

REVISITING THE FATHERS

An Examination of the Christmas Date in Several Early Patristic Writers

1. Two Main Theories Regarding the Origin of the Christmas Date

There are two main views in academic circles regarding the origin of the Christmas date. The great majority hold that celebration of Christmas December 25th originated about AD 336 in the city of Rome, where it was adopted as a Christianized version of the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti*, instituted by the emperor Aurelian in AD 274. This view is known as the “History of Religions Theory.”¹ The second view, called the “Calculation Theory,”² argues that the Christmas date is derived from rabbinic notions of “integral age,” which had it that the great patriarchs and prophets of Israel died on the same day as their birth. This model operates on a two-prong approach, limited to the subject’s birth and death, but was allegedly modified and expanded by early Christians into a three-prong approach including Christ’s conception. According to the theory, belief among early Christians that Christ *died* on March 25th required that his *conception* occur March 25th, thereby placing his *birth* nine months later on December 25th.³

1. The modern formulation of this view is owed to a large extent to Hermann Usener (1834-1905) who first published his thesis in 1889. Hermann Usener, *Das Weihnachtsfest* (Bon: Bouvier, ³1969).

2. The Calculation Theory was first articulated by Louis Duchesne, *Origines du culte chrétien* (Paris: Thorin, 1889; Paris: Fontemoing, ⁵1920); cf. Thomas J. Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986) 5-13; 91-97; Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995) 88-90.

3. But see Philipp E. Nothaft, “Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: A Defense of the ‘Calculation Theory,’” in *Questions Liturgiques* 94 (2013) 247-265, where the author argues that the true impetus for the spring conception was not the March 25th death, but the *already established* tradition of a winter birth: “Since it was established early on that Jesus died 25 March, and since it was also assumed, based on Luke’s annunciation narrative, that he was born in winter, early Christians would have been tempted to reinterpret 25 March as the day of conception, whereby they could then arrive at 25 December as the day of the nativity.” *Ibid.*, at 262.

The equation thus begins with the supposed date of Jesus' death, from which the date of his conception was putatively "calculated," leading finally to the date of his birth and the origin of the Christmas date. The Calculation Theory assumes *a priori* that the March 25th conception occurred first in early Christian writers and chronographers and that the December 25th nativity came only later. *It did not*. As we shall see, the opposite is true; not only does December 25th have the better claim to priority, it also has an entirely separate provenance. As the evidence from patristic writers stands at present, the December 25th nativity occurs both *earlier* than men proposed Jesus was conceived March 25th and *independent* of calculations derived therefrom.

The same evidence that upsets the Calculation Theory also proves troublesome for the History of Religions Theory: December 25th occurs *earlier* in patristic writers than the theory predicts or allows. The History of Religions Theory is derived largely from deduction based upon the *Chronograph of 354*. The *Chronograph* is an illuminated codex manuscript commissioned by a wealthy Christian named Valentinus. Part six of the *Chronograph* contains a calendar for the city of Rome for the year AD 354 wherein December 25th marks games held in honor of *Natalis Sol Invicti* – the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun – the solar deity worshipped by Aurelian. The same codex in part twelve contains reference to the December 25th birth of Christ in a section set in calendrical order devoted to annual commemoration of the martyrs. The *Depositio Martirum* was originally dated to AD 336 but was updated to AD 354 for inclusion in the codex, and is arranged from December 25th to December 25th, indicating that the nativity of Christ was at the head of the ecclesiastical year in Rome at least as early as AD 336.

Proponents of the History of Religions Theory infer from the shared dates of December 25th that Christians appropriated the date to offset Aurelian's pagan festival. However, this conclusion is purely gratuitous and in no way required by the evidence and seems to be driven more by proponents' personal views of the church and ecclesiastical calendar than by the evidence itself. The better view is that repeated reference to December 25th in the same codex argues *against* the Christmas date being derived from *Sol Invictus*. If Christmas was surreptitiously appropriated by church authorities as the History of Religions Theory alleges, we would expect reference to *Sol Invictus* to be *suppressed*. Nothing could have been easier than omitting reference to *Sol Invictus* when assembling the codex. However, that both appear together shows that the owner who commissioned the work felt there was nothing to hide by these occurring the same day and that it was a purely fortuitous coincidence. Moreover, that Christmas

was derived from the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti* represents only one possible inference. The opposite inference is equally valid. 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.”⁴

That Aurelian instituted the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti* almost three hundred years after the birth of Christ testifies to the fact that the December 25th date had little historical importance with the Romans in the centuries immediately prior thereto. Prior to Aurelian, there is no clear evidence the Romans anciently observed *any* religious holiday December 25th. If we consult Ovid’s *Fasti*, a book composed under Augustus near the time of Christ’s birth, which is devoted to the historical events and observances of the Roman calendar, December 25th receives no mention at all. The occurrence of the winter solstice is noted by Ovid, but no religious festival or holiday appears.⁵ This should be compared with the summer solstice when the Romans celebrated the goddess of Fortune. Here, Ovid is very explicit about this pagan holiday coinciding with the solstice.⁶ Similarly, Macrobius’ encyclopedic account of Roman culture makes no mention of any religious festival December 25th. The Saturnalia came closest, but ran only from December 17-23, coming short of the solstice by several days.⁷

Outside of Rome, December 25th had limited significance in worship of the eastern sun god, Mithras. Mithraism experienced expanding popularity with Roman soldiers in the second and third centuries due to the large numbers of Roman troops stationed in Syria. However, it was not until Aurelian

4. C. P. E. Nothaft, “The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research,” in *Cambridge Journal* 81 (2012) 903-911, at 908; quoting Steven Hijmans, “Usener’s Christmas: A Contribution to the Modern Construct of Late Antique Solar Syncretism,” in *Herman Usener und die Metamorphosen der Philologie*, ed. Michel Espangen and Pascale Rabault-Fuehrhahn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011) 150. Cf. Anselme Davril, “L’origine de la fête de Noël,” in *Renaissance de Fleury: La revue des moines de Saint-Benoit* 160 (1991) 9-14.

5. Ovid, *Fasti* 1:163, 164.

6. Ovid, *Fasti* 6:785-790.

7. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.10.23, 24.

that Mithraism attained popular acceptance among the Romans by institution of the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti*.⁸ Even so, the relative unimportance of *Sol Invictus* is reflected in the fact that Macrobius, who wrote in the fifth century, makes no mention of it. If *Sol Invictus* was so unimportant that Macrobius did not see fit to include it in his account of Roman holidays and customs, it is doubtful it exerted the kind of influence assumed by the History of Religions Theory. Would Christians really institute an annual feast to counter a pagan festival that had only limited significance with the Roman people themselves?

The scarcity of hard evidence substantiating the History of Religions Theory has led a growing number of students and scholars to call it into question.⁹ As we have seen, the theory rests almost completely upon inferences that are equally susceptible of being interpreted the opposite way. Where an inference is capable of supporting two opposing conclusions its evidentiary value is for all intents and purposes negated. That leaves only direct evidence of contemporary sources to support the theory, of which there is *none*. No hard evidence that the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti* is the true source of the Christmas date occurs in any contemporary source: no epistles, no decrees, no historical accounts, *nothing*. Indeed, what evidence we do possess shows that patristic writers uniformly accepted December 25th in good faith as being received by tradition (legend or report) from earlier fathers.¹⁰ Since there is no direct evidence supporting the theory, and what evidence we do possess is merely inferential and far from conclusive, rejection *pro forma* of the Christmas date earlier than Aurelian cannot be justified.

In the past, the assumption has been that because the History of Religions Theory is purportedly *true*, therefore witnesses of the Christmas date

8. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas*, 110-114; Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 87-89.

9. These include: Thomas J. Talley, "Constantine and Christmas," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000) 265-272; id., *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 87-91; Hijmans, "Usener's Christmas," 139-151; Steven Hijmans, "Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas," in *Mouseion* 3/3 (2003) 377-398; id., *Sol: The Sun in the Art and Religions of Rome* (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2009) 583-595, <http://dissertations.ub.rub.nl/faculties/arts/2009/s.e.hijmans>; Nothaft, "The Origins of the Christmas Date;" Kurt M. Simmons, "The Origins of Christmas and the Date of Christ's Birth," in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015) 299-324.

10. "He was born, according to tradition, upon December the twenty-fifth" (Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff; transl. Arthur West Haddan (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887) vol. 3, p. 74. Cf. St. Jerome, *Homily 88: On the Nativity of Christ*: "We are not airing our own opinion, but supporting tradition ... You have rejected tradition, we have accepted it" (Jerome, *The Fathers of the Church, The Homilies of St. Jerome*, Vol. 2, *Homily 88* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966] 225-226).

earlier than Aurelian must be spurious or *false*. However, this sort of “self-authentication,” whereby a theory is made the basis by which conflicting evidence is dismissed, is not academically defensible. A theory can serve only to *explain or interpret* evidence, not invalidate it. The merits or demerits of a witness must be weighed and assessed separate and apart from prevailing theories, not by or against them. In many cases, absent the prejudices and assumptions of the History of Religions Theory, there is no objective basis to reject the verity of early witnesses or to conclude that they are false. In the space that remains, we will examine several witnesses to the early occurrence of the Christmas date. Although these sources cannot explain the origin of the date, we believe an objective and impartial analysis will show that the December 25th nativity was not derived from the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti* or the calculations of later computists and chronographers.

2. Julius Africanus

Julius Africanus (AD 160-240) is credited as the first Christian chronographer. Most of his works have been lost, but portions have come down to us culled from the works of later writers. Africanus is perhaps the earliest writer to typologically correlate the events of creation with those of salvation. A number of scriptures speak of Jesus figuratively in various celestial terms. Malachi calls him the “Sun of righteous” (Mal 4:2); Luke calls him the “Day-spring from on high” (Luke 1:78); Jesus calls himself the “bright and morning Star” (Rev 22:16). Many early writers thought Jesus’ resurrection is referred to when the Psalmist described the sun as a bridegroom going forth out of his chamber (Ps 19:5).¹¹ To early Christian writers, this symbolism meant that the events of creation had potential typological significance pointing to Christ. Since the year begins with the vernal equinox and God allegedly would have divided the light from the darkness *perfectly*, which to early believers meant *equally*, the first day of creation was assumed to have been March 25th, the date of the equinox in the Roman calendar.¹² Moreover, since the seventh day of creation was the Sabbath,

11. Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* 6:292-293, in *Translated Texts for Historians*, ed. Gillian Clark and Mary Whitby, trans. F. Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999) vol. 29, p. 25, 6; Cassiodorus, however, took it in reference to Christ’s incarnation and virgin birth (Cassiodorus, *Explanation of the Psalms*, Psalm 19:5, 6).

