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### **Lukan Nativity Chronology and Modern Versions:**

#### **How the Consensus View of Herod's Death has Affected Translation of Luke**

*Kurt M. Simmons, JD*

Since the publication of Emile Schürer's *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*,<sup>1</sup> the consensus among scholars is that Herod the Great died in 4 BC. However, this conflicts with the traditional date of Christ's birth based upon the Gospel of Luke which was widely understood to place the nativity in 2 BC. The tendency has thus grown up to so interpret and translate Luke's statement of Jesus' age at his baptism as to remove this discrepancy and contradiction. In this article we look at Luke's Gospel and questions of history and translation as they bear upon the time of the nativity. We will conclude that the evidence weighs well in favor of the traditional translation and view placing Jesus' birth in late December, 2 BC.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edinburgh, T. & T. Clarke, 1890.

<sup>2</sup> The consensus view based upon Schürer has come under serious attack in recent years and has been all but overthrown: W. E. Filmer, *The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great*, JTS 17 (1966), 283–298; Earnest L.

## The Time and Season of Jesus' Birth

Luke informs us that John the Baptist and Christ were conceived “in the days of Herod the king” (Luke 1:5, 24, 26). From Matthew we learn that Herod died soon after Jesus' birth (Matt. 2:1, 19). How long before Herod's death the nativity occurred may be estimated from events recorded in scripture and history:

- Nativity
- Presentment of the Christ-child/Return to Nazareth
- Trial of Antipater/Onset of Herod's final illness
- Execution of the Rabbis stemming from the assault upon the eagle above the temple gates
- Arrival of the magi/Flight to Egypt
- Herod's final departure from Jerusalem for the mineral springs at Cholerrhoe
- Execution of Antipater/Slaughter of the Innocents
- Death of Herod
- State funeral/Internment at Herodium/Accession of Archelaus
- Passover

These are the major events marking the final days of Herod from and after the birth of Christ as collected from the New Testament, Josephus, and Macrobius. Naturally, we must allow for some overlap and uncertainty in the order in which some of these events unfolded and came to pass. Indeed, it is possible that the trial of Antipater was roughly contemporaneous with or even slightly antedated the nativity. However, knowing that the magi arrived *after* the presentment of the Christ-child (Lev. 12:2-8; Luke 2:22),<sup>3</sup> but

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Martin, *The Nativity and Herod's Death, Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Eisenbrauns, 1989), 85–92; idem, *The Star that Astonished the World* (2nd ed.; Portland: ASK Publications, 1996), 119–155; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 298-301; Andrew E. Steinmann, *When Did Herod the Great Reign?*, *Novum Testamentum* 51 (2009), 1–29; cf. Rodger C. Young and Andrew E. Steinmann, *Caligula's Statue for the Jerusalem Temple and its Relation to the Chronology of Herod the Great*, *JETS* 62.4 (2019)759-773.

<sup>3</sup> “Now the visit of the Magi obviously did not occur until more than forty days after the birth of Jesus, and may probably be placed during the winter... The ceremony in Jerusalem, Luke ii.22, could not have taken place after the visit of the Magi, for the flight into Egypt must have followed immediately on the visit,” Sir William Ramsay, *Was*

*before* Herod's final departure from Jerusalem, the initial deterioration of Herod's health and the execution of the rabbis almost certainly occurred prior to these events, sometime during the forty-day window following Jesus' birth. Luke tells us that after presentment of the Christ-child, the holy family returned to Nazareth (Luke 2:39). This would have been followed by the arrival of the magi. Next, would have followed Herod's departure from Jerusalem for the mineral springs beyond Jericho at Cholerrhoe, seeking relief from what proved to be his final illness. Herod then returned to the palace at Jericho where he died five days after ordering the execution of Antipater and the slaughter of the innocents.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding the uncertainty attached to these dates, Passover following Herod's death provides a fixed referent from which we may reckon backward to the approximate time of Jesus' birth. Passover annually occurred in the thirty-day window marked by the full moon on or first after the vernal equinox, or about March 23<sup>rd</sup>-April 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>5</sup> The period from the onset of Herod's final illness to Passover

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*Christ Born in Bethlehem?* (London, 1898) 217; *cf. ibid* at 100: "The language of [Luke] ii.39 shows that after the brief visit [to Bethlehem] they returned to their own city, Nazareth, and implies that this had always been their intention." So also Epiphanius: "He was born in Bethlehem, circumcised in the cavern, presented in Jerusalem, embraced by Simeon, openly confessed by Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, and taken away to Nazareth." "Panarion" ("De Incarnatione"), 1.4, Vol. 63, p. 55; *cf.* "Panarion" ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation"), 51.7.9, Vol. 79, p. 33; *cf.*, Methodius, "Oration Concerning Simeon and Anna" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), 6:385.

<sup>4</sup> From Macrobius we learn that slaughter of the innocents and execution of Antipater occurred at the same time; from Josephus we learn that Herod died five days afterward. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.11; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.6-8.1 (all citations of Josephus are to the Whiston ed).

<sup>5</sup> The Romans historically associated March 25<sup>th</sup> with the vernal equinox. However, because the solar year was thought to be precisely 365 ¼ days, eleven minutes longer than it is in fact, the Julian calendar slowly grew out of sync with the annual cycle of astronomical phenomena, causing the vernal equinox in Jesus' time to occur about two days early, or around March 23<sup>rd</sup>. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (AD 324), the Julian calendar was about four

following his death has been variously estimated by scholars at between as little as twenty-nine to as many as seventy days, or an average of about fifty-one days. More recently, Andrew Steinmann has estimated about sixty-two days.<sup>6</sup> Sixty-two days plus forty days until the presentment of the Christ-child, and allowing three days for the holy family to return to Nazareth, is one hundred five days, placing us within easy reach of the traditional, late December birth of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

However, while the time and season of the nativity may thus be ascertained, the *year* of Jesus' birth cannot. Because the year of Herod's death is in dispute and Matthew provides no certain chronological markers, the Matthean-year of the nativity hangs in doubt. Josephus reports that a lunar eclipse occurred the night the rabbis were executed shortly before Herod's death, but here, too, the date is in dispute and cannot resolve the question.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the census noted by Luke.

### **Census Points to 2 BC, but is Inconclusive**

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days late so that the vernal equinox fell on March 21<sup>st</sup>. By the time the Gregorian calendar was adopted to correct these deficiencies (AD 1582), the Julian calendar was ten days out of sync.

<sup>6</sup> Steinmann, *When Did Herod the Great Reign?* Novum Testamentum 51 (2009), 15, 16; Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, 113–130; Ernest L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Foundation for Biblical Research, 1980), 29–33; idem *The Star That Astonished the World* (2d ed.; Portland, ASK Publications, 1996), 124–137; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 300; cf. P. M. Bernegger, *Affirmation of Herod's Death*, JTS 34 (1983), 526–531; Timothy D. Barns, *The Date of Herod's Death*, JTS 19 (1968), 204–209

<sup>7</sup> If Herod died in 1 BC, Passover would have occurred April 8<sup>th</sup>; 105 days from April 8<sup>th</sup> brings us to exactly December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2 BC. For a full discussion, see Kurt M. Simmons, *The Origins of Christmas and the Date of Christ's Birth*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 57 (2015) 299–324.

<sup>8</sup> The consensus view assigns the partial lunar eclipse of March 13<sup>th</sup>, 4 BC. Those arguing for the traditional date of Herod's death assign this eclipse to January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1 BC.

