

WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

Luke 3:23

INTRO: Our subject this Christmas morning is, "When Was Jesus Born?" I very seldom give a message for the sake of interest, but that is what this message is for me. I came to this subject last year when I was studying and preparing the messages on the Gospels. Matthew and Luke give us the account of the birth of Christ. From Jesus' birth until He began His ministry only Luke gives us a very brief account of an event in the life of Christ when He was about 12 years old. Then we have nothing until Jesus was about 30 years old, when He began His ministry. After this, Matthew Mark and Luke tell us about Jesus' baptism.

Immediately after Jesus' baptism He fasted for forty days. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about that, but then they fall silent and right there John picks up the story. And I think, piecing together where Matthew, Mark and Luke leave off and where John picks up, we can come to within about a month or maybe closer to where Jesus was born. It is that which I want to share with you this Christmas morning. Now, most authorities agree that Jesus was not born December 25th. The question then remains, when was He actually born? It is interesting that the Lord has not given us a clear date. He, no doubt, has very good reasons for that. But over the years several methods have been used to determine the date of Christ's birth. One of the main ones is taken from Luke 1:5, using the course of Abijah as a starting point (read). Zachariah, John the Baptist's father served during the course of Abijah. It was one of 24 courses of priests that served the temple two weeks of the year and during the festivals. From Luke 1:5, rough calculations can be made to the time of the birth of John the Baptist, and from there you only need to add three months and you have the time Christ was born.

There are a number of other ways scholars have tried to find the date of Christ's birth, but for the sake of time, we will not discuss those. But none the less, I look forward to giving another way of calculating the date of Christ's birth which could show us at least the month of His birth. I discovered this possibility in preaching on the four Gospels when I covered the first few chapters. Our starting point and text is going to be Luke 3:23 (read). We know that the time Jesus got baptized is not far from His birth date. That much is clear in this verse. What we will

do is see if we can count forward until we come to a definite date. If so, and I believe we can, we should be able to arrive at least within a month of His birth date.

I. THE TIMING OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST FROM LUKE 3:23

A. Day 1

We begin then, with Luke 2:23. The NKJV says, "Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age..." The NKJV has tried to help Luke out in a sentence that sounds very awkward when it is translated literally. The KJV states it more literally when it says, "And Jesus Himself began to be about 30 years of age..." That is a very interesting way to word this. Darby's literal translation says it like this, "And Jesus himself was beginning to be about thirty years old..." Young's Literal Translation translates it exactly the same way. So we have a very interesting verse. How do you begin to be about a certain age? We will look at that later.

Just prior to Luke 3:23, Jesus was baptized (read 3:21-23). It is at that time that He began to be about 30 years of age. The one thing that appears quite certain is that at Jesus' baptism we are close to His birthday. Then we are given His genealogy in verses 23-38, so there is no passage of time between His baptism and when He began the forty days of fasting. Mark says that immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Now, if we can go forward from here and keep track of time, and come to a definite date, we have a good possibility of coming close to the time when Christ was born. So we begin at His baptism.

B. Days 2-41 Now look at Matthew 4:1-2 (read).

We now add 40 days and we have days 2-41. All that is quite simple so far. We have come 41 days from His baptism.

C. Day 42

Now look carefully at Matthew 4:2 (read). It says that Satan tempted Jesus *after* the 40 days. So we are

now into day 42. Now we do not know how long this temptation took place, but I would think that it would have taken place in one day.

Now look at Matthew 4:11-12 (read). Now between Matthew 4:11 and 12, from Jesus' baptism until John was put in prison is some time and Matthew, Mark and Luke do not give us any of what happened between those two times. But what is most helpful in our case, as it is numerous times, where the synoptic Gospels leave out a section, the Gospel writer John picks up and that is what we have here. The section left out by Matthew, Mark and Luke is covered by John 1:19 through 5:47. That is a large section and it is the first part of this section in John that carefully gives us the days between Jesus' temptation and His arrival in Jerusalem for His first Passover. If we can carefully count those days, we can come very close to His birthday. And it is from John 1:19 through 2:13 that we are given some very crucial information which leads us to a definite date.