12. “Some have claimed that the first day of the world was the 8th kalends of April [March 25th], and others that it was the 12th [March 21st]. In both cases they adduce the same argument, namely, the equinox. For it seems reasonable that because God in the beginning divided light and darkness into two equal parts we should believe that the beginning

the first day of creation would have been Sunday, the Lord's day, when Christ rose again from the dead. Add to this the mistaken belief that Jesus died in AD 31 when Passover occurred on or about March 25th, and the temptation to conclude that creation was a prophetic type prefiguring the resurrection of Christ at the equinox was simply too great for some to resist. However, whereas some early chronographers placed the equinox at the first day of creation, Africanus is thought to have placed it at the creation of the sun and moon the fourth day. Thus, for Africanus, March 21st is the first day of creation, not the 25th. And because cosmic time counts from creation of the sun and moon on March 25th, most scholars believe Africanus set Jesus' crucifixion in the 5531st year from Adam *before* the vernal equinox, but his resurrection the 5532nd year *following* the vernal equinox. Regarding the nativity, leading scholars believe that Africanus assigned the conception and incarnation to March 25th and therefore should be numbered among those who date the nativity nine months later to December 25th.¹³ This view was most recently articulated by Phillip Nothaft:

The fact that Africanus began a new cosmic year from the resurrection therefore indicates that he counted the years of the world from 25 March, which was a Wednesday in 5501 BCE, Africanus' year of creation. It would hence seem that he structured his chronicle around the date 25 March, because he was pleased with the correspondence of the resurrection with the fourth day of creation, on which the sun and moon began their course (making this day the beginning of calendrical time). If he counted exactly 5500 years between the creation and the divine incarnation, this would mean that 25 March was also the exact date of the latter event, referred to as the *sarkosis* in the text, by which he likely meant the conception in the womb. If this is the case, then Africanus implicitly dated the birth of Jesus to the following winter, perhaps even to 25 December.¹⁴

Nothaft's argument that Africanus implicitly dated Christ's conception to March 25th and his birth to December 25th appears to be validated by the *Excerpta Barbari*. The *Excerpta Barbari* is an 8th century translation of an earlier Greek chronograph, composed in Alexandria during the reign of either Zeno (AD 474-491) or Anastasius (AD 491-518), which incorporates material from earlier chronographers, including Africanus and Eusebius.¹⁵

of the world took place specifically at the point of the equinox" (Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* 6:290, in *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 29, p. 24).

13. Paul de Lagarde, "Altes und Neues über das Weihnachtsfest," in *Mitteilungen* (Goettingen, 1889) 316-317; Venance Grumel, *La chronologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958) 22-24.

14. Nothaft, "Early Christian Chronology," 263.

15. The leading studies of this work are Heinrich Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie* (Leipzig, 1885-98) 2:316-229; Frick, *Chron. min.*,

It was first published by Joseph Scaliger (AD 1540-1609) in his *Thesaurus Temporum* (AD 1606). The document derives its name from the description given to it by Scaliger: “*Most useful excerpts from the first chronological volume of Eusebius, Africanus, and others, translated into Latin by a barbarous, unlearned man who was most incompetent at Greek and Latin.*” The document consists of three sections, the last of which is a list of Roman consuls from the dictatorship of Caesar to AD 387, where it breaks off. Into these have been inserted short notices of various events in Christian history, including the conception and nativity of Christ:

XI Augusto undecimo & Pisone. [In these times, under the consulate of Lentulus and Silvanus, Zachariah saw a vision of an angel in the temple of the Lord. XII Aruntio & Marcellio. XIII Celso & Tiberio. XIV Tullio & emellio. XV Asperio & Severio.] XIII Saturnino & Cinno. XVIII Lentulo & Silvano. In these times, in the same consulate of Lentulus and Silvanus, an angel announced to Elizabeth about John, on the eighth calends of April. XIX Lentulo the second time & Lepido. XX Rufino & Pisone. XXI Messalla & Seriniano. XXII Maximo & Tuberone. XXIII Africano & Maximo. XXV Aruntio & Prisco. XXVI Censorino & Gallione. XXVII Nerone & Plaudo. XXVIII Balbino & Bereto. At the same time was sent the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary in the thirteenth [consulship] of Augustus on the eighth calends of April. XXIX Felecio & Suilio. XXX Lentulo & Auxonio. XXXI Caesario & Austorino. XXVII Sylvano & Paullino. In the sixth month went Mary to her cousin Elisabeth and saluted her. And Elisabeth said to her Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold the babe that is in me leapt, and he blessed you. XXXIII Prisco & Romano. XXXIV Juetore & Protarcho. XXXV Senecione & Bardone. XXXVI Timageno & Nigriano. XXXVII Syriano & Peregriano. XXXVIII Xiridio & Marcello. In these times under Augustus was born John the forerunner, the son of Zachariah, on the eighth calends of July. XXXIX Fruro & Antorino. XL Augusto & Sacerdote. XLI Pompeiano & Plutone. XLII Augusto & Silvano. XLIII Antulo & Julio. XLIV Augusto & Silvano. In the same consulship our Lord Jesus Christ was born under Augustus on the eighth calends of January. He was born in a desert whose name was *Puusdu*: that is “Pious.” On the same day he was born, the shepherds saw the star Chuac 28. Verily from Adam unto the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ there were 5500 years. XLV Vincio & Birro.

lxxxiii-ccx, ccxxi-ccxxii (Leipzig, 1895) 180-184; Johann Joseph Hoeveler, “Die Excerpta Latina Barbari,” in *Festschrift der dreiundvierzigsten Versammlung deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner dargeboten von den höheren Lehranstalten Kölns* (Bonn, 1895) 193-214; id., “Die Excerpta Latina Barbari 2: Die Sprache des Barbarus,” in *Programm des königlichen Kaiser Wilhelm-Gymnasiums zu Köln* 28 (1896) 1-29; Felix Jacoby, “Excerpta Barbari,” in *RE* (1909) 6:1566-76 = Felix Jacoby, *Griechische Historiker* (Stuttgart: Druckenmüller, 1956) 257-262, and Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols., Oxford-Warburg Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983-93) 560-569.

XLVI Caesario & Servilio. XLVII Macrino & Saturnio. XLVIII Sacerdo & Bolenso. XLIX Lepido & Arruntio. In these days under Augustus on the calends of January the Magi brought gifts and worshipped him.

...

LXXII Tiberio Augusto the sixth time & Silo. In the same year our Lord Jesus was crucified under the Consulship of Rubellio the eighth calends of April: that is Phamenoth 29 ... However, our Lord Jesus Christ was raised under the consulship of Rubellio the sixth calends of April.¹⁶

Scaliger's *Thesaurus Temporum* reflects a version of the *Excerpta Barbari* that had been copied for him and, unfortunately, introduced new errors and omissions into the text: reference to Zachariah's vision in the temple does not occur in Scaliger's edition. However, it appears in the edition by Alfred Schoene and I have supplied it from there enclosed in brackets with its accompanying consular dates, which are also missing.¹⁷ The consular names and their enumeration from Augustus have otherwise been retained as they occur in Scaliger's edition; the notes I have translated from the Latin. To conserve space, I have omitted portions of the excerpt that contain material from the *Protoevangelium of James* about the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Martyrdom of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist (*Proto.* 22, 23), and other unnecessary material. We will look more closely at the *Protoevangelium* later; for now, it is sufficient merely to note its place in the birth-narrative recorded in the *Excerpta Barbari*.

As may be seen, laced between the consular dates are various events from the births of John the Baptist and Christ. However, as presently formatted, the dates and events are almost completely incoherent. According to Burgess:

But even logic is thrown out the window as a chronological tool: for instance, the occasion of the *Magnificat* is said to have taken place six months after the Annunciation, but there are four years in between; Zachariah is told about John's birth six years before Elizabeth is informed; Elizabeth conceives ten years before Mary, her pregnancy lasts twenty years, and John is born six years before Jesus; Mary's pregnancy lasts sixteen years; the wise men arrive when Jesus would have been five; Joseph flees into Egypt when he would have been twenty-one; and the transfiguration, Je-

16. Joseph Justus Scaliger, *Thesaurus Temporum Eusebii Pamphili Caesareae Palaestinae Episcopi* (Lugdunum Batavorum [Leiden], 1606) 2nd pagination, pp. 67-68 (= 1681, p. 82).

17. Alfred Schoene, *Eusebii chronicorum liber prior*, 2 vols. (Berlin 1875-76) vol. 1, Appendix p. 227 [50a].

sus's arrest, the crucifixion, the martyrdom of Stephen, and Paul's 'ordination' are all dated internally 'sub consolato Rubellionis' – this date appears six times – yet the last event is dated three years after the first.¹⁸

However, I fear this misapprehends the case. Although confusion reigns and the composition makes no chronological sense in its present form, we must assume originally it did. Our task is to sort it out. We propose that in its original form the consular dates appeared vertically in a table or column, next to which were placed the corresponding historical events in a second column. In Schoene's edition, page notations occur at regular intervals marked with a numeral accompanied by the letters "a" or "b" (e.g., "52a" followed by "52b," etc.), suggesting the pages were originally divided in half ("a" and "b"), each containing a table consisting of a column of consular dates, next to which appeared a corresponding column of historical notes. However, as there were sometimes multiple events for a particular consular year and they could not all fit neatly beside it, the events were invariably "stacked" one upon another in a column above and below the corresponding consular date. Subsequently, when copied into the form shown above, or some other intermediate form, the scribe failed to replicate the document's original arrangement, but instead placed the events *after* the consular date they formerly appeared *next to* so that it is made to appear as if many years intervened between them.

This also explains why sometimes there are repeated references to the same consuls: the original author was conscious of the fact that his notations are not properly aligned with their respective consuls, and therefore calls attention to their proper placement by repeated mention of the consuls' names. Thus, the repeated references to the consulate of *Rubellio*; most of the events described occurred within the space of one calendar year and so would have been placed vertically upon one another in the column and the name of *Rubellio* noted to indicate each event's proper referent. Likewise, the events of the nativity; the births of John the Baptist and Christ occur within the space of fifteen months. Since there is no way all the events associated with their births could have been placed beside two consular dates, the events had to be arranged vertically, spanning the space of many years, with reference to the appropriate consular date inserted within the notes to help guide the reader. At some point, before it assumed its present form, the text would probably have looked something like this:

18. R. W. Burgess, "The Date, Purpose, and Historical Context of the Original Greek and Latin Translation of the So-called Excerpta Latina Barbari," in *Traditio* 63 (2013) 13.