Luke tells us that at the time of the nativity a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed, and that this taxing was first made when Cyrenius (Latin, “Quirinius”) was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1). Although probably well-known to Luke’s original audience, unfortunately the details of this census are much disputed today. Josephus reports that Cyrenius was governor of Syria the thirty-seventh anniversary of the battle of Actium, or AD 6, when he was sent to take an inventory of the property of Archelaus, whom Caesar had banished.<sup>9</sup> This is the only documented occasion Cyrenius was governor in Syria. However, since this occurred years after Jesus’ birth, some have charged that Luke is guilty of conflating events separated by many years.<sup>10</sup> Others have proposed that Cyrenius served twice in Syria, the first as procurator or special legate associated with Saturninus, or else when he led a war against the Homonadensians. Indeed, this was Schürer’s view: “The only conclusion then that remains is that Quirinius at the time of that war with the Homonadensians was governor of Syria.”<sup>11</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment the question of Cyrenius’ double-service in Syria, it seems clear that the original census which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem extended only as far as the *enrollment of persons*, and that it was not until Rome assumed the direct government of Judea that there was an *assessment of property and incomes*:

So Archelaus’s country was laid to the province of Syria; and Cyrenius, one that had been consul, was sent by Caesar to take account of the people’s effects in Syria, and to sell the house of Archelaus.

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<sup>9</sup> Josephus *Ant.* 17.13.5; 18.1.1; 18.2.1.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 413, 414: “the evidence favors the theory that the use of the census to explain the presence of Joseph and Mary at Bethlehem is a Lucan device based on a confused memory . . . There may be historical items within the two narratives, but both involve creative Lucan construction.”

<sup>11</sup> Emile Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 1.352. For a survey of various solutions see, Wayne Brindle, *The Census and Quirinius: Luke 2:2*, JETS 27/1 (March 1984) 43-52;

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Now Cyrenius, a Roman senator, and one who had gone through other magistracies, and had passed through them till he had been consul, and one who, on other accounts, was of great dignity, came at this time into Syria, with a few others, being sent by Caesar to be a judge of that nation, and to take an account of their substance: Coponius also, a man of the equestrian order, was sent together with him, to have the supreme power over the Jews. Moreover, Cyrenius came himself into Judea, which was now added to the province of Syria, to take an account of their substance, and to dispose of Archelaus' money; but the Jews...took the report of a taxation (Gk: ἀπογραφᾶς) heinously.

Here we see that the tax assessed by Cyrenius was primarily connected with Syria and included Judea only because it had been made part of that province. Galilee and the places under the governments of Herod Antipas and his brother, Phillip (Luke 3:1), were not made part of Syria and therefore were not under direct Roman government and tax. Instead, client kingdoms paid tax to their respective rulers who in turn paid tribute to Rome, the amount being assessed against the *kingdom*, not individuals.<sup>12</sup> Joseph and Mary dwelt in Nazareth of Galilee (Luke 1:26; 2:4, 39). Since the tax reported by Josephus was confined to Syria and Judea and did not include Galilee, it was obviously different than the initial registration recorded by Luke. The tax under Cyrenius must therefore be distinguished from the registration which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

But if these were distinct events separated by time and circumstance, how do we account for the fact Luke seems to treat them as if they were identical? The short answer would seem to be that both were in pursuit of the same policy and objective. The decree that “the whole world should be taxed,” apparently had in view all provinces under direct Roman administration. Client kingdoms were likely included in the registration since a complete census of the empire would have been of interest to Augustus

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<sup>12</sup> Ant. 17.11.4 where Josephus gives an account of the division of Herod's kingdom between his sons and the income paid to each in taxes, which sum was fixed by Caesar, a portion of which was in turn paid to Rome.

in any event.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it was foreseeable that client kingdoms like Herod's might eventually come under direct Roman rule, making the people's registration and professed subjection to Caesar both necessary and desirable as a first step toward establishing direct Roman rule and tax.<sup>14</sup> Of course, if the initial registration differed from the tax subsequently imposed by Cyrenius, the question of his double-service in Syria is largely avoided. Luke would then be saying that although the registration commenced or occurred at the time of the nativity, the tax itself was not levied until the government of Cyrenius some years later. If this is correct, it would require Luke to use ἀπογραφὴ differently in the space of two verses, first, for the *registration* which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and, second, for the *tax* imposed in the days of Cyrenius. This dual use of ἀπογραφὴ occurs and may be seen in Acts 5:37, where Luke uses it in reference to the assessment and tax laid in the days of Cyrenius when Judas of Galilee made his famous revolt (*cf.* Josephus Ant. 18:1, 2, *supra*) and in Heb. 12:23, where it occurs for the citizenship of the saints "written in heaven" (*cf.* II Macc. 2:1 – "in the records"). Moreover, this duality is in keeping with Roman usage of the term "census," which originally was a registration of citizens who gave an account of their property upon oath, by which the population was divided into classes for purposes of

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<sup>13</sup> Augustus reports that he took a census of Roman citizens three times, in 28 BC, 8 BC, and 14 AD (*Res Gestae divi Augusti* 8). It is also known that censuses were taken at regular intervals in various provinces, including Sicily and Egypt, for purpose of taxes and military service (R.E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977, Doubleday, New York), 549; *cf.* Andrew Monson, *Late Ptolemaic Capitation Taxes and the Poll Tax in Roman Egypt*, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 51 (2014) 127-160: "Augustus' reforms improved the state's capacity to assess and enforce poll-tax liability, introducing the census cycle, predictable rates, and the widespread use of written receipts," *ibid.*, 160.).

<sup>14</sup> E. T. Salmon, *A History of the Roman World from 30 B.C. to A.D. 138* (Methuen's History of the Greek and Roman World 6; 6th ed.; London: Methuen, 1968) 104-5: "Client kings were encouraged to foster urbanization and general economic improvement; when their kingdoms had reached a level compatible with that generally prevailing through out the Empire, they could be and usually were incorporated so as to become provinces or parts of provinces."

military service and taxes.<sup>15</sup> As it happens, Orosius (*circa* AD 385-425) indicates that an *oath of fealty* was sworn to Caesar in connection with the census that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem:

This was when the first and greatest census was held, when all God's creation of great nations unanimously swore fealty to Caesar alone, and, at the same time, by partaking of the census were made into one community.<sup>16</sup>

Orosius' source for this oath is not known. However, we learn from Josephus that an oath professing subjection to Caesar was taken in Judea about this very time, shortly before Herod's final illness.<sup>17</sup> It has been suggested that this oath was taken in connection with Augustus being declared *Pater Patriae* ("Father of the country") February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2 BC. According to Finegan:

For the "whole people of Rome" to bestow the honor there must have been some kind of universal registration, perhaps an oath of loyalty such as that of which Josephus (*Ant.* 17.41-45) tells "when the whole Jewish nation took an oath to be faithful to Caesar," which six thousand Pharisees refused to swear.<sup>18</sup>

2 BC answers to the thirteenth consulship and the forty-second year of Augustus.<sup>19</sup> These are the two most common references given by the early fathers for the year of Christ's nativity (below). Since

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<sup>15</sup> Livy, 1.42-44; 4:24; 43.14. Livy states that the word "tribe" (*tribus*) was derived from the word "tribute" (*tributum*), the former being the basis upon which the people were registered for payment of the latter. 1.44. The term "census" (Gk. κῆνσον) is used for tribute paid to Caesar indirectly by the inhabitants of Galilee (Matt. 22:17; Mark 12:14).

<sup>16</sup> Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* 7.2.16; Translated Texts for Historians, Vol. 54 (2010, Liverpool University Press) 322, trans. A. T. Fear.

<sup>17</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 18.2.4.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Hendrickson, 1998 edition), 306.

