroborates the chronology of the presentment of the Christ-child and the final illness of Herod, placing Jesus' birthday in the predicted time-frame around December 25th.

c. *Did the magi arrive after two years?* That no significant period elapsed between the nativity and the arrival of the magi is also reasonably clear from the natural force of Matthew's narrative. Read in isolation from Luke, the force is such that it is often wrongly assumed the magi arrived the very night of the nativity. It is only in reading the accounts of Matthew and Luke together that we realize the magi arrived after presentment of the Christ-child forty-odd days following his birth. While the natural force of the narrative does not preclude the possibility of additional gaps, we are aware of no evidence that would allow us to conclude such exist. It is sometimes supposed from the fact Herod ordered the death of all male children two years old and under that as much as two years elapsed from the nativity until the arrival of the magi. However, this possibility may be ruled out. For Jesus to have been born two years prior to the arrival of the magi and Herod's death in 1 BC would mean he was born as early as 4–3 BC. Yet, Luke indicates Jesus' thirtieth birthday occurred in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (AD 29). This places Jesus' birth in 2 BC, ruling out the possibility of a two-year gap.

There is no evidence of gaps in the chronology between the birth of Christ and death of Herod the Great. What evidence we possess shows that the nativity and presentment of the Christ-child, followed by the arrival of the magi, Herod's final illness, his departure for Callirrhoe, and his death shortly before Passover, 1

BC, were contiguous events. Laid end to end, they give every indication that the traditional date of Christ's birth is historically defensible and sound.

V. THE CONCEPTION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
AND THE PRIESTLY COURSES

The conception of John the Baptist as it bears upon the date of Christ's birth was mentioned in passing above. We want to discuss this evidence briefly here.

David divided the priests into twenty-four courses, which served at appointed times in the temple (1 Chr 24:7–18). Two courses concern us here: Jehoiarib, the first, and Abijah, the eighth. Luke informs us that Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was a member of the course of Abijah, and was burning incense in execution of his priestly office when Gabriel appeared and announced that his wife would conceive a son. Based on statements in Luke, John was about six months older than our Lord (Luke 1:36, 56). If it can once be determined when Zachariah was serving, and therefore when John was conceived, it is possible to identify the approximate time of Christ's birth fifteen months later.

To identify when Zachariah may have served requires that we first recreate the priestly courses; to do this we require a point of reference from which to begin. Happily, history has not left us without a witness. The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Taan.* 4; cf. *S. Olam* 30.86–97) records a saying of Rabbi Yose ben Halafta, which dates to about AD 150—80 years after the event—stating that the course of Jehoiarib was serving when the temple was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans:

> Whence do we know that the second Temple was also destroyed on the 9th of Ab? We have learned in a Boraitha: "A happy event is credited to the day on which another happy event happened, while a calamity is ascribed to the day when another calamity occurred;" and it was said that when the first Temple was destroyed it was on the eve preceding the 9th of Ab, which was also the night at the close of the Sabbath and also the close of the Sabbatical year. The watch at the time was that of Jehoiarib, and the Levites were chanting in their proper places, at that moment reciting the passage: "And he will bring back upon them their own injustice, and in their own wickedness will he destroy them"; and they did not have time to end the passage, which concludes, "yea, he will destroy them—the Lord our God," before the enemy entered and took possession of the Temple. This happened also at the destruction of the second Temple.

Knowing that the course of Jehoiarib was reputedly serving on Ab 9 (August 4th) in AD 70 allows us to attempt to recreate the priestly courses. We do not know with certainty how the cycle of priestly courses was arranged. It does seem clear the cycle commenced in the month of Tishri with the course of Jehoiarib. Moreover, it is apparent that the courses were not static, but advanced in some form or other. Otherwise, Jehoiarib could not have been serving on Ab 9 when the temple was destroyed, for the month of Ab falls in the forty-third through forty-seventh ministrations, but Jehoiarib serves the first and twenty-fifth.[41] The approach adopted

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[41] For a general discussion of the priestly courses see Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 131–38.