Table of Consuls in which Occurred the Nativity of Christ

XI Augusto undecimo & Pisone	In these times, when Lentulus and Silvanus were consuls, Zachariah saw a vision of an angel in the temple of the Lord.
XII Aruntio & Marcellio	
XIII Celso & Tiberio	
XIV Tullio & Emellio	
XV Asperio & Severio	In these times, while the same Lentulus and Silvanus were consuls, an angel announced to Elizabeth about John, the eighth calends of April
XVI Saturnino & Cinno	
XVII Lentulo & Silvano	
XVIII Savino & Antonio	
XIX Lentulo secundo & Lepido	[Reference to the conception of John 8 cal. of April has probably been conflated with a note relating announcement to Elizabeth of Christ's conception, which would have appeared here.]
XX Rufino & Pisone	
XXI Messalla & Seriniano	
XXII Maxino & Tuberone	
XXIII Africano & Maximo	
XXIV	
XXV Aruntio & Prisco	At the same time was sent the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary in the thirteenth [consulship] of Augustus on the eighth calends of April.
XXVI Censorino & Gallione	
XXVII Nerone & Plaudo	
XXVIII Balbino & Bereto	In the sixth month went Mary to her cousin Elisabeth and saluted her. And Elisabeth said to her Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold the babe that is in me leapt, and he blessed you.
XXIX Felecio & Suilio	
XXX Lentulo & Auxonio	
XXXI Caesario & Austorino	
XXXII Sylvano & Paullino	
XXXIII Prisco & Romano	
XXXIV Juctore & Protarcho	In these times under Augustus was born John the forerunner, the son of Zachariah, on the eighth calends of July
XXXV Senecione & Bardone	
XXXVI Timageno & Nigriano	
XXXVII Syriano & Peregrino	
XXXVIII Xiridio & Marcello	In the same consulship our Lord Jesus Christ was born under Augustus the eighth calends of January. He was born in a desert whose name was Puusdu: that is "Pious." On the same day he was born, the shepherds saw the star Chuac 28. Verily from Adam unto the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ there were 5500 years.
XXXIX Fruro & Antorino	
XL Augusto & Sacerdote	
XLI Pompeiano & Plutone	
XLII Augusto & Silvano	
XLIII Antulo & Julio	
XLIV Augusto & Silvano	
XLV Vincio & Birro	
XLVI Caesario & Servilio	In these days under Augustus on the calends of January the Magi brought gifts and worshipped him.
XLVII Macrino & Saturnio	
XLVIII Sacerdo & Bolenso	
XLIX Lepido & Arruntio	

As the table above demonstrates, the events of the nativities of John and Christ span many years when arranged vertically in a column. However, when the formatting was subsequently changed, the dates and events

would have become interlaced, causing complete confusion. Moreover, it is clear that the consular dates themselves have suffered at the hands of copyists and scribes. Many of the names are unknown to history. For example, *Pompeiano & Plutone*, which occurs at 3 BC, the forty-first year of Augustus, should read *Lentulo & Messelino*.¹⁹ John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus; his birth is set at the summer solstice eight calends of July (June 24th). But as the year Mary received the annunciation is stated to have occurred when Augustus was consul the thirteenth time (*XLII Augusto (XIII) & Silvano* = 2 BC), Zachariah obviously would not have received the vision in the temple during the consulship of *XVII Lentulo & Silvano* twenty-five years before. Rather, the reference was originally almost certainly to the 3 BC consulship of *Lentulo & Messelino* when John would historically have been conceived. At some point, the *Silvano* belonging to the consulate of 2 BC was probably mistakenly attached to that of 3 BC, resulting in the reading *Lentulo & Silvano*. A copyist subsequently encountering the erroneous reference may have supposed that *XLI Lentulo & Silvano* represented a mis-transcription of *XVII Lentulo & Silvano* and therefore emended it, changing the notes relating to Zachariah and Elizabeth accordingly, and substituting the equally erroneous entry of *Pompeiano & Plutone*. The fact that Zachariah's vision occurs in the column near to *XVII Lentulo & Silvano* doubtless would have confirmed the copyist in this supposition.²⁰

Other corruptions have also obviously entered into the text. Since John was born June 24th, it is hardly possible that Elizabeth received announcement of his conception March 25th, for his gestation would then only be three months long. Probably there were two notes relative to Elizabeth that have been conflated: one regarding the conception of John during the consulship of *Lentulo & Messelino* in the fall of 3 BC; the other received March 25th, 2 BC, regarding Christ's conception, which may have been included

19. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1964; revised edition 1998) 84.

20. That location of the notes near various consulships influenced copyists encountering references they could not read or did not understand is confirmed by the unnumbered reference to *Asiatici & Silvani* following *LXVIII Getulo & Barro* corresponding to the 12th year of Tiberius (AD 26) in the chart below. *Asiatico II & Silvano* were consuls in AD 46 under Claudius. Although separated by almost twenty years, this equals only twenty lines in a column, one line for each consulship. When placed in parallel columns as shown herein, the sheer number of notes relating to the births of John and Christ will cause Christ's changing water to wine to fall near to *Asiatico II & Silvano*, explaining how these names came to be associated with events almost twenty years before.

to explain how Elizabeth knew in advance Mary was pregnant with the Christ-child when she came to visit shortly thereafter (Luke 1:39-44).²¹

Finally, it remains to notice that according to the *Excerpta Barbari* Jesus' ministry is accomplished under the consulship of *Rubellio*. This indicates that we are dealing with the so-called "short" chronology of the synoptic Gospels, which some early writers misread to teach Jesus' ministry lasted only one year and several months. *Rebellio* is the same consulship given by Tertullian (AD 155-240) for the crucifixion:

And the suffering of this extermination was perfected within the times of lxx hebdomads, under Tiberius Caesar, in the consulate of Rubellius Geminus and Fufius Geminus, in the month of March at the times of the Passover on the eighth day before the calends of April, on the first day of unleavened bread, on which they slew the lamb at even, just as had been enjoined by Moses.²²

The tables of consuls we presently possess give the consulate of *Geminio & Geminio* as AD 29. But as Passover that year fell on April 16th, this is plainly wrong. Epiphanius places Christ's death in the eighteenth year of Tiberius (AD 32); he assigns the consulate of *Geminio & Geminio* to the preceding year, AD 31:

For after that consulship which came, as I indicated, in Christ's thirtieth year, there was another, called the consulship of Rufus and Rubellio. And then, at the beginning of the consulship after the consulship of Rufus and Rubellio – the one which later came to be called the consulship of Vinnicius and Longinus Cassius – the Savior suffered on the thirteenth before the kalends of April in his thirty-third year, which was the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar.²³

21. Alternatively, the announcement to Elizabeth may not have been about John's conception at all, but merely that the child she carried would be the forerunner of Christ conceived that very day by Mary.

22. Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 8, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), republished by Hendrickson 1994; vol. 3, p. 160. However, Irenaeus specifically rejected the short chronology, arguing Jesus celebrated three Passovers following his baptism. "However, that they may establish their false opinion regarding that which is written, 'to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord', maintaining that He preached for one year only, and then suffered in the twelfth month," etc. *Against Heresies* 2.22.3-5, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, pp. 390-391; cf. Clement Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.21; Origen, *De Principiis* 4, 5.

23. Epiphanius, *Panarion* ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation," 23.3-5), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, vol. 79, ed. Einar Thomassen and Johannes van Oort, 2nd revised edition, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 55. Epiphanius omits the consulship of 16 Tiberius, which would have been Jesus' thirty-first year. See fn. 25, below, for the full list as given by Epiphanius.

As AD 31 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 had in mind and the one probably intended by the *Excerpta Barbari*.²⁴ When and how the names became confused is not known, but it is clear that the consulship of AD 31, which we now associate with *Tiberio Augusto V solo*, was known to early church fathers under the name of *Rubellio & Fufio (Gemino & Gemino)*.

The consulship of *Rubellio* is among several missing or unnumbered consulships spanning the reign of Tiberius in the *Excerpta Barbari*, most of which nevertheless occur by name in the historical notes. *Asiaticus & Silvanus*, *Crasso Tiberio quarto & Antonio*, and *Meura* are denoted following the numbered consulship of *L[X]VIII Getulo & Barro*. The *Excerpta* places the baptism of Christ under the consulship of *Meura*. This is almost certainly the consulship of *Silano et Nerva*, "n" being changed to "m" by the barbarous tongue of the translator, similar to "b" for "v" (*Bitello vs. Vitello*) and "c" for "g" (*Crasso vs. Grasso*); "v" and "u" likewise being interchangeable in former times. The tables of consulships we presently possess date *Nerva* to AD 28. However, Epiphanius, who lists consuls from Jesus' birth in the thirteenth consulship of Augustus until his crucifixion in his thirty-third year, places Jesus' baptism under *Nerva* in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, AD 29.²⁵ Accepting this as the date intended by the *Excerpta*, the document next mentions the numbered consulship *LXVIII Tiberio quarto & Antonio*. After this follows the first mention of *Rubellio*, which would then answer to AD 31, the seventy-fourth year from 1 Augustus.

24. Hebrew date converters give the following Julian dates for Nisan 15 in the years AD 29-33: AD 29 – April 17; AD 30 – April 6; AD 31 – March 27; AD 32 – April 15; AD 33 – April 4. <http://www.rosettacalendar.com>, accessed Jan. 15, 2017.

25. Epiphanius, *Panarion* ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation," 22.22–23.1), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, vol. 79, pp. 53, 54. The order of consuls as given by Epiphanius, beginning within the reign of Tiberius until Christ's crucifixion, are as follows: 1. Pompeius Magnus & Apuleius; 2. Brutus & Flaccus; 3. Taurus & Libo; 4. Crassus & Rufus; 5. Tiberius Caesar II & Drusus Germanicus II; 6. Silanus & Balbus; 7. Messala & Gratus; 8. Tiberius Caesar III & Drusus Germanicus III; 9. Agrippa & Galba; 10. Pollio & Veterus; 11. Cethegus & Varus; 12. Agrippa II & Lentulus Galba; 13. Getulicus & Sabinus; 14. Crassus & Piso; 15. Silanus & Nerva; 16. (omitted); 17. Rufus & Rubellio; 18. Vinnicius & Longinus Cassius. *Ibid.*

Table of Consuls Comprising the Reign of Tiberius

Excerpta Barbari

LVIII Tiberio Augusto & Germano
 LIX Flaubio & Rufino
 LX Drusollo & Sorano
 LXI Tauro & Libone
 LXII Silvano & Gerontio
 LXIII Mesaulico & Balbino
 LXIV Tiberio Aug secundo & Colta
 LXV Agrippa & Druso
 L[X]VI Nerone & Lentulo
 L[X]VII Celetho & Pisone
 L[X]VIII Getulo & Barro
 Asiaticus & Silvanus

 Crasso Tiberio Seriniano secondo
 Meura
 LXVIII Tiberio quarto & Antonio
 Rubellio
 LXX Tiberio quinto & Prisco
 LXXI Bicino & Arruntio
 [L]XXII Tiberio Augusto sexto & Silio
 LXXII Scipio & Sulano
 LXXIII Persico & Bitellio
 LXXIII Tiberio Augusto & Druso

Finegan²⁶

Druso Caesare & Flacco (AD 15)
 Tauro & Libone (AD 16)
 Flacco & Rufo (AD 17)
 Tito Caesare III & Germanico Caesare II (AD 18)
 Silano & Balbao (AD 19)
 Messala & Cotta (AD 20)
 Tito Caesare IIII & Druso Caesare II (AD 21)
 Agrippa & Galba (AD 22)
 Pollinoe & Vetere (AD 23)
 Caethego & Varro (AD 24)
 Agrippa & Lentulo (AD 25)
 Getulico & Sabino (AD 26)
 Grasso & Pisone (AD 27)
 Silano & Nerva (AD 28)
 Gemino & Gemino (AD 29)
 Vinicio & Longino (AD 30)
 Tiberio Caesare V solo (AD 31)
 Arruntio & Ahenobarbo (AD 32)
 Galba & Sulla (AD 33)
 Vitellio & Persico (AD 34)
 Camerino & Noniano (AD 35)
 Allieno & Plautino (AD 36)
 Proculo & Nigrino (AD 37)

The names, order, and number in many cases are garbled, but in some instances can still be identified. Africanus subscribed to the “short” chronology which early fathers associated with the consulship of “*Gemino et Gemino*,” e.g., *Rubellio*. The *Excerpta* also place Christ’s passion and resurrection under *Rubellio* the second year following his baptism, which early fathers equated with AD 31.

26. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 84.