<sup>19</sup> "In my thirteenth consulship the senate, the equestrian order and the whole people of Rome gave me the title of Father of my Country." P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, eds., *Res gestae divi Augusti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 57.

these events all converge upon the year 2 BC, there is good reason to believe that the registration which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem was connected with the oath mentioned by Josephus and Augustus being declared *Pater Patriae*, and that this was the first step toward the tax ultimately imposed when Judea was annexed to Syria and came under direct Roman rule.

Other solutions have been proposed. However, since the facts surrounding this census are in dispute, the question need not further detain us. Luke has provided another date which has not become lost or obscured to history.

### **The Fifteenth Year of Tiberius and the Nativity of Christ**

Luke places Jesus' baptism in the fifteenth year of Tiberius when our Lord was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar...when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened...and Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age.

If the date and circumstances of the census referred to by Luke are in doubt, there can be little question about the year of Jesus' baptism. Roman emperors followed the "accession year" system, dating their reigns by Julian calendar-years beginning January 1<sup>st</sup> following their accession. Augustus Caesar died August 19<sup>th</sup>, AD 14. The remainder of AD 14 would have been Tiberius' "accession year," but credited to the reign of Augustus. The first *regnal* year of Tiberius would have commenced and been counted from January 1<sup>st</sup>, AD 15; his fifteenth regnal year would have been the Julian calendar-year AD

29.<sup>20</sup> Jewish men began public ministry at thirty years of age.<sup>21</sup> As Jesus approached his thirtieth birthday, he therefore came to John to be baptized. This was followed by a forty-day fast undertaken in preparation for his ministry. Since preaching was Jesus' life work, it is unlikely he would have interposed a protracted fast between his thirtieth birthday and his public ministry. The better view, therefore, is that Jesus timed his fast to conclude *on or just before* his thirtieth birthday so he could begin teaching as soon as he attained thirty years of age.

Based upon a ministry of forty-two months or three-and-a-half-years, Jesus would have been baptized in late fall. Forty-two months from Nisan 15, AD 33, when Jesus was crucified (allowing for a leap-year of thirteen months in AD 32), brings us to Heshvan 15, AD 29, which translates to November 10<sup>th</sup>,<sup>22</sup> but Epiphanius gave as November 8<sup>th</sup> in the Julian calendar for that year (below). Forty days from these dates are December 20<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, respectively. From John's Gospel we learn that Jesus then returned to John the Baptist in Bethabara where he made his first disciples and commenced his public ministry. The seventh day after returning to John (John 1:26, 29, 35, 43 (four days) + 2:1 (three days) = seven days), Jesus performed his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. The traditional date for the wedding at Cana is January 6<sup>th</sup>, marked by Epiphany. This would mean Jesus returned to John at Bethabara December 31<sup>st</sup>, apparently having turned thirty before the year's end (Jan. 6<sup>th</sup> – 7 days = Dec.

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<sup>20</sup> "Tiberius's fifteenth...regnal counted as Julian calendar years according to the accession-year system was Jan 1 to Dec 31, A.D. 29...the correct equation for Luke 3:1...[is]... Tiberius year 15 = Jan 1 to Dec 31, A.D. 29." Finegan, 340.

<sup>21</sup> "Jesus annorum triginta baptizatur, et tunc demum incipit signa facere et docere, legitimum videlicet et maturum tempus ostendens aetatis, his qui omnem aetatem vel ad sacerdotium vel ad docendum putant opportunam." Bede, "Lucae Evangelium Expositio," in *The Complete Works of Venerable Bede, Commentaries on the Scripture* (London, 1844) J. A. Giles Editor, 4.355

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.rosettacalendar.com>; accessed 09/16/2020.

31<sup>st</sup>). This is a window of between eleven (Dec. 20<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>) to thirteen days (Dec. 18<sup>th</sup>-Dec. 31<sup>st</sup>) during which Jesus' thirtieth birthday would have occurred, assuming the analysis above is correct.

The wedding at Cana was followed by an exploratory visit with his disciples and family to Capernaum (John 2:12). Following this was the first Passover of Jesus' ministry when he cleansed the temple the first time (John 2:13-25). This would have been the Passover of AD 30 which fell on or about April 5<sup>th</sup> in the Julian calendar. As with the death of Herod, Passover here provides a convenient terminus from which we can reckon backward to events connected with the anniversary of Jesus' birth. From November 10<sup>th</sup>, AD 29, to April 5<sup>th</sup>, AD 30, is one-hundred-forty-six days. This is consistent with the one-hundred-five days between the nativity and Passover following Herod's death estimated before – the forty-four-day period between November 10<sup>th</sup> to December 25<sup>th</sup> and the fact Passover occurred three days later in 1 BC accounting for the difference (105+44-3=146). The points that punctuated the discussion there may be replaced as follows here:

- Baptism (*circa* Nov. 10, AD 29)
- Wilderness fast/Temptation
- Thirtieth birthday
- Return to Bethabara (Dec. 31, AD 29)
- First disciples
- Wedding at Cana (Epiphany) (Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, AD 30)
- Exploratory visit to Capernaum
- First Passover of Ministry (April 5, AD 30)<sup>23</sup>

The point we want to take away from this is that there is much that argues the anniversary of Jesus' thirtieth birthday occurred in the closing weeks or days of AD 29, which would place his nativity in 2 BC. Certainly, this is how the early fathers read and understood Luke.

Clement Alexandria (AD 150-215):

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<sup>23</sup> The Passover of Jesus' twelfth year (Luke 2:42) provides yet another *terminus ad quem*. Since Jesus was fully twelve in spring at Passover, his twelfth birthday necessarily occurred sometime prior thereto, tending to confirm the previous results.

And our Lord was born in the twenty-eighth year, when first the census was ordered to be taken in the reign of Augustus. And to prove this is true, it is written in the Gospel by Luke as follows: “And in the fifteenth year, in the reign of Tiberius, the word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zacharias.” And again in the same book: “And Jesus was coming to His baptism, being about thirty years old,” and so on. And that it was necessary for Him to preach only a year, this is also written: “He hath sent me to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” This both the prophet spake and the Gospel. Accordingly, in fifteen years of Tiberius and fifteen years of Augustus; so were completed the thirty years till the time that he suffered.<sup>24</sup>

Clement counts the twenty-eighth year of Augustus from the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BC, marking the end of the Seleucid dynasty. Twenty-eight years from the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra answers to 2 BC (30 BC -28 = 2 BC), the forty-second year and thirteenth consulship of Augustus. This is the date Clement assigns to the census ordered by Augustus, appealing to the date Luke gives for Jesus’ baptism as confirmation, reckoning backward thirty years from the fifteenth of Tiberius (AD 29 – 30 = 2 BC). According to Clement, Jesus completed fifteen years under Augustus (2 BC-AD 14) and fifteen years under Tiberius (AD 15-AD 29), at which point he commenced his ministry.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Stromata* 1.21

<sup>25</sup> Clement subscribed to the so-called “short” chronology, which had it that Jesus preached only one year and several months. This is based upon a mis-reading of the synoptic Gospels which omit the first year or two of Jesus’ ministry, which is provided instead by John.

Other early fathers who placed the nativity in 2 BC include Tertullian,<sup>26</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>27</sup> Africanus,<sup>28</sup> Hippolytus,<sup>29</sup> Origen,<sup>30</sup> Eusebius,<sup>31</sup> and Epiphanius.<sup>32</sup> Since all these fathers placed the nativity in 2 BC,

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<sup>26</sup> Tertullian dates Jesus' birth to the forty-first year of Augustus when he had been reigning twenty-eight years from the death of Cleopatra (*Contra Judaeos* 7.8). If dated from the Second Triumvirate, this would point to 2 BC. This agrees with the date Tertullian provides from the death of Cleopatra. Cleopatra died August 12, 30 BC, marking the end of the Seleucid dynasty. Twenty-eight years from this date is 2 BC. That this is the date Tertullian intends we learn from his further statement that Augustus survived Jesus' birth by fifteen years. Augustus died AD 14. Fifteen years backward from this date will bring us to 2 BC (there being no year "zero").