here is to frame the courses in twenty-four-year cycles, beginning the Sabbath on or next preceding Tishri 1 (cf. 1 Kgs 8:2; Ezra 3:6), with each course serving one week twice annually, coming in the afternoon of the preparation for the Sabbath (Friday) and going out the afternoon of the preparation (Friday) following (2 Kgs 11:5; 1 Chron 9:25; 24:19; Josephus, *Ant.* 7.14.7). Since there are twenty-four courses, serving twice annually will accomplish forty-eight weeks; the two and a half weeks remaining to the lunar year (354 ÷ 7 = 50.5) presumably would have been fulfilled by the first several courses serving a third time. Leap years in the Jewish calendar added a thirteenth month ("second Adar") seven times in nineteen years.[42] The approach adopted here is for the weeks composing Adar II to be filled by the courses whose turn it was to serve in Adar that year, so that they will each serve an extra week, allowing for the uninterrupted progression of the courses.

Assuming each course advanced annually to the next station, the cycle of priestly ministration would be completed in twenty-four years, at which point it would begin anew. Rabbinic tradition placing Jehoiarib on service when the temple was destroyed allows us to identify the station in the twenty-four-year cycle. From there we can find when the cycle began. Then, by reckoning backward in twenty-four-year increments to the beginning of cycle preceding the conception of John the Baptist in 3 BC, we can putatively identify the week and month Zachariah was serving. Since the twenty-four-year cycle begins with Jehoiarib at the Sabbath on or next preceding Tishri 1, the point where these converge will determine where the cycle begins; the intersection of Jehoiarib with the week of Ab 8–14 tells us where the temple was destroyed and the priestly ministration ended. Since Ab 8–14 will be AD 70, the number of steps from there to the beginning of the cycle tells us where in the cycle AD 70 fell.

As it happens, the point at which Jehoiarib's second ministration (for the first does not reach so far) intersected with the week of Ab 8–14, and the first ministration intersected with the first week of Tishri, was twenty-one stations. Thus, AD 70 was the twenty-first year in the twenty-four-year cycle. To return to the beginning of the cycle we subtract twenty years from AD 70, which brings us to AD 50. Subtracting twenty-four more years brings us to AD 26; this course would therefore have consisted of the years AD 26–49. Twenty-four more years brings us to AD 2; this course would have consisted of the years AD 2–25. 24 years more bring us to 23 BC (there was no year zero). This course would have consisted of the years 23 BC to 1 AD.

Counting forward from 23 BC to 3 BC when John was conceived shows that the course of Abijah would have putatively been serving at its twenty-first station when Gabriel appeared to Zachariah (23 BC to 3 BC = 21). Assuming Zachariah's course was in its *second* ministration, this would mean he was on duty the week of Elul 27–Tishri 4 (Sept. 5–11). We do not know how long after Zachariah's min-

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[42] "There is much to make it look as if, in general, the Babylonian system came to prevail relatively early, but with some variations in Jewish practice from the Babylonian. … Therefore, in spite of the fact that the Jewish system used only added Adars, the result was the same as in the Babylonian system and seven months were intercalated in nineteen years" (Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* 35, 39).

istration his wife conceived; tradition places John's conception at or near the autumnal equinox September 22nd. Since the course of Abijah would have been serving September 5–11, the traditional time of John's conception is clearly possible, followed by his birth nine months later about the time of the summer solstice. Since John was six months older than Jesus, Jesus' birth would therefore naturally fall about the time of the winter solstice.

Table 6
Priestly Courses and the Births of John and Jesus

	AD 50	AD 69	AD 70
1. Jehoiarib	27-4 Tishri ←	15-21	8-14 / 15-21
2. Jedaiah	5-11	22-28	22-28
3			
4			
5			
6			
7. Hakkoz	10-16	28-4 Iyar	28-4 Iyar
8. Abijah	17-23	5-11	5-11

There were 24 courses of priests that served twice annually, plus such additional weeks as were needed to fill out the year (1 Chr 24:7-18). Each course would advance annually to the next station to fulfill twenty-four years, and then the cycle would begin anew. The juncture of Jehoiarib and the week of Tishri 1 and the week of Ab 8-14 when the temple was destroyed establish the parameters of the twenty-four-year cycles.