Although other portions of the *Excerpta Barbari* are acknowledged as the work of Africanus, the material above does not appear in the standard edition. The question naturally arises whether this is an authentic excerpt. The answer is almost certainly in the affirmative. Without exception, all of the dates in the passage accord with what we know of Africanus' chronology:

- Africanus dated Christ's incarnation to *Annus Mundi* (AM) 5500 (T92; 93c).²⁷ AM 5500 is the date provided in the *Excerpta Barbari*.
- Africanus dates the death of Cleopatra (30 BC) to the 14th year of Augustus, AM 5472 (F89). If AM 5472 equals 14 Augustus, then AM 5500 would correspond to 42 Augustus ($5500 - 5472 = 28 / 14 + 28 = 42$). The *Excerpta Barbari* specifies that the annunciation occurred when Augustus was consul the 13th time, which corresponds with 42 Augustus.²⁸
- Scholars predict that Africanus placed the conception of Christ on March 25th based upon the fact that he counted the years of the world from this date.²⁹ March 25th is the calendar date given by the *Excerpta Barbari* for the annunciation and conception.
- Scholars predict that Africanus placed the nativity of Christ December 25th. This is the calendar date given in the *Excerpta Barbari*.
- The *Excerpta Barbari* gives January 1st as the date the Magi arrived. Africanus placed the arrival of the Magi when Jesus was seven days old. Seven days from December 25th is January 1st: "But Cyril and Africanus together with some others report that Christ was seven days old when the Magi arrived" (T91).
- Both Africanus and the *Excerpta Barbari* commence numbering consulships from the first year of Augustus, showing both attached particular significance to that date, evidencing a common plan and scheme (T6).³⁰
- Africanus numbers seventy-four years from the first of Augustus until the resurrection of Christ (T6; F93, 53f).³¹ The *Excerpta Barbari* states that

27. All references are to Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, ed. Martin Wallraff, transl. William Adler (New York: De Gruyter, 2007).

28. Cf. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 84.

29. Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origin of the Christian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 389-421, at 418.

30. Cf. Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, p. 13, fn. 3. The year *Annus Mundi* for the first year of Augustus is given by the *Excerpta Barbari* as 5467. But inasmuch as Christ's birth is set at 42 Augustus, AM 5500, the first regnal year of Augustus would correspond to the last quarter of AM 5458 ($5500 - 42 = 5458$). The date is therefore plainly corrupt and should be emended to AM 5458. "In the same Consulship Julius Caesar was killed and Octavian, who also is Augustus, took the kingdom for fifty-six years and received the consulship thirteen times. Verily, from Adam unto the beginning of the reign of Augustus there were 5467 [5458] years."

31. *Ibid.*, T6, p. 13, fn. 3. Africanus numbers 60 years from the death of Cleopatra in 14 Augustus to the *Parousia* of Christ, which is often equated with Jesus' resurrection (F89,

Jesus died and rose again under *Rubellio & Fufio*, which the early fathers associated with AD 31, making it the seventy-fourth consulship from the first of Augustus (43 BC + AD 31 = 74 / AM 5532 -5458 = 74).³²

- Africanus set the crucifixion on Luna (Nisan) 13, AM 5531 (F93; T93b, c); the *Excerpta Barbari* places the crucifixion on March 25th. Hebrew date converters place Nisan (Luna) 13 on March 25th in AD 31.³³ The *Excerpta Barbari* and Africanus therefore agree.

The date of the resurrection requires further comment. Because he dates the crucifixion to one year (AM 5531) and the resurrection to another (AM 5532), scholars tend to assume that Africanus set the resurrection at the equinox on March 25th marking a new cosmic year.³⁴ This is the approach of Epiphanius, George Syncellus, and others, so the assumption that Africanus took the same approach heretofore seemed sound. Unfortunately, it is *not*. Africanus nowhere states Jesus rose on March 25th or even on the equinox. What Africanus does state is that Jesus died one day before Luna 14 when the Jews celebrate Passover (F93).³⁵ Since Passover occurs at the full moon *on or first after* the equinox, Passover following the crucifixion could *only* belong to AM 5532; otherwise the Jews would be guilty of observing Passover twice in the same cosmic year, once at the beginning of AM 5531 and again at its end. Since Passover Luna 14 could only belong to AM 5532, but he set the crucifixion at Luna 13, AM 5531, it is clear that for Africanus the equinox occurred after the one but before the other. This is possible because part of March 25th could belong to one cosmic year, part to another. The Julian calendar divided the solar year into 365 ¼ days; the quarter day meant that the equinox occurred at different quarters of the day from year to year. This point is made explicit by Bede:

When the sun first rose above the earth, it was positioned in that part of the sky which philosophers call the fourth degree of Aries. It was destined to

93) (14 + 60 = 74 / BC 29 + AD 31 = 60 yrs. reckoned exclusively). If, however, by *Parousia* Africanus meant Jesus' public ministry, reckoned inclusively, this would point to AD 30, 16 Tiberius being the date twice actually given by Africanus for the *Parousia*, rather than 17 Tiberius which answers to AD 31 (F93; cf. T93b, c, d; F94). In either case, the resurrection would occur in 74 Augustus regardless of which meaning is attached to the *Parousia*.

32. For an overview of the dating scheme of Africanus as adopted herein, see the chart at the end of this section. See also, Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus*, 389-421, advocating the date AD 31 for the passion and resurrection.

33. <http://www.rosettacalendar.com>, accessed Jan. 15, 2017.

34. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus*, 405-407; Nothaft, "Early Christian Chronology," 263.

35. "For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on Luna 14, and what happened to the Savior occurred one day before the Passover" (F93). Africanus follows the so-called "Johannine" chronology which is mistakenly read to place Jesus' crucifixion prior to celebration of Passover (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14).

return there when a year had passed by, after 365 days and six hours. This addition amounts to a quarter of a day, so that the vernal equinox itself sometimes occurs at dawn, sometimes at noon, sometimes at sunset, and sometimes at midnight.³⁶

Since the equinox could occur at different quarters of the day, Jesus' death in mid-afternoon March 25th could belong to one cosmic year (AD 5531), with the equinox occurring sometime thereafter marking another cosmic year (AM 5532). And that this was Africanus' intent is verified, as we have seen, by the fact that he set the crucifixion at the end of one cosmic year, but the Passover following could only belong to the next cosmic year, the equinox therefore obviously occurring between them.³⁷ The fact that this scheme has been present in the *Chronographiae* all along (albeit heretofore unnoticed), but is drawn out and made explicit by the *Excerpta Barbari* expressly placing the crucifixion March 25th, argues strongly that Africanus is the latter's ultimate author. When we then add the fact that the *Excerpta Barbari* follows Africanus' plan in every other particular, including the very remarkable coincidence touching the arrival of the Magi, the conclusion becomes all but irresistible.

According to Martin Wallraff, editor of the standard edition of Africanus, where the *Excerpta Barbari* lists the names and dates of rulers recorded in synchronism with major events in sacred history, and these also correspond with the dating scheme of Africanus' *Chronographiae*, "there is a strong likelihood that the information derives from Africanus."³⁸ The table of consuls and corresponding events from sacred history fit this description perfectly. Moreover, we have identified *eight* points of correspondence between Africanus' chronology and the *Excerpta Barbari* and would not be surprised if there were more. Since these features and the corresponding dates evidence a "strong likelihood" the excerpts derive from Africanus, the question naturally arises why they have not found their way into the standard edition of the text? The answer likely is that assumptions associated with the History of Religions Theory probably prejudiced the material and caused it to be dismissed as dating from a later source. Moreover, the confused and incoherent form the excerpts have been in until now probably prevented the material from being understood and seriously considered or examined by scholars. However, when the formatting is corrected as suggested herein, a coherent and credible picture emerges;

36. Bede, *The Reckoning of Time* 6.291, in *Translated Texts for Historians*, vol. 29, p. 25.

37. Since the equinox necessarily preceded the Passover of AM 5532, and Passover preceded the resurrection, the notion that for Africanus the equinox coincided with the resurrection March 25th is wrong and will have to be abandoned.

38. Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, xxxvii.

Table of Seventy-four Years from First of Augustus until Resurrection of Christ (43 BC-AD 31) according to Africanus

Regnal Year	Julian Year	Annus Mundi	Regnal Year	Julian Year	Annus Mundi	Regnal Year	Julian Year	Annus Mundi
	44 BC	5458	29	15 BC	5487	1	15 AD	5516
1	43 BC	5459	30	14 BC	5488	2	16 AD	5517
2	42 BC	5460	31	13 BC	5489	3	17 AD	5518
3	41 BC	5461	32	12 BC	5490	4	18 AD	5519
4	40 BC	5462	33	11 BC	5491	5	19 AD	5520
5	39 BC	5463	34	10 BC	5492	6	20 AD	5521
6	38 BC	5464	35	9 BC	5493	7	21 AD	5522
7	37 BC	5465	36	8 BC	5494	8	22 AD	5523
8	36 BC	5466	37	7 BC	5495	9	23 AD	5524
9	35 BC	5467	38	6 BC	5496	10	24 AD	5525
10	34 BC	5468	39	5 BC	5497	11	25 AD	5526
11	33 BC	5469	40	4 BC	5498	12	26 AD	5527
12	32 BC	5470	41	3 BC	5499	13	27 AD	5528
13	31 BC	5471	42	2 BC	5500	14	28 AD	5529
14	30 BC	5472	43	1 BC	5501	15	29 AD	5530
15	29 BC	5473	44	1 AD	5502	16	30 AD	5531
16	28 BC	5474	45	2 AD	5503	17	31 AD	5532
17	27 BC	5475	46	3 AD	5504	18	32 AD	5533
18	26 BC	5476	47	4 AD	5505	19	33 AD	5534
19	25 BC	5477	48	5 AD	5506	20	34 AD	5535
20	24 BC	5478	49	6 AD	5507	21	35 AD	5536
21	23 BC	5479	50	7 AD	5508	22	36 AD	5537
22	22 BC	5480	51	8 AD	5509	23	37 AD	5538
23	21 BC	5481	52	9 AD	5510			
24	20 BC	5482	53	10 AD	5511			
25	19 BC	5483	54	11 AD	5512			
26	18 BC	5484	55	12 AD	5513			
27	17 BC	5485	56	13 AD	5514			
28	16 BC	5486	57	14 AD	5515			

Years *Annus Mundi* run March 25-March 25, rather than Jan. 1-Dec. 31 as in the Julian calendar. Because years *Annus Mundi* begin and end three months later, the column holding these dates should be shifted just less than $\frac{1}{4}$ way downward vis-à-vis their corresponding Julian date, so that March 25 AM corresponds with March 25 in the Julian year. This will cause the first regnal year of Augustus, Jan 1, 43 BC, to fall in the last quarter of AM 5458, and Christ's crucifixion to occur in the last quarter of AM 5531, but the resurrection in the first quarter of AM 5532, both in the Julian year AD 31. When the new year March 25, AM 5500, is aligned with March 25, 2 BC, Dec. 25th, 2 BC, will agree with Dec. 25th, AM 5500, the date specified by Africanus for Jesus' birth.