<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus dates the nativity to the forty-first year of Augustus (*Adversus Haereses*, 3.21.3). If reckoned from the death of Julius Caesar, this would place Jesus' birth in 3 BC (44 – 41 = 3 BC). However, as this would contradict Irenaeus' statement that Jesus was not yet thirty when baptized in the fall of AD 29 (*Adversus Haereses*, 2.4.5), this is obviously incorrect. The forty-first year of Augustus therefore should be dated from the Second Triumvirate, formed November 27, 43 BC, by enactment of the *Lex Titia*, which would point to 2 BC as the year of Jesus' birth.

<sup>28</sup> See *Chronographiae*, F89, T92 where 14 Augustus = AM 5172. Therefore, AM 5500, the year of the nativity, = 42 Augustus, or 2 BC; cf. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 288, 289.

<sup>29</sup> Hippolytus' commentary on Daniel follows Africanus in placing Christ's birth 5500 years from Adam, the forty-second year of Augustus, when he was consul the thirteenth time (= 2 BC). "Hippolytus of Rome, Commentary on Daniel and 'Chronicon,'" in *Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics*, Vol. 67 (2017, Gorgias Press), trans. T.C. Schmidt, 139, 152.

<sup>30</sup> Origen appears to follow Tertullian. Frag. 82 on Luke 3:1; *Origenes Werke*, vol. 9, *Die Homilien zu Lukas*, ed. Max Rauer (GCS; 2d ed., Berlin: Akademie, 1959), 260; cited by Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 289.

<sup>31</sup> "It was, then, the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, and the twenty-eighth year after the submission of Egypt and the death of Antony and Cleopatra... when our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ... was born." Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 1.5.2; Loeb ed.

<sup>32</sup> Epiphanius places the nativity in the forty-second year of Augustus, when he was consul the thirteenth time. "Panarion," ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation,"), in *Nag*

they must have concluded that Jesus turned thirty in AD 29 based upon Luke's statement regarding Jesus' age the fifteenth year of Tiberius.

To reconcile Luke with the consensus view that Herod died in 4 BC, it is sometimes alleged that Tiberius' reign is to be counted from AD 12 when he began to share rule over the provinces as the colleague of Augustus. However, that Luke counts Tiberius' reign from AD 12 is extremely doubtful. Luke wrote his history for the people of the Roman Empire and succeeding generations and therefore would have conformed to standard conventions, universally understood and accepted. Period historians such as Dio Cassius, Tacitus, and Suetonius all date Tiberius' reign from and after the death of Augustus, not from the time he was associated as colleague in the government of the provinces.<sup>33</sup> According to Finegan:

For Luke and his intended readers, therefore, it is most likely that the "reign" of Tiberius meant Tiberius's own sole rule (from the death of Augustus, Aug 19, A.D. 14) and that this rule is to be reckoned in terms of the Julian calendar.<sup>34</sup>

But if Tiberius' reign cannot be ante-dated to AD 12 to avoid placing the nativity in 2 BC, can Luke be translated some other way? This brings us to the *crux interpretum* and meaning of Luke 3:23.

### **"Began to be about Thirty" and the Consensus View**

Here is the Greek of Luke 3:23, with a translation reflecting the order of the Greek:

Καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὡσεὶ ἐτῶν τριάκοντα ἀρχόμενος, ὧν, ὡς ἐνομίζετο, υἱὸς Ἰωσήφ, τοῦ Ἡλίου

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*Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, eds. Einar Thomassen, Johannes van Oort, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (Brill, 2013); trans. Frank Williams, 51.22.3-4, Vol. 79, p. 51; cf. "Panarion" ("De Incarnatione"), 2.1, Vol. 63, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 58.27.1-28.5; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.5; 4.1; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 73.

<sup>34</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Hendrickson, 1998 Revised edition) 338; for a full discussion see Finegan 329-343.

And himself was Jesus about years thirty [of age] beginning, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph, [the son] of Heli

The question to be resolved is what is the relationship between ἀρχόμενος and the rest of the sentence? Is it part of a verbal phrase that describes Jesus' age, or does it introduce and belong to a subject that is unspoken and merely implied, viz., the commencement of his ministry? If it modifies Jesus' age and indicates he was on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday in AD 29, obviously this would conflict with the consensus view that Herod died in 4 BC. The consensus view therefore finds it necessary to so interpret and translate Luke 3:23 as to obviate this contradiction. Typical of those holding the consensus view are the following comments by Hoehner:

Luke (3:23) mentions that at the commencement of His ministry, Jesus was “about thirty years of age.” ...in the previous chapter it was concluded that Jesus was born around December, 5 B.C./January, 4 B.C...the fact Luke used the term “about” (ὥσει) indicates that Jesus was not exactly thirty years of age when He began his ministry. Of course, how far one is allowed to stretch the limits of the term “about” is not known. One would think no more than two or three years from the time stated...If this is true then Jesus would have been thirty-two years of age with His thirty-third birthday approaching in December of A.D. 29 or January of A.D. 30.<sup>35</sup>

Notice that “beginning to be” (ἀρχόμενος) has effectively dropped out of the passage. To the extent ἀρχόμενος occurs at all, Hoehner appears to attach it to the commencement of Jesus' ministry, not the anniversary of his birth. Hence, Jesus is merely “about” (more or less than) thirty and not on the threshold of, or *beginning to be* thirty, as the church fathers held. This allows Hoehner to make Jesus as old as thirty-two, accommodating the consensus view regarding Herod's death. As already noted, Luke mentions Jesus' age at his baptism because this is the age Jewish men began their public ministries. For the consensus view to be correct, we would have to be willing to believe that Jesus, having turned thirty, postponed his life's work and passed two or three years in *complete obscurity and idleness*, neither preaching nor teaching until he was almost 33 years old. Obviously, this is entirely untenable.

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<sup>35</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Zondervan, 1977), 37, 38.

But commentators are merely men and we expect that men should err. The great tragedy of the consensus view is that it has not confined its influence to commentators, but has found its way into modern translations of the sacred text. As the view that Herod died in 4 BC gained in popularity over the last century the translation of Luke 3:23 changed, until today the overwhelming majority of new translations attach ἀρχόμενος to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, not the anniversary of his birth:

### Table of Translations of Luke 3:23

<b>“Began to be about thirty”</b>	<b>“When he began to teach”</b>	
Jerome’s Vulgate - 483	Tyndale - 1534	NET - 1996
Wycliff - 1385	Coverdale Bible - 1535	CJB - 1998
Erasmus - 1519	Matthews - 1537	HCSB – 1999
Great Bible – 1540	Taverner’s 1551	WEB - 2000
Judge’s Tyndale - 1552	Revised - 1881	ESVUK - 2001
Geneva NT - 1557	ASV - 1901	OJB - 2002
Bishops – 1568	RSV - 1946	NCV - 2005
Rheims – 1582	AMPC - 1954	ERV - 2006
Geneva - 1599	NASB - 1960	NABRE - 2010
AV (KJV) - 1611	Phillips - 1960	NOG - 2011
Challoner - 1749	WE - 1969	EXB - 2011
Young’s Literal - 1862	NLV - 1969	CEB - 2011
Darby - 1890	TLB - 1971	DLNT - 2011
Douay-Rheims - 1899	NIV - 1973	NTE - 2011
KJ21 - 1998	NKJV - 1982	Voice - 2012
JUB - 2000	NRSV - 1989	LEB - 2012
BRG - 2012	GNT - 1992	MEV - 2014
	MSG - 1993	TLV - 2015
	CEV - 1995	AMP - 2015
	GW - 1995	NMB - 2016
	INV - 1995	ESV - 2016
	NIRV - 1995	CSB - 2017
	NLT - 1996	TPT - 2017
		RGT - 2019 <sup>36</sup>