The course of Jehoiarib served the 1st & 25th weeks. For it to have been serving the week of Ab 9, A.D. 70, requires that it have been in its second ministration, and indicates it was the 21st stage of the 24-year cycle. To arrive at the beginning of the cycle we subtract 20, which brings us to A.D. 50. By reckoning backward in 24 year segments from A.D. 50, we can putatively identify the week and month Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was serving when Gabriel appeared to him (Luke 1:9-20). From there, we can count forward to the births of John and Christ.

| 14. Jeshebeab | 30-6 Tebet | 18-24 | 18-24 |

Reckoning backward in twenty-four year periods from A.D. 50, we find that the course of Abijah would have served on or about the week of Elul 27-Tishri 4 (Sept. 5-11), 3, B.C. John was six months older than Jesus. Allowing that John was conceived Tishri 12-18 (Sept. 19-25) about the time of the autumnal equinox, he would have been born about the time of the summer solstice. Jesus would have been born about six months later at the winter solstice, the week of Tebet 26-Shebat 3 (Dec. 21-27), 2 B.C., according to one early source a Wednesday, but by Hillel II's calendar a Saturday.

20. Jehezkel	13-19	1-7 Ab	1-7 Ab
21. Jachin	20-26	8-14	8-14 ←
22. Gamul	27-3 Adar	15-21	15-21
23. Delaiah	4-10	22-28	22-28
24. Maaziah	11-17	29-5 Elul	29-5 Elul

Josephus says that the courses served eight days, from Sabbath to Sabbath (Ant. 7.14.7). The weeks are thus laid out to begin with Saturday and end with Friday. According to rabbinic tradition, the 9th of Ab was a Sunday.

Charts covering so many courses over so many years obviously cannot be included here.[43] However, one important aspect of their testimony deserves mention. Because the twenty-four-year cycle of ministration is determined by the juncture of Jehoiarib and first week of Tishri on the one hand, and the week of Ab 8–14 on the other, the cyclical parameters of all other courses is governed by this result. As already noted, the week of Ab 8–14 represents the twenty-first station of the second ministration, and therefore indicates the cycle began in AD 50. If the juncture of these two points turned out instead to be the sixteenth station, this would place the beginning of the cycle at AD 55. The beginning of all preceding cycles would therefore also be five years earlier, with the result that the course of Abijah in the year 3 BC would serve five weeks earlier, moving the conception of John the Baptist an equal number of weeks from the autumnal equinox, and Jesus' birth fifteen months later the same distance from the winter solstice.

If, on the other hand, the juncture of the two points occurred three stations later, at the twenty-fourth station, Zachariah would then have served *after* the autumnal equinox. This would place the births of John and Jesus beyond the summer and winter solstices, arguing against the verity of their received birth-dates. Thus, the fact that the convergence of Jehoiarib with the weeks of Tishri 1 and Ab 8–14 occurs twenty-one steps apart—and only twenty-one steps apart—and so doing causes the course of Abijah in the year 3 BC to fall two weeks before the autumnal equinox argues persuasively not only that the charts are correct (they concur with historical tradition on both ends), but that John was in fact conceived and born about the time traditionally received, but more importantly, so also was Jesus. Of course, since the courses served twice annually, when Zachariah actually served, and John and Jesus were born, cannot be proved absolutely by the charts. However, while the charts may not prove the certainty, they do establish the possibility, if not probability, that the traditional date of Christ's birth is correct.

VI. CONCLUSION

Neither the History of Religions Theory nor the Calculation Theory can adequately account for the origin of the Christmas date. Therefore, transmission of the date of Christ's birth by tradition from the apostles and holy family cannot logically be ruled out. Moreover, since the traditional date of the nativity is fully consistent with various chronological indicators left for us in history and the Gospels, we have every reason to accept it as the true source and origin of the Christmas date.

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[43] The charts may be viewed at http://www.dec25th.info/pdf%20books/Priestly%20Courses%2023%20BC%20-%20AD%2070%20Revised.pdf.