44 BC = Death of Julius Caesar

43 BC = 1st regnal year of Augustus / 74 years until resurrection of Christ

30 BC = 14th of Augustus / Death of Cleopatra / 60 years until "*Parousia*" of Christ

2 BC = 42nd year of Augustus / 13th Consulship of Augustus / Birth of Christ

1 BC = Death of Herod the Great

14 AD = Death of Augustus

15 AD = 1st regnal year of Tiberius

29 AD = 15th of Tiberius / Baptism of Christ / Beginning of public ministry

30 AD = 16th of Tiberius / "*Parousia*" of Christ / "Acceptable year of the Lord" / Jesus' public ministry

31 AD = 17th of Tiberius / Crucifixion (AM 5531) / Resurrection (AM 5532) ("short" chronology)

37 AD = Death of Tiberius

one that almost certainly indicates Africanus' authorship. That Africanus is indeed the ultimate author was the opinion of Selden who flourished in the generation following Scaliger and was hailed by Milton as "the chief of learned men reputed in this land"³⁹:

This is likewise confirmed by an old barbarous Translation of what was taken out of *Africanus* and *Eusebius*, and published in the noble *Scaliger's Thesaurus Temporum*, where the words are, *Aug. & Sylvano Coss Dominus noster Jesus Christus natus est sub Augusto 8 calendas Januarias*: and then, *In ipsa die in qua natus est pastures viderunt stellam, chuac 28.* which should rather be 29. for so agrees the 25. of *December* to that of the *Aegyptian Choiac*, which the Author means.⁴⁰

Concluding with Selden that Africanus is indeed the author of the portions of the *Excerpta Barbari* we have examined, the argument of Nothhaft and others that Africanus taught the December 25th birth of Christ would seem to be vindicated and the occurrence of the Christmas date prior to Aurelian established.

3. Evodius

In the preceding section, we were chiefly concerned to show that Africanus is the ultimate author of heretofore unrecognized portions of the *Excerpta Barbari* and that he held to the December 25th birth of Christ. In this section, we examine a work attributed to Evodius that also affirms the December 25th nativity. Evodius relies upon what appears to be an early version of the *Protoevangelium of James*, which allows us to tentatively date the composition prior to the latter half of the second century when the *Protoevangelium* is thought to have assumed its present form.

Perhaps the earliest putative witness of the December 25th birth of Christ is from Evodius ("Euodius"), the second bishop of the church of Antioch, Syria. Nicephorus calls Evodius a "successor" of the apostles and is related to have been ordained by St. Peter. Tradition has it that he was one of the Seventy sent out by the Lord (Luke 10:1). He is believed to have

39. John Milton, *Areopagitica: A Speech of John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing to the Parliament of England* (London, 1644; reprinted Oxford: Clarendon, 1898; 3rd edition; John W. Hales, ed.), p. 16. Note Milton's use of iambic hexameter to describe Selden.

40. John Selden, *Theanthropos, or God Made Man: A Tract Proving the Nativity of our Saviour to be on the 25 of December* (London, 1661) 37.

suffered martyrdom in the persecution under Nero (AD 64-68). According to Bingham:

From Jerusalem, if we pass to Antioch, there again we find Euodius first, and after him Ignatius, ordained bishops by the hands of the apostles. Baronius and some others fancy, that they sat both at the same time, the one as bishop of the Jews, and the other of the Gentiles; but Eusebius says expressly, that Euodius was the first, and Ignatius the second, after Euodius was dead. And it is agreed by all ancient writers, that they were both consecrated before St. Peter's death.⁴¹

Evodius therefore carries us back as near to the fountainhead of the faith as possible outside of the New Testament itself. The only writing that has reputedly survived of Evodius is part of an epistle quoted by Nicephorus:

From the baptism unto the passion of Christ there were three years; from the passion, resurrection, and his ascension into heaven unto the stoning of Steven, seven years; from Steven's martyrdom unto the time when light encompassed Paul, six months. From there unto the decease of the holy mother of God, three years. He [Evodius] says the period from the nativity of Christ unto the passing of the mother of God was forty-four years; but the whole of her life, fifty-nine years. This sum obtains if it was in fact the case⁴² that she was presented at the temple when she was three years old and there in the holy precincts spent eleven years. Then, by the priest's hands was placed in the custody of Joseph, with whom she resided four months when she received the joyful announcement from the angel Gabriel. However, she gave birth to the Light of this World, the twenty-fifth day of the month of December, being fifteen years of age. Following this, she passed thirty-three years, which sum also her son completed on earth, who was even the eternal and before all ages Word. After the cross, however, at his request she dwelt in the home of John eleven years, so that of her life-time there were altogether fifty-nine years.⁴³

Since this is the only writing attributed to Evodius, we cannot test his authorship by comparing what is said here with what he is known or believed to have said elsewhere, as we can Africanus and other early writers. Hence, the authenticity of Evodius' authorship can never be made certain. On the other hand, the same lack of evidence that prevents us from confirming the attribution also prevents us from pronouncing against it. We simply lack

41. Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae, Antiquities of the Christian Church* (London, 1878) vol. 2, p. 20.

42. Evodius (or Nicephorus) does not necessarily credit the legend, and indeed seems to question it by the phrase *siquidem* ("if actually").

43. Nicephorus Callisti, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.3; translated from the Greek to Latin by Iohannes Langus AD 1562; English translation from the Latin by the author.

sufficient information to say either way. If the only objection to Evodius' authorship is the presence of the Christmas date, which the History of Religions Theory eschews prior to AD 336, this is no objection at all. A theory can attempt to explain evidence; it cannot serve as the basis to dismiss or reject it. The *Chronograph of 354* is our earliest uncontested evidence of the Christmas date; it does not establish a boundary beyond which we are prohibited to go. Nevertheless, identity of the author is largely immaterial. We do not know the original author of the *Protoevangelium* and other early documents, but this does not prevent us from dating them. Since it is the date of the composition that ultimately concerns us, we will occupy ourselves chiefly with that question and not whether Evodius is the actual author (which cannot be known). If we refer to Evodius in the discussion below, it is more from convenience than from certainty he is the author.

We note initially that Evodius places Jesus' birth at December 25th. That this is part of the original composition and not the addition of a later hand will appear from the discussion that follows. The historical accuracy of Evodius' account at various points may certainly be questioned;⁴⁴ that it consists of some legendary material also goes without saying. This is especially true regarding the dedication of Mary and her dwelling in the temple, which appears to be an early variation of the apocryphal work known as the *Protoevangelium of James*, which we briefly encountered in our discussion of Africanus. The *Protoevangelium* is the earliest and most influential of the New Testament pseudepigrapha; it is one of the many "infancy gospels" written to expand upon the canonical narratives of Matthew and Luke. It was known to Origen (AD 184-254) and probably Clement (AD 150-215),⁴⁵ and therefore cannot be later than AD 250. Most scholars date it to the middle or latter half of the second century. The story-line of the *Protoevangelium* is based upon the story of Elkanah, Hannah, and

44. The persecution over Stephen probably began within one year of Jesus' ascension, not seven years as put forward by Evodius. Moreover, this first persecution, which followed close upon the heels of Christ's ascension, probably lasted 3 ½ years, not merely six months (cf. Rev 12:5-16). This can be confirmed by the date of Paul's conversion around AD 38, which marked the end of the first persecution (Acts 9:31). Paul states that he went up to Jerusalem three years after his conversion (Gal 1:18); he then went again after fourteen years to attend the Jerusalem Counsel (Gal 2:1; Acts 15:2). He returned again two or three years later when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-22). From an inscription found at Delphi, we know Gallio was proconsul in AD 52-53. Moreover, mention of Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome further fixes this date, for Claudius expelled the Jews in the tenth year of his reign, or AD 52 (Acts 18:2). Two years later, Paul went up again and was arrested (Acts 19:10; 20:22; 24:17, 18), and remained in custody under Felix two years (Acts 24:27). Festus replaced Felix in AD 59-60. Thus AD 59-2-2-14-3 = AD 38. Therefore, Paul would have converted within roughly four-and-a-half years of Jesus' ascension, not the seven-and-a-half stated by Evodius. The intervening period would have been filled with the persecution over Stephen.

45. Clement Alexandria, *Stomata* 7:16; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 17.

Samuel. Hannah and Elkanah make their annual trek to the tabernacle. Hannah is barren and asks a child of the Lord who gives her conception of the child Samuel. Samuel is dedicated to the Lord and grows up in the temple under the care of the High Priest, Eli, until becoming established as a prophet in his own right (1 Sam 1-4). In the *Protoevangelium*, Joachim, Anna, and Mary are substituted for Elkanah, Hannah, and Samuel. Anna is barren but obtains conception of Mary from the Lord; Mary is then dedicated to the Lord when she is three years of age. Later, she is betrothed to Joseph and bears the Christ-child. The narrative also includes the Arrival of the Magi (*Proto.* 21), the Slaughter of the Innocents (*Proto.* 22), and the Martyrdom of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, who is portrayed as the High Priest (*Proto.* 23, 24).

140 Greek manuscripts are known, and the work has been translated into Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Georgian, Slavonic, Armenian, Arabic, Latin, and Irish.⁴⁶ Variations in the story-line include the circumstances of Anna's conception of Mary, the length of Anna's pregnancy (six, seven, and nine months), and the age of Mary at the annunciation (fourteen, fifteen, sixteen).⁴⁷ The original scope of the worked is debated. The Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, Papyrus Bodmer 5, generally dated between the third and fourth centuries, is the oldest existing manuscript, and already evidences signs of revision and cutting and reflects shorter versions of the story-line in several places. According to Cameron, although it is the oldest manuscript we possess, many of its readings seem to be "secondary."⁴⁸ Moreover, different sections appear to represent later additions super-added to the original, so that what we have today represents a *composite* made up of separate traditions which are necessarily older than the document itself. For example, in the narrative of Jesus' birth, Joseph suddenly begins speaking in the first-person. Thereafter, the narrative resumes the third-person until the story's close when the first-person occurs again, this time in the person of James who claims to be the author. The sudden change from third-person to first-person, first in Joseph then in James,

46. O. Cullmann, "Infancy Gospels," in *The New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, ed. W. Schneemelcher, transl. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1991) 421-422; Emile de Strycker, "Die griechischen Handschriften des Protevangeliums Jacobi," in *Griechische Kodikologie und Textüberlieferung*, ed. D. Harlfinger (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, repr. 1980) 577-612; Maurice Geerard, *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992) 27-29.

47. Mary Clayton, *The Apocryphal Gospels of Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 26 (Cambridge: University Press, 1998) 8, 9.

48. Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels, Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982) 107.

demonstrates the composite nature of the work and that separate traditions seemingly have been rather carelessly “cut and pasted” together.⁴⁹

These variations, and the likelihood that the document represents a compilation of earlier traditions, may explain the differences that occur between Evodius and the *Protoevangelium* we possess today. Specifically, the differences appear to derive from an early version of the *Protoevangelium* before it settled into its present form. In Evodius, Mary is *fourteen* years old when she is betrothed and placed in the custody of Joseph, whereas in the *Protoevangelium* she is only *twelve*. In Evodius, Mary resides with Joseph four *months* before the annunciation; the *Protoevangelium* changes this to four *years*. Mary gives birth to Jesus while she is still *fifteen* according to Evodius; in the *Protoevangelium* she is *sixteen*. The difference between a fourteen-year-old girl capable of conception four months after her betrothal and a twelve-year-old girl that must wait four years to conceive is highly significant. A girl of fourteen would already experience menstrual flow; a girl of twelve presumably would not. The difference therefore almost certainly reflects a change in the story to address issues not anticipated in the original composition, requiring her age be lowered to twelve. It is widely agreed that the original author of the *Protoevangelium* was a Gentile,⁵⁰ unfamiliar with Jewish law and custom and even the most basic geography of Israel itself: the idea that Joachim could not present an offering at the temple because he was childless; that Mary would be permitted to live in the temple and approach the altar; that Bethlehem is a region separate from Judea rather than a city or village within Judea; that Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was High Priest; *etc.* These and other indicia all reveal the original author’s ignorance of his subject matter. Evodius’ report that Mary was fourteen at her betrothal doubtless evidences yet one more.