We have included Jerome’s and Erasmus’ Latin translations because Latin was the international language of the world and Christendom beginning about the fourth century when Greek began to fall away and Latin assumed its place. The first English translation of the Bible (Wycliff’s) was also taken from the

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<sup>36</sup> 21<sup>ST</sup> Century King James (KJ21), American Standard Version (ASV), Amplified (AMP), Amplified Classic Edition (AMPC), Blue, Red and Gold Letter Edition (BRG), Christian Standard Bible (CSB), Common English Bible (CEB), Disciples’ Literal New Testament (DLNT), Easy to Read Version (ERV), Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV), English Standard Version (ESV), English Standard Version Anglicised (ESVUK), Expanded Bible (EXB), God’s Word (GW), Good News Translation (GNT), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), International Standard Version (ISV), Lexham English Bible (LEB), The Living Bible (TLB), The Message (MSG), Modern English Version (MEV), Names of God Bible (NOG), New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE), New American Standard Bible (NASB), New Century Version (NCV), New English Translation (NET), New International Reader’s Version (NIRV), New International Version (NIV), New King James Version (NKJV), New Life Version (NLV), New Living Translation (NLT), New Matthew Bible (NMB), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament for Everyone (NTE), Orthodox Jewish Bible (OJB), Revised Geneva Translation (RGT, 2019), Revised Standard Version (RSV), The Passion Translation (TPT), Young’s Literal Translation (YLT).

Latin. Not until the Reformation and the invention of the printing press did the English Bible come into its own. As can be seen from the chart, several early English versions rendered ἀρχόμενος “when he began,” but this was abandoned almost immediately (less than twenty years) and the traditional rendering resumed. This prevailed for three hundred years until the consensus view of Herod’s death came into vogue, when it begins to occur again. Of course, it may be partly coincidental that the translation should have changed just when the consensus view began to gain in popularity, but it cannot be denied that adherents of the new view concerning the date of Herod’s death would have found the old translation very inconvenient and therefore welcomed if not actively encouraged the change. The English Revised Version (1881), followed by the American Standard Version (1901), lead the charge for the change and is typical of modern translations today: “And Jesus himself, when he began to teach, was about thirty years of age, etc.”

The words “when he...to teach” do not occur in the Greek, but have been added by the translators. However, there seems to be a rather serious grammatical error with this construction. The Greek word ἀρχόμενος is the present middle/passive participle “beginning.” Phrases like “beginning to come to pass” (ἀρχομένων...γίνεσθαι, Luke 21:28), and “beginning to sink” (ἀρξάμενος καταποντίζεσθαι, Matt. 14:30) are verbal combinations in which the middle/passive participle patterns with the middle/passive infinitive. Middle/passive verbs, whether alone or in combination with the infinitive, act *on the subject*; the subject *experiences* the action or it is done *to him*, not by him. This is true even of the verbal phrase ἦν ἀρχόμενος εἶναι (“was beginning to be”) which, although utilizing the active infinitive “to be,” nevertheless signifies a condition the subject experiences rather than does. However, the Revised English and other modern versions ignore this grammatical rule. “Began to teach” takes a middle/passive and patterns it with an active infinitive of doing, not experiencing. Jesus begins to teach. To teach is an action the subject does and should not be patterned with the middle/passive. Anyone can convince himself of this by consulting a concordance. There are several dozen examples where Jesus or someone began to say or to speak, to teach or to tell, to publish or to show, to rebuke or to upbraid, etc.

Invariably, these pattern with the indicative ἀρξάτο, never with the middle/passive ἀρχόμενος. Versions which pattern ἀρχόμενος with an active infinitive are grammatically incorrect.

But is Luke speaking here of Jesus' teaching or the commencement of his ministry? Following ἀρχόμενος, Luke traverses a full fifteen verses covering Jesus' genealogy (Luke 3:24-38), followed by fourteen verses recounting his wilderness temptation (Luke 4:1-14). Luke does not mention Jesus' teaching until Luke 4:15, twenty-nine verses later. That ἀρχόμενος points to the beginning of Jesus' ministry is therefore exceedingly doubtful. Certainly, nothing in the context requires it. Framed as it is between Jesus' baptism and his genealogy, it is far more natural to understand it as part of a verbal phrase describing Jesus' age at his baptism, rather than the commencement of his ministry twenty-nine verses later. The fact that Luke uses the middle passive makes this conclusion almost certain, since it requires that Jesus begin to experience, not do something.

### **Survey of the Fathers**

In questions of text and translation, the three-fold cord of *manuscripts*, *versions*, and *fathers* is our surest guide. Happily, we have the witness of several early fathers who wrote a hundred years or more before the earliest manuscripts now in our possession. We will therefore begin our survey with them.

Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 130-202):

For how could he have had disciples, if He did not teach? And how could He have taught, unless He had reached the age of a Master? For when He came to be baptized, He had not yet completed thirty years of age (for thus Luke, who has mentioned His years, has expressed it: "Now Jesus was, as it were, beginning to be thirty years old," when He came to be baptized).<sup>37</sup>

Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* survives only in a Latin translation and scattered fragments of Greek. Here is the Latin:

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<sup>37</sup> Irenaeus, "Adversus Haereses," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1885) 2.4.5.

Ad baptismum enim venit nondum qui triginta annos suppleverat, sed qui inciperet esse tanquam triginta annorum: (ita enim, qui ejus annos significavit Lucas, posuit: *Jesus autem erat quasi incipiens triginta annorum*, cum venire ad baptismum,).

The Latin provides two instances of *began to be about thirty*. The passage in the Ante-Nicene Fathers leaves untranslated the first instance, *sed qui inciperet esse tanquam triginta annorum*, and instead passes directly into the quote from Luke where this phrase occurs again in slightly different wording: *erat quasi incipiens triginta annorum*. This latter represents the Latin of the Greek New Testament as it proposes to quote Luke; the former are the words of Irenaeus. The difference is not great. Irenaeus uses the imperfect subjunctive *inciperet* (began) where the Latin of Luke uses the present participle *incipiens* (beginning). Irenaeus supplies the infinitive *esse, to be*, which is missing in Luke but Irenaeus believed to be implied. Irenaeus uses *tanquam* where Luke's translator uses *quasi*. Finally, Irenaeus places *inciperet* before *tanquam*; his quote from Luke reverses this order, placing *quasi* before *incipiens*. Although the differences are negligible, they stand as a double witness how the early church understood the passage. Clearly, Irenaeus took ἀρχόμενος as pointing to the threshold of Jesus' thirtieth birthday, which followed sometime *after* his baptism.

Epiphanius of Salamis (AD 310-403):

First, he was baptized on the twelfth of the Egyptian month Athyr, the sixth before the Ides of November in the Roman calendar. In other words, he was baptized a full sixty days before the Epiphany,<sup>38</sup> which is the day of his birth in the flesh, as the Gospel according to Luke testifies, "Jesus began to be about thirty years old, being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph." Actually, he

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<sup>38</sup> The sixth before the Ides of November (Nov. 13<sup>th</sup>) is November 8<sup>th</sup>. Nov. 8<sup>th</sup> to Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, inclusive, is sixty days (23 + 31 + 6 = 60).

was twenty-nine years and ten months old—thirty years old but not quite when he came for his baptism. This is why it says, “began to be about thirty years old.”<sup>39</sup>

Epiphanius quotes Luke 3:23 more than any other ancient writer, citing the relevant portion six times.<sup>40</sup> Five of the six times, Epiphanius couples ἀρχόμενος with the term εἶναι to form “began to be” (ἦν δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἀρχόμενος εἶναι ὡς ἐτῶν τριάκοντα). However, because he also quotes the passage without εἶναι, it seems likely that Epiphanius has supplied it in the other places as necessary to the sense.