And so, likely on the same day Jesus was tempted by Satan, He made His way back to Bethabara where John was baptizing and where He Himself had been baptized. One might add a day, but I think that is not necessary. So where Matthew, Mark and Luke leave off, we go to John 1:19-28 and pick up the story right there (read).

When I was studying for the messages on the Gospels, I read Alfred Eedersheim. He wrote on the life of Christ and he is a very thorough Christian Jewish Scholar. And he calls the verses in John that we just read the temptation of John the Baptist. He believes that John and Jesus were both tempted on the same day. If that is so, then John 1:19-28 took place on the day Jesus was tempted. Now there may be a day or two difference here, but hardly likely any more. So we are now at day 42. There was the day of Jesus' baptism, day one; and the 40 days of fasting, 41; and the day of temptation which is day 42. If Eedersheim is right on this, then I believe that from here we can come to a definite date.

D. Day 43

Our next time marker is in John 1:29-34 (read). John says this happened on the next day. Here we come to day 43. I believe that this is also the day Jesus began His ministry. It is very likely that somewhere here He turned 30. Most scholars note that He began His ministry at 30, as did the priests of the temple service. Here He also began to call His disciples, who will later become the foundation of the Church.

E. Day 44

We come to another time marker in John 1:35-42 (read). This brings us to day 44. It is interesting that John so carefully notes the days in this part of his Gospel.

F. Day 45

Now note verse 43 (read). It says Jesus wanted to go to Galilee. Well, that day takes us from verses 43-51 (read). We are now in day 45. Jesus is beginning to call His disciples. His ministry has begun and He is moving forward quickly.

G. Days 46-47

We come to our next time marker in John 2:1 (read). Here is what I gather. On day 45 Jesus went to Galilee. He arrived in the evening and that begins day 46. That begins the first of the three days. He spends that day in Galilee and the next He goes to Cana, since He and His new disciples have been invited to a wedding at Cana of Galilee. He arrives there on the 47th day in the evening and the next day the wedding begins. So we are now at day 47.

H. Days 48-54

Now I believe that the wedding feast was a seven day feast because of the amount of grape juice they used. There were six water pots which would have contained from 20-30 gallons each. That is 120-180 gallons! They had already depleted the amount they had expected they might use. I expect that this was quite a long feast. So if we give it seven days, which was quite normal for Jewish weddings, then we have days 48-54.

I. Days 55-58

After the wedding at Cana, Jesus goes to Capernaum and spends a few days there (John 2:12). It is almost certain by the festivities at the wedding in Cana, that it was a single woman that got married, and not a widow. Maids got married on Wednesdays. Widows got married on Thursday. So Jesus would likely have left Cana on the next Wednesday. From Cana He went to Capernaum. I would gather He stayed there until after the Sabbath, which takes us from day 55-58. John 2:12 says He did not stay there many days. So, most likely He left right after the Sabbath, which was the fourth day after leaving Cana. So there we have days 55-58.

J. Day 59

On day 59, Jesus starts out for Jerusalem (John 2:13). We are not told by which road He went. I am not sure how long that took. We will give it a day, though it possibly took more, especially if He visited on the way.

K. Day 60-63

We do not know how much time Jesus spent in Jerusalem but it was likely a few days. He did cleanse the temple so He will likely have been there a few days before the Passover (John 2:14-22). So I will give this as possibly days 60-63.

L. Day 64

For our 64th day we come to John 2:13 (read). We have now arrived at a fixed date. This is Passover day. It is Nisan 14. So, if we give or take a few days, we are somewhere between day 60 and day 70 from the time of His baptism. And somewhere between those two dates He was born because Luke says He began to be about 30 years of age. If our reckoning is correct to this point, then He was born somewhere in the spring time of the year.