Jewish law rendered a woman ritually impure during her menstrual flow (Lev 18:19; 20:18; Isa 30:22; Lam 1:17; Ezek 22:10). The original author apparently did not realize this fact and therefore failed to take into consideration issues regarding Mary remaining in the temple until she was fully capable of conception. When this point later came to attention, the age must then have been lowered to twelve and the period between her

49. Harnack proposed that the *Protoevangelium* was a composite of three separate traditions: a Nativity of Mary, a Joseph Apocryphon, and a Zachariah Apocryphon (Adolph von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius*, 2 vols. [Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897] 1:600-603; cf. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels,” 424). For an argument for the unity of authorship, see Emile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961) 377-392; cf. Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, The Scholars Bible 2 (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1995) 13-15.

50. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels,” 423.

betrothal and the annunciation lengthened accordingly. How else can we account for the difference? What other motivation can there be to make Mary so young at the time of her betrothal if not to avoid the problem associated with a fourteen-year-old girl, capable of conception, dwelling in the temple? Indeed, the *Protoevangelium* specifically states that it was to *prevent* Mary from polluting the temple that she was betrothed to Joseph when she was (*Proto.* 8:3-9). It then causes her to live as a virgin *four full years* before the annunciation (*Proto.* 12:9) – a duration inexplicably long except understood as a contrivance allowing Mary to pass from prepubescence to physical maturity and adulthood where she is finally able to conceive. This version of the story would thus seem to represent a later correction or emendation intended to resolve problems not anticipated in the earlier version reported by Evodius. If this is correct, it would allow us to tentatively date Evodius' account prior to the mid-second century when the *Protoevangelium* is thought to have settled into its present form.

This conclusion is corroborated to a certain extent by Africanus who seemingly cites the same tradition or source-document. Africanus quotes the *Protoevangelium* in connection with the births of John and Christ, and, like Evodius, places Jesus' birth at December 25th. We may therefore reasonably conclude that the tradition known to Evodius was similarly known to Africanus. And since Africanus would have sought out and used the earliest sources he could find, the tradition he reports necessarily originated at a period earlier than himself (AD 160-240), carrying us back to about the time predicted. Indeed, for aught we know, Africanus read and relied upon Evodius. However, this much is reasonably clear, that a very early tradition of Christ's December 25th birth was known and reported by both authors who seem to have found the date in the *Protoevangelium*.⁵¹ Indeed, a close examination of the *Protoevangelium*, both as reported by

51. Another apparent witness of the connection between the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* and the Christmas date are the Nativity homilies of Jacob of Sarug (d. AD 521). Homily I in particular bears the unmistakable imprint of the *Protoevangelium's* influence. Most telling is the portion of the *Protoevangelium* which claims Mary retained her hymen even after giving birth to Jesus, a point crudely and graphically made by Salome's physically inspecting Mary to ensure the hymen was intact (*Proto.* 19:18–20:3). Jacob of Sarug repeats the identical claim throughout his homilies, stating for example, "The Begetter of babes begot himself corporeally; / He proceeded from the womb but the seal of her virginity remained (intact)" ("Jacob of Sarug's Homilies on the Nativity," in *The Metrical Homilies of Mar Jacob of Sarug*, Fascicles 18-20, Texts from Christian Late Antiquity 23 [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010] 102, cf. 172, 198). Other points of contact with the *Protoevangelium* include the 1) High Priesthood of Zachariah who receives the vision of Gabriel regarding John in the Holy of Holies (p. 48), 2) Mary is consistently referred to as a "young girl" (pp. 40, 48 *et alia*), 3) Jesus is born in a cave (pp. 14, 102, 112, *et alia*) and, 4) he is born at the time of the winter solstice when "the sun ascends degrees of light...[and] darkness retraces its footsteps" (pp. 132-134).

Evodius and as it exists today, reveals multiple points of contact with the December 25th birth of Christ.

3.1. *The Protoevangelium and the December 25th Birth of Christ*

3.1.1. *Mary's Passover conception, Jesus' birth, and the manuscript tradition.* According to the *Protoevangelium*, Mary was conceived at the time of the "great day of the Lord" when Jews from all over make their annual trek to the temple. It is a time of rejoicing when mourning and sorrow are to be put away. Moreover, hatchlings are still in their nests, showing that it is spring (*Proto.* 2:2; 3:1). This makes clear that we are dealing with *Passover*, similar to the story of Hannah and Elkanah (1 Sam 1:1-20). *Passover* occurs at the full moon on or first after the vernal equinox. Because the lunar cycle is 29 ½ days, there is a 30-day window beginning with the vernal equinox in which *Passover* can occur. That is, assuming the full moon occurred the day before the vernal equinox, one would have to wait 30 days until the next full moon in order to celebrate *Passover*. The Roman calendar set the vernal equinox at March 25th. Therefore, *Passover* could occur anywhere between March 25th and April 24th. Assuming she was full term and depending upon when *Passover* occurred the year she was theoretically conceived per our story, this means that Mary would have been born sometime between December 25th and January 24th. All else remaining the same and assuming Mary's betrothal occurred on or about her birthday (it is Mary's turning twelve (fourteen per Evodius) that prompted making provision for her betrothal),⁵² this would postpone Jesus' birth until January 25th to February 24th, thirteen months from the previously stated dates. However, when we reckon backward thirteen months from Jesus' given date of birth December 25th (four months' betrothal plus nine months' gestation) we find that Mary was born (according to our story) in late *November*. In other words, in order to fix Jesus' birth at December 25th, Mary's gestation has been cut short.

To approach the matter from a slightly different angle, it would require twenty-two months in the normal course of human affairs to complete Mary's and Jesus' birth narratives: nine months each for the gestation of Mary and Jesus, plus four months for Mary's betrothal until the annunciation (9 + 9 + 4 = 22). In linear time, there is, of course, a fourteen-year gap between Mary's birth and her betrothal to Joseph. But in calendrical time, which is cyclical and exists in an endless revolution of weeks and months,

52. γενόμενης δὲ αὐτῆς δώδεκαετους. That Mary's betrothal corresponded closely with her fourteenth birthday is also seen in the fact that she was fifteen when she gave birth to Jesus: four months' betrothal until the annunciation plus nine months' gestation equals thirteen months, allowing Mary to turn from fourteen to fifteen.

because Mary's betrothal occurs at or near the same point in the calendar as her birth, this gap effectively disappears. Hence, twenty-two months would normally be required to accomplish the stated events and Jesus' birth would occur one to two months *later* than Evodius reports. However, by setting Jesus' birth at December 25th pressure results, requiring that something somewhere give. The place this shows up is the length of Mary's gestation, which Evodius' account shortens to *seven or eight* months, causing her to be born in November. This, in turn, shortens the combined birth-narratives of Mary and Jesus to between twenty and twenty-one months (depending whether Passover was in March or April the year Mary was conceived).

That copyists were conscious of the need to shorten Mary's gestation this way in order to accommodate Jesus' December 25th birth is witnessed by the manuscript testimony varying the length of Anna's pregnancy between six, seven and nine months. Just as the manuscript variation regarding the *age* of Mary at her betrothal indicates this was a critical point in the evolution and development of the story, the variation in the manuscripts regarding the *length* of Mary's gestation shows this too was a critical point and tends to confirm that Jesus' December 25th birth was in some form or manner associated with an early variation of the text. Without a fixed time or date of this sort, no pressure results in the story's timeline and subsequent copyists would have had no reason to vary the length of Anna's pregnancy the way they do. But where a fixed time or date is stated or assumed, Mary's Passover conception becomes a *terminus a quo* on the one end and Jesus' early winter birth a *terminus ad quem* on the other, creating pressure between them. To manipulate the length of Jesus' gestation apparently was not seen as an option, whereas Mary's obviously was. Hence, the manuscript witness lengthening or shortening Anna's pregnancy as individual copyists thought best to accommodate Jesus' December 25th birth. The manuscript tradition varying the length of Mary's gestation therefore bears witness that the Christmas date was formerly attached to the *Protoevangelium* precisely as reported by Evodius and Africanus. Indeed, it is only in versions of the *Protoevangelium* where the length of Mary's betrothal is extended to four years that the winter birth of Christ is lost or obscured. Even then, however, it does not disappear altogether; traces of it may still be seen in the High Priesthood of Zachariah and the Arrival of the Magi.

3.1.2. *December 25th and the High Priesthood of Zachariah.* Luke indicates that Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was fulfilling his priestly ministration when he received the announcement of John's impending conception (Luke 1:5-20). Encountering this imagery, early writers supposed Zachariah was High Priest serving at the Feast of Atonement. The Feast of Atonement occurred the tenth day of the seventh lunar month

(Lev 16:29-34; Num 29:7) in a 30-day window beginning roughly mid-September through mid-October, near the autumnal equinox. This would place the birth of John the Baptist nine months later about the time of the summer solstice. And because John was six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26, 36), the nativity of Christ would have occurred six months later, near the winter solstice. Among the earliest writers proposing Zachariah was High Priest are Ambrose of Milan (AD 340-397)⁵³ and Ephrem Syrus (AD 306-373)⁵⁴. However, the most well-known example is probably the AD 386 Christmas-day sermon of John Chrysostom, given in defense of the Christmas festival lately arrived in the city of Antioch. Chrysostom gives the Greek name of the month *Gorpiaios* answering to our September, when Zachariah purportedly served, the sixth month thereafter (*Dustros*) when the annunciation was made to Mary, then counts nine months forward to the Greek equivalent of our December and the birth of Christ:

Once a year the High Priest alone entered the Holy of Holies. And when did this happen? In the month *Gorpiaios*. Then in fact Zachariah entered the Holy of Holies; then he also received the glad tidings concerning John. Accordingly, he withdrew from there, and his wife conceived. And after *Gorpiaios*, when Elizabeth was in the sixth month, which is *Dustros*, Mary conceived. So, counting nine months from *Xanthikos*, we come to the present month in which our Lord Christ was born.⁵⁵

53. "Seems here holy Zachariah to be designated High Priest, because as it is read, concerning the first tabernacle, 'into which the priests went always accomplishing the service of God ... But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood which he offered for himself and for the sins of the people.'" Ambrose, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam ad 1:22* in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. XXXII, *S. Ambrosii Opera, Pars III*, p. 24; (CCSL 14, p. 17) (translation by the author).

54. "The paschal lamb is a type of the Lord, who, on the tenth day of the month of Nisan, descended into the womb of the Virgin. From the tenth day of the seventh month, when Zachariah was foretold of the nativity of John, unto the tenth day of the first month, in which the angel announced to Mary the incarnation of the Divine word, six months transpired, as Mary was told by the angel: 'This is the sixth month with her who was called barren'. And as the paschal lamb was shut up on the tenth day of the month, so the Lord was then conceived." Ephrem Syrus, "Commentary on Exodus 12:2-3," in *Opera Omnia Ephraem Syri* (Rome, 1737) 1.212-213; (CSCO 152, p. 141) (translation from Latin by the author); cf. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Luke 1:29 (SC 121, pp. 61-62). Ephrem held to the January 6th nativity. But as they are only twelve days apart, the typology was applied equally to the December 25th. Both dates occur very early in the church, Epiphany – which probably commemorated Jesus' first miracle – becoming confounded with the nativity at some point along the way.