Epiphanius believed Jesus was baptized in the fall, on November 8<sup>th</sup>, his birthday occurring sixty days later on January 6<sup>th</sup>. In the passage before us, he twice quotes Luke 3:23 in support of this proposition, attaching ἀρχόμενος to Jesus’ birthday. He never attaches it to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Origen of Alexandria (AD 184-253):

*And Jesus himself was beginning.* For when he was baptized, and assumed the mystery of the second generation (as you also put off the first nativity, and were born in the second regeneration), then he is said to have begun. . . .so he who has not yet been baptized is not said to have begun. For we ought not think *beginning* was added in vain to *Jesus himself was*. But that it says: *He was about thirty years of age*, it must be considered that Joseph was thirty when freed from bonds and interpreted the dream of Pharaoh.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Epiphanius, “Panarion,” (“Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation”), 51.16.1-7, Vol. 79, p. 42, 43; cf. 51.24.4-25.1, Vol. 79, p. 56, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Panarion, “Against the Ebonites,” 29.11; “Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, or his Revelation” 10.6, 16.2, 24.6; Against the Arian Nuts, 22.5.

<sup>41</sup> Jerome, *Translatio Homiliarum XXXIX Origenis in Evangelium Lukae, ad Paulam et Eustochium*, Homilia XXVIII; translation by author. *Et ipse erat Jesus incipiens.* Quando enim baptizatus est, et mysterium secundae generationis assumpsit, ut tu quoque priorem nativatem destruas, et in secunda regeneratione nascaris, tunc dicitur incepisse. . . .sic qui necdum est baptizatus, nec coepisse narrator. Nec enim frustra additum putemus ad id quod

Like Irenaeus, the Greek of Origen in this place is lost; all that survives is the Latin translation by Jerome. Origen connects ἀρχόμενος with Jesus' baptismal regeneration. For Origen, baptismal regeneration marks Jesus' true beginning, the point at which he is said to have "begun." Most would likely agree that this interpretation is forced and unnatural; the text can be made to bear this meaning, but it almost certainly is *not* what Luke intended. However, Origen's remarks are typical of the Alexandrian school, which was known for allegorizing scripture, historical narrative in particular. Given the tension between the birth of the flesh and rebirth of the Spirit, coupled with the mention of Jesus' thirtieth year, it is likely Origen did not deny the connection between ἀρχόμενος and Jesus' approaching birthday. Indeed, since he attached ἀρχόμενος *allegorically* to the second birth or regeneration, Origen probably would have also attached it *literally* to the anniversary of Jesus' physical birth, following Clement, his teacher. However, this much is sure: Origen did not attach ἀρχόμενος to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Moreover, like Irenaeus and Epiphanius, Origen took the present middle/passive participle as pointing to something Jesus himself experienced, not did or commenced.

In sum, neither Irenaeus, Epiphanius, or Origen saw ἀρχόμενος in reference to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. All either attached it to the anniversary of Jesus' birth, or allegorically to his rebirth, or both.

### **A Brief Notice of Early Manuscripts and Translations**

Leaving the witness of the early fathers, we move to the testimony of the manuscripts and versions. In the vast majority of Greek manuscripts, ἀρχόμενος appears at the *end* of the subject clause following Jesus' *age* ("thirty years old beginning"). However, in a small number of manuscripts, ἀρχόμενος appears near the *front* of Luke 3:23 following Jesus' *name* ("Jesus himself was beginning"). The two oldest complete or nearly complete manuscripts we possess, the Sinaiticus (Ⲙ) and the Vaticanus

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dicitur: *Ipse erat Jesus, quod sequitur, incipiens. Sed at quod aid: Quasi annorum triginta, considerandum, Joseph triginta annorum erat, quando dimissus e vinculis, et interpretatus somnium Pharonis.*

(B), are of this type. Manuscripts of this era were customarily written in “majuscule,” large capital letters without spacing and only sporadic punctuation, accents, and breathing marks. Jesus’ name was abbreviated by using the first and last letters with a line above it, signifying its contraction. Later cursive or “minuscule” manuscripts (beginning in the seventh and eighth centuries) employed smaller letters, and consistently separated the words and provided punctuation, accents, and breathing marks. Luke 3:23 appears in  $\aleph$  and B as follows.

Siniaticus/Vaticanus (fourth or fifth century):

KAIAUTOCHVIC̄APXOMENOC̄ΩCEIET̄ΩNTPIAKONTA

Whether  $\aleph$  and B are the repositories of the original, inspired autograph is subject to debate. Epiphanius is the only early church father whose quotations of the passage survive in Greek and these follow closely the text of  $\aleph$  and B. Finegan thought that the Greek text of Luke in  $\aleph$  and B reflects the original and that it was changed in other manuscripts due to confusion of its meaning.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, this was also the decision of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, including the 28<sup>th</sup> edition, which adopts the reading found in  $\aleph$  and B.<sup>43</sup> However, this is almost certainly wrong. One of the first canons of textual criticism is that between variant readings the more difficult is preferable to the easier (*proclivi scriptioni praestat ardua*).<sup>44</sup> It is the location of ἀρχόμενος at the *end* of the passage that causes confusion, not dispels it. Hence, it is far more likely that ἀρχόμενος was moved to the front of the passage to clarify its meaning, not toward its end, which obscures it. This conclusion is reflected by another, closely related canon of textual criticism which holds *that less grammatically refined readings more likely*

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<sup>42</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Henrickson, 1998 edition), 323, 344.

<sup>43</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland), 28. Edition, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2012.

<sup>44</sup> This canon was first articulated by Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tubingen, 1742); cf. Eldon J. Epp, Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Eerdmans, 1993), 145.

*reflect the original.*<sup>45</sup> Since scribes allegedly tended to improve, clarify, and smooth out passages of scripture rather than make them grammatically awkward or difficult, readings that are less grammatically refined are preferred over those that are otherwise. Stated still in other terms, *that variant that best explains all other variants is more likely the original.*<sup>46</sup> The grammatical difficulty of ἀρχόμενος at the passage's end explains why scribes found it expedient to move it toward the passage's front; however, its occurrence toward the front cannot explain why scribes should have moved it to the rear. Hence, occurrence of ἀρχόμενος at the passage's end is more likely the original.<sup>47</sup> But if κ and B do not embody the *ipsissima verba* of the inspired autographs in this place, they *do* preserve and reflect the understanding of their age; *viz.*, that ἀρχόμενος pointed to the anniversary of Jesus' birth. The earliest manuscripts therefore accord with the early fathers.

Having briefly taken notice of the manuscripts, we turn to early translations, beginning with the Syriac Peshitta.

Aramaic or Syriac was the language of the Syro-Palstinian region in the time of Christ and the apostles. With the early growth of the church in Antioch, Syria (Acts 11:19-26), it is to be expected that this region was among the first to translate the New Testament into its native tongue. What is known to scholars as the "Old Syriac" is contained in two manuscripts: (1) The Curetonian Syriac and (2) the Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in St Catherine's Monastery by Agnes Smith Lewis in 1892, both of which

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<sup>45</sup> Stanley E. Porter & Andrew W. Pitts, *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism* (Eerdmans, 2015), 119.