Recently I found a quote by John Gill on John 2:13 that adds some credibility to my calculations. His quote on John 2:13 says this, "This was the first "passover" after Christ's baptism, which is generally

thought to have been about half a year before; though so much time cannot be made out from the scriptural account; for from his baptism, to his return out of the wilderness to John, were forty days; and from thence, to his coming to Cana, four or, five days more; and perhaps he might be seven days in Cana; for so long a wedding was usually kept; and his stay at Capernaum was but a few days; all which do not amount to above eight or nine weeks at most..." end quote. So He has arrived at the approximate number of days I arrived at. If this is correct, then Christ was most certainly born somewhere from February to March.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WORDING OF LUKE 3:23

So, with that, let us now look at the significance of the wording in Luke 3:23 as it reads in the KJV, "Jesus began to be about 30 years of age!" Now, here is a very interesting expression. Luke makes some other very interesting statements, which if translated literally, do not seem to make sense but when one understands the historical situation they are very accurate.

Let me give you an example from Acts 13:42 (read). The NKJV says that the people begged that these words might be preached to them again, 'the next Sabbath'. But when you translate the original words literally, they requested that these words be preached again on, 'the between Sabbath.' What does that mean? One explained these strange words like this. During certain feast days, the first and last days were called Sabbaths, because the people were not to work on those days. But these Sabbaths often happened between the regular seven day Sabbaths, so they were called 'between Sabbaths'.

So when Luke says, "Jesus began to be about 30 years of age" we need to pay careful attention to those words. What is most instructive in these words is that we are somewhere near the birthday of Christ. It is not the exact date of His birth, but near the date of His birth. This much is clear. We have seen that between Jesus' baptism and the Passover, there are between 60 and 70 days. So, we are that close to Christ's birth date.

Now, it is important that we understand something here with regard to the Jewish year. The Jews used a lunar month but went by a solar year. The lunar month is 29 1/2 days. So the Jewish months were 29 days, then 30 days, then 29 days etc... The lunar month is the month as determined by the moon. But there are about 11 days more than 12 lunar months in a solar year. The solar year goes by the sun. The Jews used a lunar month but a solar year. By using a solar year, their harvest times always fell much at the same time.

So, to compensate for the 12 month lunar cycle and the extra 11 days each year, they had a 19 year cycle. And in a cycle of 19 years, they added one extra month 7 times. This extra month was added in the 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, 14th, 17th and 19th years of the cycle. Every year had 12 months but in the spring of the leap years, the month Adar II was added to the regular Adar I month. This was the month before Nisan. The current cycle began in Jewish year 5758. On our calendar that year began October 2, 1997. [See file Calendar 1 Jewish]

Now all of this gets rather complicated but in a time period of three years lambing season may vary up to say about 22 days as the year slipped back by that much in that time. So if Jesus was born in the spring, this would have affected his birthday and so Luke says, "Now Jesus Himself began to be about 30 years of age..."

So, what is the significance of all this? Well, that brings us to some familiar verses from the OT regarding the birth of Christ. You see, after the temple was built and it was in a permanent place, special shepherds were trained to raise sheep for Israel's sacrificial days. They raised hundreds of thousands of lambs every year. These lambs were born around the area of Bethlehem. And close to Bethlehem was Migdol Eder, the tower of the flock. So go to Micah 4:8 (read). Now look at 5:2 (read).

So, listen to this from Cooper P. Abrams. He writes, "First, we know that Migdal Eder was the watchtower that guarded the Temple flocks that were being raised to serve as sacrificial animals in the Temple. These

were not just any flock and herd. The shepherds who kept them were men who were specifically trained for this royal task. They were educated in what an animal that was to be sacrificed had to be and it was their job to make sure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged, or blemished."6 These lambs were apparently wrapped in 'swaddling cloths' to protect them from injury and also used to wrap the Lord Jesus", end quote. Now that is most fascinating.

In my studies over the past years I have come to the conclusion that Jesus was born at Migdal Edar, as given in the prophet Micah. That is very significant. That was the tower of the flock, a place where the special sacrificial lambs were raised for the feasts of Israel. When the temple was built in Jerusalem, and worship became permanent there, the special sacrificial lambs were raised around Bethlehem. As I understand it, they were birthed at Migdal Ader which is near Bethlehem. We are told that at the birth of Christ, the shepherds were out in the fields at night. It is clear that at no time would the sheep have had more careful attention than at lambing season and lambing season is said to have been from some time in February to early April. Scholars don't appear to be agreed as to exactly when but it was some time in the spring. Also with the shifting days of the month Adar 1 and 2, and the lunar months it varied from year to year by a number of days.