55. John Chrysostom, *In diem natalem D.M. Jesu Christi*, PG 49, cols. 351-352. In reading Chrysostom, we come away with the distinct impression that the argument Zachariah was High Priest was retrofitted to explain or justify the already existing date of December 25th, leaving open the question whether the early winter nativity resulted from belief Zachariah was High Priest, or *vice versa*.

Of course, Zachariah was not High Priest. Zachariah lived in the priestly city of Hebron in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39; Josh 20:7; 21:11; cf. Num 35); the High Priest maintained a palace in Jerusalem (John 18:15). It was to burn incense *outside* the veil that brought Zachariah into the Holy Place, not to carry blood within the veil (Exod 30:7; 1 Chron 23:13; Lev 10:1; Num 16:39). Nevertheless, that early writers confused Zachariah's office bears directly upon our discussion, for the *Protoevangelium* also represents Zachariah as High Priest. In fact, it is Zachariah who betroths Mary to Joseph after receiving a vision within the veil:

And the priest took the vestment with twelve bells and went into the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning her. And behold, an angel of the Lord (suddenly) stood before him and said to him, saying, "Zacharias, Zacharias."⁵⁶

The vision of Zachariah here cannot be read in isolation, but must be read in light of the canonical vision recorded by Luke foretelling the conception of John, and was almost certainly written to fill up the space between the conceptions of John and Christ. The writer therefore takes us into the Holy of Holies a second time, two months after the Feast of Atonement, to provide details of Mary's betrothal to Joseph and the annunciation four months later. September to November (the time from Zachariah's vision regarding John until Mary's betrothal) is two months. November to March (the length of Mary's betrothal until the annunciation) is four months. Together these equal six months, the length between the births of John and Christ. Hence, the whole story-line as reported by Evodius was obviously carefully thought through and arranged to fit seamlessly into the canonical narrative of Luke, providing a time-line from the conception of John until Mary's betrothal, and thence to the annunciation and the December 25th birth of Christ.

Of course, in versions of the *Protoevangelium* which reduce Mary's age at her betrothal to twelve and extend the period until the annunciation to four years, the vision of Zachariah regarding Mary would necessarily precede the canonical vision regarding the birth of John. Even so, the fact that John was conceived near the Day of Atonement and was six months older than Jesus would place the latter's birth on or about the winter solstice in any event, so that the winter birth of Christ is an *inherent result* of the High Priesthood of Zachariah and the *Protoevangelium* no matter which version we consult. However, Evodius' account seems to us more likely to have been the original, as witnessed by the manuscript variations, the latent

56. *Protoevangelium* of James 8.3, in Cameron, *The Other Gospels, Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, 113.

points of contact with December 25th, and the inherent improbability of Mary being twelve at her betrothal and living as a virgin four full years until the annunciation. Moreover, the seamlessness with which Evodius' account fits into the canonical narrative of Luke impresses us as the more probable setting for Mary's betrothal than one that carries us back four years before the vision regarding John.

3.1.3. December 25th and the Arrival of the Magi. Read in isolation, the Arrival of the Magi in the *Protoevangelium* does not provide information which would allow us to date the birth of Christ. However, when read in conjunction with the High Priesthood of Zachariah, we find that it accords perfectly with Africanus' affirmation placing the arrival of the Magi at January 1st.

According to the *Protoevangelium*, Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem to be enrolled according to the decree of Augustus (Luke 2:1-5). However, before they reach Bethlehem, the couple is forced to seek shelter in a cave because Mary has begun labor with the Christ-child. Shortly after the child's birth, Joseph prepares to move the family from the cave, but before the couple can relocate the Magi arrive. When Herod learns the Magi have returned to their country another way and orders the slaughter of the innocents, Mary wraps baby Jesus in swaddling clothes and hides him in a cattle stall to keep him safe. Meanwhile, Elizabeth escapes to the mountains with the infant John (whom Herod also seeks to kill), and Zachariah, who is still High Priest, is put to death by Herod for refusing to disclose his location.⁵⁷ After Zachariah is mourned three days, he is replaced by Simeon as High Priest, the gentle soul introduced by Luke who was told he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's anointed (*Proto.* 17-24; cf. Luke 2:22-35). The appointment of Simeon marks the end of the birth narrative and is followed by a closing statement attributed to James who claims to be the document's author.

That the holy family is still in the temporary shelter of the cave places the arrival of the Magi very soon after Jesus' birth. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is circumcised the eighth day, followed by the introduction of Simeon in connection with the presentment of Christ at the temple forty days after his birth (Luke 2:21, 25; cf. Lev 12:1-4; Exod 13:13; Num 18:15, 16). In the *Protoevangelium*, the appointment of Simeon to replace Zachariah sets the stage for the presentment of Christ recorded by Luke. However, since there is no mention of Jesus' circumcision in the *Protoevangelium*, we may be

57. The implication intended being that John's father was the "Zachariah the son of Berechiah" mentioned by Jesus, who was slain between the temple and the altar, rather than the Old Testament prophet whose martyrdom was prophetic of Christ (Matt 23:35; Zech 1:1; 11:7-13; 12:10; 13:7; cf. Matt 26:31).

given to understand that the arrival of the Magi and martyrdom of Zachariah occurred the *seventh* day as affirmed by Africanus. The notion that the Magi arrived when Jesus was seven days old has a fairly long and pervasive tradition. T91 in the standard edition of the *Chronographiae* indicates that Africanus was followed in this view by “Cyril” and “some others.”⁵⁸ “Cyril” may refer to Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 315-386), or Cyril of Alexandria (AD 375-444); it is uncertain which. Both were prominent figures in their day. If either man assented to Africanus’ view, it is likely they were not alone and that this view was once widely embraced. The fact that T91 indicates “some others” also held the view tends to confirm that this was so. As late as the ninth century, George Syncellus, our primary source for Africanus, was keeping the tradition alive:

The good shepherd summoned the first shepherds through angels to see and hear the ineffable mysteries. Through the guidance of a star, he drew the Magi to him to stand guard and worship. On the eighth day, they circumcised the Lord and on the fortieth day they led him up to Jerusalem according to the law of Moses, at which time Symeon was at hand and embraced the creator of all things.⁵⁹

The Magi were Gentiles from the east (Matt 2:1, 2). Theologically, their arrival before Jesus’ circumcision would tend to emphasize Jesus as the Savior of all mankind, not just circumcised Jews. In causing them to arrive prior to the eighth day, the adoration of the Magi would thus occur while Jesus was still uncircumcised like the Magi themselves. Faced with the quandary where in the narratives of Matthew and Luke to place the arrival of the Magi, finding room between the adoration of the shepherds and Jesus’ circumcision and having a theological justification to support the decision, placing the arrival of the Magi on the seventh day was a natural choice. The fact that the Magi arrive while the holy family is still residing in the cave following Jesus’ birth suggests that the *Protoevangelium* was shaped by similar considerations. When we add to this the continuity of the narrative and the priestly ministrations of Zachariah on the Day of

58. Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, T91, p. 274, 5.

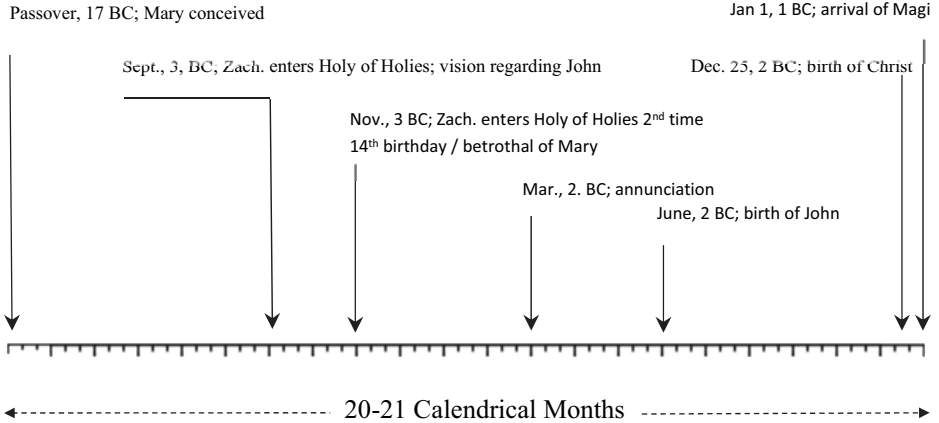
59. George Syncellus, *The Chronography of George Syncellus, A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation*, transl. William Adler and Paul Tuffin (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 456. Read together, Matthew and Luke would suggest the Magi arrived *after* the presentation of Christ, where they found him at the family home in Nazareth, having returned there after fulfilling the requirements of the law (Matt 2:11; Luke 2:39). This follows from the fact that the flight to Egypt occurred following the departure of the Magi, perhaps the very same night (Matt 2:13, 14). Since they could not make the offering at the temple after the flight to Egypt, presentation of the Christ-child necessarily occurred before this event.

Atonement, as discussed above, and that the December 25th nativity implicit there is equally applicable here, there is a strong likelihood that the *Protoevangelium* contemplates the arrival of the Magi January 1st, precisely as affirmed by Africanus.

3.1.4. Summary this part. The authenticity of the Christmas date in Evodius is witnessed by the *Protoevangelium* and its repeated points of contact with the winter birth of Christ. The tradition known and cited by Evodius appears to be a version earlier than AD 150, which was likely changed after issues regarding a fourteen-year-old-girl capable of conception remaining in the temple came to the fore. At this point, the document's connection with the December birth of Christ became lost or obscured, although traces are still clearly discernible at various points, including the High Priesthood of Zachariah and the Arrival of the Magi, the latter particularly when read in conjunction with Africanus. If we are tempted to dismiss Evodius' account as a clever fraud or misattribution, we are prevented by the corroborating witness of Africanus who cites the like tradition and source-document in connection with the December 25th birth of Christ. Together, these three – Evodius, Africanus, and the *Protoevangelium* – therefore present strong evidence of the Christmas date 120 years or more before Aurelian.

Regarding the Calculation Theory, December 25th is the only date expressed in Evodius' account. Although the March conception of Christ is probably implicit based upon Mary's November betrothal, apart from mention of the December 25th nativity, neither the month of Mary's birth/betrothal nor the month of Jesus' conception could be identified. Therefore, to the extent a March conception exists at all, it exists only by implication of Christ's December 25th birth, as a calculation from it, not *vice-versa*. Moreover, the December 25th birth is not derived from the putative date of Jesus' crucifixion. The *Protoevangelium* is fundamentally a *birth* narrative; the date of Jesus' crucifixion is no part of the story and therefore cannot serve as the basis from which calculations are made. Much the opposite, Evodius specifically states Jesus' lived *thirty-three* years and that there were *three years* from his baptism until his passion. Hence, it is clear we are not dealing with the "short" chronology, which would allow us to place Jesus' death in AD 31, when Passover occurred on or about March 25th. Evodius therefore stands for the proposition that the Christmas date occurred both earlier than, and independent of a March 25th crucifixion and conception.

The Nativities of Mary and Christ according to Evodius, Africanus, and the *Protoevangelium Jacobi*



Whereas the combined birth-narratives of Mary and Jesus should comprise twenty-two calendrical months ($9 + 9 = 4 = 22$), the narrative fills only twenty or twenty-one months, Mary’s gestation being shortened to accommodate the Dec.25th birth of Christ. Shortening of Mary’s gestation to accommodate Jesus’ birth is probably reflected in the manuscript witness varying the length of Anna’s pregnancy to 6, 7, and 9 months, showing that the December birth of Christ was in some form or manner part of an early tradition stated or assumed by the text

4. Hippolytus of Rome

In the preceding sections, we have argued for the early occurrence of the Christmas date based upon original research of our own. In the present section, we are happily able to draw upon the work of another. This section is included because it offers the corroborating witness of a contemporary source, so that whatever hesitancy we may have in accepting the foregoing conclusions may be set to rest by what follows here. “A three-fold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12).