<sup>46</sup> Eldon J. Epp, Gordon D. Fee, *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism*, 41, 158.

<sup>47</sup> Against this it must be owned that "more difficult" readings were oftentimes created by the mistake or inattention of scribes who, omitting a word or phrase in its proper place and realizing the mistake, inserted it at the clause's end or where they could, thus changing the order of words. However, this sort of variant would not likely be long lived but quickly weeded out by subsequent copyists and therefore cannot explain the occurrence of ἀρχόμενος at the clause's end in the vast majority of manuscripts.



Next in antiquity among the versions is the Old Latin. These generally translated ἀρχόμενος by the present participle *incipiens* (beginning), and ὡσεὶ by either *fere* (almost)<sup>52</sup> or, more often, *quasi* (as it were, about). The habit of abbreviating Jesus' name continued in the Old Latin where it was represented by the first, second, and last letters of the Greek IHS, with a line above indicating its contraction, but in lower case Latin letters appeared as *ihs̄*. Old Latin versions are generally assigned to the second century; they continued to circulate and to be copied along-side Jerome's Vulgate (AD 385) until the Council of Trent (AD 1546), when the latter was pronounced to be the authoritative Latin version. Virtually all Latin versions combine *incipiens* (beginning) with *erat*, (was) to form the verbal phrase "was beginning (to be)." Typical of the Old Latin is the following.

Codex Monacensis or Valerianus (sixth century):

Et ipse *ihs̄* erat *incipiens quasi* annorum triginta

And Jesus himself was beginning [to be] about thirty years old, *etc.*

Latin, like Greek, is an inflected language in which the order of words is relatively free. Latin is therefore capable of mirroring the word order of the Greek without changing the meaning in Latin. However, presence of *incipiens* toward the front of the passage probably is not evidence translators found ἀρχόμενος there or that they used manuscripts similar to  $\aleph$  and B. Erasmus placed *incipiens* in the identical position as the Old Latin even though he used Byzantine type manuscripts, as did also Jerome who used Western type manuscripts. The better view therefore is that the presence of *incipiens* toward the passage's front reflects the judgment of the translators that Luke intended ἦν... ἀρχόμενος to be taken as a verbal phrase, and therefore joined *incipiens* with *erat* to better convey the sense that at his baptism Jesus *began to be almost thirty*.

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<sup>52</sup> Codex Colbertinus (twelfth century): Et ipse *ihs̄* erat *incipiens fere* annos XXX; Würzburg,

Universitätsbibliothek, M.p.th.f. 67 (eighth or ninth century) Et ipse *ihs̄* erat *incipiens quasi* annorū XXX.

The term *Coptic* refers to the language spoken and written by early Christian inhabitants of Egypt. The term was coined by the earliest Arabic conquerors of Egypt who spoke of their native Christian subjects as “Copts,” presumably in reference to town of Coptos in Upper Egypt. The two principal dialects during this era were the Bohairic and Sahidic, which were spoken in Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively, but the terms Memphitic and Thebaic from the ancient capitals of the two kingdoms of Egypt have also been adopted to describe these tongues. Translation of the New Testament into these dialects is believed to have occurred in the mid- to late third century.<sup>53</sup>

Bohairic (Memphitic) Coptic:

Ἰη̅ς δε ἀφ̅ερ̅θ̅η̅τ̅ς ἡ̅ψ̅ω̅π̅ι δε̅π̅ θ̅ε̅ο̅ῶ̅ν̅ π̅ρ̅ο̅β̅η̅π̅ι.  
ἄρ̅χ̅ο̅μ̅ε̅ν̅ο̅ς ε̅τ̅ε̅λ̅ε̅τ̅ι ε̅ρ̅ο̅ϥ̅ χ̅ε̅ π̅ψ̅η̅ρ̅ι ἡ̅ψ̅ω̅σ̅η̅ϥ̅.

And Jesus began to be in (the) thirtieth year, as he is thought the son of Joseph, *etc.*<sup>54</sup>

Here we find ἀρχόμενος translated by the verbal phrase “began to be” and that it was connected with Jesus’ age at his baptism. However, the Sahidic version, like the Peshitta, fails to translate ἀρχόμενος, testifying again to the difficulty translators experienced with the term’s occurrence near the clause’s end.

Sahidic Coptic:

τ̅ε̅ δε̅ νε̅φ̅ε̅ρ̅η̅μα̅α̅β̅ε̅ ρ̅ρο̅μ̅πε̅ πε̅ ε̅ψ̅η̅ρ̅ε̅ ἡ̅ψ̅ω̅σ̅η̅ϥ̅ πε̅ε̅ ἡ̅θ̅ε̅ ε̅το̅υ̅μ̅ε̅ε̅ϥ̅ ε̅ρ̅ο̅ϥ̅. π̅ψ̅η̅ρ̅ε̅ ἡ̅ψ̅η̅λ̅ε̅ι

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<sup>53</sup> Christian Askeland, “The Coptic Versions of the New Testament” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research, Essays on the Status Quaestionis* (Brill, 2nd ed. 2013), 209.

<sup>54</sup> G. W. Horner, *The Coptic Version of the New Testament in the Northern Dialect: Otherwise called Memphitic and Bohairic; with introduction, Critical Apparatus, and Literal English Translation*, Vol. II, *The Gospels of S. Luke and S. John, Edited from the Ms Huntingon 17 in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1898), *in loc.*, pp. 40, 41.



provided below, the instant text “follows the Greek almost word for word.” Moreover, “There is no word for ‘ministry’ in the Armenian translation.”<sup>58</sup>

Եւ ինքն Յիսուս Էր ամաց իբրեւ երեսնից սկսեալ, որոց որպէս եւ կարծեր, որդի Յովսէփայ, որ Յակովբայն՝, որ Յեղեայն, որ Մատաթեայն:

And Jesus himself was beginning [to be] about thirty years [of age], who [was], as was thought, the son of..

The New Testament was reputedly translated from Greek into the ancient Gothic tongue (eastern Germanic) in the fourth century by Wulfila (Ulfilas), or a team under his direction, who is also credited with developing the Gothic alphabet and writing system in order to translate the New Testament.<sup>59</sup> Like the Old Latin and Memphitic Coptic, ἀρχόμενος is associated with the thirtieth anniversary of Jesus’ birth:

Gothic:

jah silba was Iesus swe jere þrije tigiwe uf gakuþpai

And Jesus himself was about thirty years under subjection, *etc.*

Translating ἀρχόμενος as “under (uf) subjection (gakuþpai)”<sup>60</sup> is problematic and suggests that Wulfila took *beginning* (“thirty years beginning”) for the whole period of Jesus’ minority while he remained in subjection to his earthly parents. Whether ἀρχόμενος can in fact bear this meaning, we have the following statement of Coke:

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<sup>58</sup> Schmidt is a professor of Religious Studies at Fairfield University, New Haven, Connecticut; translation and comments taken from private correspondence with author.

<sup>59</sup> Carla Falloumini, “The Gothic Version of the New Testament” in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, 329-350.

<sup>60</sup> The Gothic New Testament with lexical references has been made available by the University of Antwerp, Belgium, and may be accessed online at: <http://www.wulfila.be/gothic/browse/>.

The author of the Vindication of the beginning of St. Matthew's and St. Luke's Gospels, would render the words, *and Jesus was obedient* (or lived in subjection to his parents) *about thirty years*: and he produces several passages from approved Greek authors, in which ἀρχόμενος signifies *subject*; but in all these places it is used in some connection or opposition, which determines the sense, and therefore none of them are instances parallel to this; and since the evangelist had before expressed our Lord's subjection to his parents by the word υποτασσομενος, Ch. Luke 2:51, there is great reason to believe that he would have used the same word here, had he intended to give us the same idea.<sup>61</sup>

Although Wulfila's rendering is incorrect, nevertheless it is apparent that he understood ἀρχόμενος in connection with the period *concluding* at Jesus' thirtieth birthday, and not to the commencement of his public ministry which followed thereafter. Moreover, Wulfila's mistranslation testifies to the difficulty some had in making sense of Luke's phrase and that they almost certainly found ἀρχόμενος at the passage's end, not toward its front as in the Egyptian or Alexandrian tradition.

We have now traversed seven of the most ancient versions, representing peoples inhabiting lands from Africa to Eastern Europe; none can be found that attach ἀρχόμενος to the commencement of Jesus' ministry; all agree instead that it modifies Jesus' age at this baptism, or neglect to translate it at all. The unanimity of this consensus argues that something other than Greek grammar is driving the translation of modern versions that inject Jesus' ministry into the passage.

### **Objections Considered**

We might with justification end our inquiry here. However, there remains a final question of grammar that should be addressed. According to Godet:

We must take care not to connect ἀρχόμενος and ἦν as parts of a single verb (*was beginning for began*). For ἦν has a compliment of its own, *of thirty years*; it therefore signifies here, *was of the age of*. Some have tried to make τριάκοντα ἐτων depend on ἀρχόμενος, *He began His thirtieth year*; and it is perhaps owing to this interpretation that we find this participle placed first in the

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas Coke, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, (London: Whitfield. 1802) *in loc*.

Alex. But for this sense, *το ακοστοῦ ἐτους* would have been necessary; and the limitation *about* cannot have reference to the *commencement of the year*.<sup>62</sup>

These comments hale from the era when the consensus view of Herod’s death was first gaining academic acceptance. Nevertheless, they reflect errors and assumptions shared by modern versions that require correction. First, the assertion that *about* (ὥσει) cannot have reference to the commencement of the Lord’s thirtieth year is contradicted by the unanimous consent of the early fathers, all of whom read ὥσει in light of ἀρχόμενος and held that Jesus either turned thirty on the very day of his baptism or shortly thereafter. The claim that *το ακοστοῦ ἐτους* is necessary for this sense is therefore obviously baseless. Equally without merit is the assertion that ἦν and ἀρχόμενος must not be connected as a single verb. If ἦν can have as its compliment *of thirty years*, the verbal combination ἦν ἀρχόμενος obviously can also; the overwhelming testimony of manuscripts, versions, and fathers assures us that this is so. Hence it is that κ and B move ἀρχόμενος closer to ἦν to better convey this sense and virtually all of the Latin versions couple *erat* with *incipiens*. And that this is not only permissible but the constant habit of Luke and other New Testament writers, the reader may consult the following tables, which provide almost fifty examples of this very thing:<sup>63</sup>

<b>Luke</b>	<b>Greek</b>	<b>Translation</b>
1:10	ἦν προσευχόμενον	was/were praying
2:26	ἦν...κεχορηματισμένον	was divinely foretold
2:51	ἦν ὑποτασσόμενος	was subject
3:23	ἦν...ἀρχόμενος	was beginning to be
4:16	ἦν τεθραμμένος	was brought up, raised
4:17	ἦν γεγραμμένον	was written
4:38	ἦν συνεχωμένη	was oppressed
5:16	ἦν...προσευχόμενος	was praying
5:18	ἦν παραλελυμένος	was paralyzed
9:45	ἦν παρακεκαλυμμένον	was veiled (hidden, concealed)
9:53	ἦν πορευόμενον	was going
18:2	ἦν...φοβούμενος...ἐντρεπόμενος	was fearing, regarding
18:34	ἦν κεκρυμμένον	was hid
21:37	ἦν...ἐξερχόμενος	was going out
23:19	ἦν γενομένην	was made...cast
23:51	ἦν συγκατατεθειμένος	was consenting
23:53	ἦν...κείμενος	was laid

<sup>62</sup> F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1890, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed), 127.

<sup>63</sup> Source: *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle-Aland), 28.

<b>Acts</b>	<b>Greek</b>	<b>Translation</b>
1:17	κατηριθμημένος...ἦν	was numbered
3:10	ἦν...καθήμενος	was sitting
8:28	ἦν...καθήμενος	was sitting
9:28	ἦν εἰσπορευόμενος	was going in
9:28	ἦν ἐκπορευόμενος	was going out
9:33	ἦν παραλελυμένος	was paralyzed
10:1, 2	ἦν...φοβούμενον... δέόμενος	was fearing, praying
12:5	ἦν...γινόμενη	was made
12:6	ἦν...κοιμώμενος	was sleeping
18:25	ἦν κατηχημένος	was instructed
19:32	ἦν...συγκεχυμένη	was confused
20:13	διατεταγμένος ἦν	had appointed
21:3	ἦν ἀποφοριζόμενον	was discharging
<b>Matt</b>	<b>Greek</b>	<b>Translation</b>
8:30	ἦν...βοσκομένη	was feeding
<b>Mark</b>	<b>Greek</b>	<b>Translation</b>
1:6	ἦν...ἐνδεδυμένος	was clothed
1:13	ἦν...πειραζόμενος	was tempted
5:11	ἦν...βοσκομένη	was feeding
14:54	ἦν συγκαθήμενος...θερμαινόμενος	was sitting, warming
15:7	ἦν...λεγόμενος...δεδεμένος	was named, bound
15:26	ἦν...ἐπιγεγραμμένη	was written over
15:43	ἦν προσδεζόμενος	was waiting
15:46	ἦν λελατομημένον	was cut
<b>John</b>	<b>Greek</b>	<b>Translation</b>
5:35	ἦν...καιόμενος	was burning
13:5	ἦν διεζωσμένος	was girded
18:18	ἦν...θερμαινόμενος	was warming
18:25	ἦν...θερμαινόμενος	was warming
19:11	ἦν...δεδομένον	was given
19:19	ἦν...γεγραμμένον	was written
19:20	ἦν γεγραμμένον	was written

We have omitted other verb tenses and numbers and confined our survey to the third person, singular, past imperfect of εἶμι since this is the form in question. Probably more examples could be produced than we have identified. If other tenses and numbers were included, the list would be many times its present length. Luke is by far the most prolific in his use of this verbal combination, employing it in his Gospel more than twice as many times as Mark and more than John and Matthew combined. It

also occurs occasionally in the epistles of Paul.<sup>64</sup> Given the frequency with which Luke and other New Testament writers use ἦν and the middle/passive participle as a verbal phrase, there is every reason to accept its occurrence in Luke 3:23, and that Καὶ αὐτοῦ ἦν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὡσεὶ ἐτῶν τριάκοντα ἀρχόμενος was intended to be read as “*And Jesus himself was beginning (or began) to be about thirty years of age.*”

### Conclusion

The early church fathers believed Jesus was born in 2 BC based upon Luke 3:23 and the year of Jesus’ baptism. Numerous additional factors combine to confirm this conclusion. However, with the publication of Schürer’s *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, modern versions have found it necessary or convenient to so translate Luke 3:23 as to accommodate the consensus view that Herod the Great died in 4 BC. The testimony of ancient manuscripts, versions, and fathers argues against modern translations and for the traditional rendering of the text, placing Jesus on the threshold of his thirtieth birthday at his baptism in the fall of AD 29.

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<sup>64</sup> Gal. 2:11 - κατεθνωσμένος ἦν, “he was [to be] condemned;“ Heb. 12:21 – ἦν τὸ φανταζομενον, “was the appearing.”