Hippolytus (AD 170-236) was bishop of Portus, a harbor of Rome at the northern mouth of the Tiber, opposite Ostia. A contemporary of Africanus, Hippolytus was a student of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons. Irenaeus was a student of Polycarp, and Polycarp of St. John, so that with Hippolytus we have a direct line of instruction reaching back to the apostles. Hippolytus’ belief

in the December 25th birth of Christ has long been conjectured but was recently demonstrated by Thomas C. Schmidt.⁶⁰ Schmidt analyzes two notes in Hippolytus' lunar tables of paschal moons, which concern the beginning and end of Jesus' life: one places the Passion on Friday, March 25th, AD 29; the other places the "genesis" (γένεσις) of Christ on April 2nd, 2 BC.

Initially, we should note that the year AD 29 for the Passion is manifestly wrong; Hippolytus is apparently under the same confusion we encountered earlier with Tertullian. AD 29 was the year Jesus was baptized, probably in the fall shortly before his thirtieth birthday (Luke 3:1, 21-23).⁶¹ Since Jesus was baptized in the fall of AD 29, it is hardly possible he could have been crucified earlier that spring. Moreover, Passover in AD 29 occurred April 16th in the Julian calendar, further demonstrating that Hippolytus has erred. The year Hippolytus presumably is looking for is AD 31 (see discussion under Africanus, above).

The meaning of the word γένεσις in connection with the beginning of Jesus' life is more problematic: Does it mean birth, or conception? An extensive word study by Schmidt indicates that γένεσις in this context almost certainly means *conception*. For example, Schmidt cites Galen, a contemporary of Hippolytus and a founder of western medicine (all translations by Schmidt):

But with the genesis [γένεσις] of the animal in the womb the matter [semen] is abundant. Galen, *On Semen* 1.13.17

Clement of Alexandria is called next into evidence:

It is not therefore frequent intercourse by the parents, but the reception of it [the seed] in the womb which corresponds with genesis [γένεσις]. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.12.83.2

Methodius next gives testimony:

For the beginning of the genesis [γένεσις] of men is the casting of seed into the passages of the womb. Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 2.1.31

60. Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' Canon and Chronicon," in *Vigiliae Christianae* 69 (2015) 542-563.

61. "There is every reason to believe Jesus was baptized and began his public ministry in the fall of A.D. 29." Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 342. Since Jesus' 30th birthday followed his fall baptism, the latter played a critical role in establishing the early winter nativity. See generally, Epiphanius, *Panarion* ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation," 16.1-9), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, vol. 79, pp. 42, 43.

Finally, Schmidt cites Matthew 1:18 with the remark that Hippolytus may have had this verse in mind when he spoke of the “γένεσις of Christ”:

The genesis [γένεσις] of Jesus Christ happened in this way. After his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child by the Holy Spirit.

Schmidt appears to be joined in his conclusion about Matt 1:18 by Jerome (or other translator of the New Testament), who translated γένεσις in the Latin Vulgate not by “birth” (*partus, ortus, natus*), as our English versions, but by *generatio*,⁶² a term that suffers some of the same ambiguity as γένεσις, but is best defined as the *generation* or *begetting* of children, including the *whole process* of conception and birth. Based upon the above, Schmidt concludes that “conception” is the most reasonable interpretation to place upon the term γένεσις as it appears in Hippolytus’ *Canon*.⁶³

Schmidt observes further that an early winter birth naturally follows from a conception date of April 2nd.⁶⁴ However, this may be unwelcome news for proponents of the Calculation Theory. As we shall soon see, Hippolytus placed Jesus’ birth on December 25th. But if Hippolytus placed Christ’s conception on April 2nd, Christ’s December 25th birth obviously was not based upon calculations derived from a March 25th conception. This tends to refute the Calculation Theory as presently framed and give the December 25th birth of Christ an independent provenance (as also seen in Evodius). It also argues for the priority of the December 25th nativity and that the March 25th conception was calculated from it, rather than *vice-versa*. This was the position of Engberding, an early defender of the Calculation Theory before it was cast in its present form:

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...[The December 25 birthdate] 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

62. *Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Roger Gryson (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969, 1994) *in loc.*

63. Schmidt, “Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus,” 551-552.

64. *Ibid.*, 549.

and perhaps not yet, was the rationale for the date consciously constructed and defended.⁶⁵

Thus, Engberding argued that March 25th was chosen as the date of conception based upon the *already established* birth-date of December 25th – a hypothesis demonstrated by Evodius, and probably Africanus, and followed by Hippolytus' *Chronicon*, to which we now turn.

The next testimony Schmidt places in evidence is Hippolytus' *Chronicon*. This document dates to AD 235, twenty years later than the *Canon* but still in accord with all of its basic assumptions and dates. Hippolytus sets the first day of creation on Sunday, March 25th.⁶⁶ Moreover, Hippolytus sets Christ's birth on December 25th:

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. Hippolytus, *Chronicon* 686–688; *trans.* Thomas C. Schmidt

4842 years, 9 months from Adam + 660 years = 5502 years, 9 months. The extra nine months, when reckoned from the first day of creation March 25th, means that Christ would have been born December 25th. The nine months preceding the transmigration to Babylon are made up of the extra six months attributed to the reign of David, plus the three months Jehoahaz reigned (2 Sam 5:5; 2 Chron 36:1, 2). However, this requires Hippolytus to disregard the eight or so months of Jehoiakim's twelfth year prior to being put to death by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:1-6; 2 Chron 36:5-8; Ezek 33:21; cf. 2 Kgs 24:6; Jer 22:19; 36:30), plus three months of Jeconiah's reign (2 Kgs 24:8; 2 Chron 36:9), and the fact that scripture states Jeconiah went into captivity at the years' end; *viz.*, just prior to Nisan in the spring, not winter as formulated by Hippolytus (2 Chron 36:10). Since a careful student of scripture like Hippolytus could not have overlooked these facts, the extra nine months from creation until the Babylonian captivity and thence to the birth of Christ was obviously a deliberate device by which he could arrive precisely at December 25th, thereby achieving the symmetry early computists and chronographers typologically equated with God's perfect work of salvation.

This is not the whole state of the case in Hippolytus. In a forthcoming publication, Schmidt will address additional references to Christ's birth in

65. Susan K. Roll, "The Origins of Christmas: The State of the Question," in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, pp. 185-186.

66. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus," 557-560; Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas*, 87.

Hippolytus' *Canon* and his *Commentary on Daniel*, the latter of which makes specific reference to December 25th:

For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, was December 25th, a Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year, but from Adam, five thousand and five hundred years. He suffered in the thirty-third year, March 25th, Friday, the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, while Rufus and Roubellion were Consuls. *Commentary on Daniel* 4.23.3, trans. by Thomas C. Schmidt.⁶⁷

We note initially that Hippolytus has here changed the year of the nativity from AM 5502, to follow Africanus in placing Jesus' birth in AM 5500, the forty-second year of Augustus. However, he rejects the "short" chronology, which places Jesus' death in the seventeenth year of Tiberius (AD 31), moving the crucifixion instead to AD 32, even while attempting to retain the consulship of *Gemino et Gemino*, apparently because the error of the March 25th crucifixion by then had become an established part of computistical and chronographical reckoning, and because he believed Passover fell on a Friday during that consulship as required by the Gospels.⁶⁸ There are six Greek manuscripts and a medieval Slavonic translation which contain the passage from Daniel:

A=10th Century
 B=15th/16th Century
 G1=13th Century
 G2=14th Century
 J=11th Century
 P=13th Century
 S=Old Slavonic translation 11th Century (4 manuscripts exist)

All of these contain reference to December 25th except "J," which contains no date, and "A," which contains December 25th and a second fragmentary date. Based upon his observations of the *Chronicon* and *Canon*, Schmidt believes these references to the Christmas date are authentic and not the addition of a later hand. However, we must leave it for Schmidt to explain

67. For the text and Schmidt's translation of both the *Chronicon* and *Commentary on Daniel*, see, "Hippolytus of Rome: Commentary on Daniel and 'Chronicon'," in *Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics* 67 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2017).

68. The moveable nature of this consulship and the date of March 25th is further seen in the apocryphal *Acts of Pilate*, variously dated between the mid-second to fourth centuries, where the author locates the consulship of *Rubellio* in the 19th year of Tiberius (AD 33). Ron Cameron, "Acts of Pilate," in *The Other Gospels, Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, 164, 5, ed. Felix Scheidweiler (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. and Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991); "The Gospel of Nicodemus: The Acts of Pilate and Christ's Descent into Hell," in *The New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 1, 501-536.

the manuscripts and their relationship to Hippolytus' *Canon* and *Chronicon* relative to the date of Christ's birth. Even so, the state of the evidence as it presently stands still weighs all but conclusively in favor of Hippolytus' dating the birth of Christ to December 25th, and that long before the time of Aurelian. Moreover, since there is no suggestion that the December 25th nativity originated with Hippolytus, we must conclude that he followed a convention already current in his day, circulating in the works of men like Africanus and other early writers, so that the Christmas date in all probability hales from a time earlier still, according as we also saw in our discussion concerning Evodius and the *Protoevangelium*.

5. Summary and Conclusion

Of the three sources examined, Africanus alone explicitly places Jesus' conception on March 25th. Given the influence he exerted, it seems likely that Africanus is the original source of the March 25th – December 25th – March 25th triad that gained currency with later computists and chronographers. However, inasmuch as all three dates occur simultaneously in Africanus, it is impossible to say which preceded or served as the basis for calculating the others. Thus, although Africanus demonstrates the early occurrence of the triad, he does not allow us to conclude the Christmas date was calculated from a March 25th conception. On the contrary, Evodius, who is earlier than Africanus, and Hippolytus, who was his younger contemporary, both place Christ's birth December 25th, but neither places the conception on March 25th. However, it is evident that Hippolytus was committed to dating the passion to the consulship of *Rubellio* and transferred that consulship to AD 32 as necessary to maintain Jesus' death on March 25th. Since Hippolytus also dated creation to this date, it may be that he harbored a latent inclination to follow Africanus and was receptive to a March 25th conception. However, because he was committed to Jesus' conception coinciding with Passover, and Passover did not fall on March 25th in any of the relevant years, Hippolytus placed the conception April 2nd, even while placing the nativity December 25th. This tends to validate Engberding's conclusion that December 25th had priority and served as the basis for the construct placing the conception on March 25th. Indeed, although they disagree in other particulars, December 25th is the one date all three writers agree upon, which must therefore represent the point of departure from which later constructs find their source. Moreover, all three witnesses are earlier than the institution of the festival *Natalis Sol Invicti*. Unless and until they are shown to be spurious, the present state of the evidence in no way allows us to conclude that the Christmas date was derived from the festival *Sol Invictus*. In sum, the Christmas date occurs both earlier and of

separate provenance than either of the two leading theories can account, which seems instead to find its source in an early legend or report.

1628 N. Guadalupe Street
Carlsbad, New Mexico, 88220
USA
k.simmons@windstream.net

Kurt SIMMONS