Cooper P. Abrams, in a very enlightening article called, "Where was the Birth Place of the Lord Jesus?" says this: "Typically, 'Migdal Edar', (the tower of the flock) at Bethlehem is the perfect place for Christ to be born. He was born in the very birthplace where tens of thousands of lambs, which had been sacrificed to prefigure Him. God promised it, pictured it, and performed it at "Migdal Edar". It all fits together, for that's the place where sacrificial lambs were born! Jesus was not born behind an inn, in a smelly stable where the donkeys of travelers and other animals were kept. He was born in Bethlehem, at the birthing place of the sacrificial lambs that were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem which Micah 4:8 calls the 'tower of the flock.'"

Another article called, "The Bible's Story of the Birth of Jesus", by Steve Rudd says, "Was Jesus born during the lambing period? There is a tradition that Bethlehem was in fact, the very town where the Jerusalem Passover lambs were born and raised. This is quite credible, considering the fact that David (through inspiration) created a whole new spiritual system with the temple in Jerusalem that Solomon built. David was also a shepherd and given he was king, would logically choose his birth town, the "city of David" (Bethlehem) to be the place that raised such important lambs for the annual day of atonement on Nissan 14, when the High Priest would take the blood and sprinkle it on the Ark of the Covenant. If this is true, then it is possible that Jesus was born in the very manger where the actual Passover lambs were born. The "lambing season" for sheep **is in February in Israel**. It is an interesting suggestion that Jesus, being the "lamb of the world" was born at exactly the same time the literal lambs were born. If so then Jesus was born when the lambs were born and he died when the Passover lamb was slaughtered on Nissan 14." (<http://www.bible.ca/D-Xmas-story.htm>).

In another article from the internet called, "Why We Believe Messiah was Born on Passover" I quote this: "Considering how the seasons of the year affect the behavior of the sheep and the shepherds, it seems reasonable to conclude that the shepherds in the Judean hills would be "keeping watch over their flocks at night" in the spring and that, therefore, spring was a likely time for the birth of Messiah."

Another article says, "Whilst many commentators who have remarked on the impossibility of Messiah being born on 25 December because of the shepherds have opted for an autumnal birth, they have invariably overlooked one vital piece of information which in my opinion gives us an important key to a spring birth for the Messiah, namely the fact that spring is the lambing season. In Israel and in surrounding nations lambing occurs over a two week period from late March to early April. During this season the flocks require the constant attention of their shepherds, who keep careful watch over their sheep and their newborn for their own safety. At no other time of the year are

shepherds so closely tied to their flocks" end quote.
(<http://www.nccg.org/241Art-6April.html>).

Well, the lambs were born, likely in a span of about two weeks. And somewhere in that time Jesus would have been born. With the fluctuation of the months Adar I and Adar II, it is a clear possibility from Luke 3:23 that Jesus was born during the time the sacrificial lambs were being born. The little we know of the place where Jesus was born in the Gospel accounts comes from the Gospel writer Luke. He says, "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." And he also tells us there were shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night. This fits well with the prophecies of Micah, and with a spring birth date.

III. CORRELATION OF THE COURSES OF ABIJAH WITH LUKE 3:23

Now I want to make one more point. I think that most who have studied the birth-date of Christ probably have come to the month of Tishri or the fall time of the year. The first of Tishri is the New Year's day of Israel's civil calendar. The first day of Tishri commemorates the first day of creation. The Jewish civil calendar began, so they hold, at creation.

How do scholars come to that date? They do so by reckoning from the course of Abijah, in which John the Baptist's father served, just before his wife Elizebeth conceived. They determine from that when John would have been born and go forward in time three months, since we are told Mary conceived three months later. From that, one comes to the birth date of Christ.

Now there are two very important things that those who come to a fall birth date seem to miss. First, there were 24 courses of priests in the Jewish Levitical system. They all served for two weeks in a year, but they did not serve two consecutive weeks in a row. They served twice in a year, about six months apart. So if we date Christ's birth from the birth of John the Baptist and the time when Zachariah served in the course of Abijah, and we may well come to the

fall of the year. But on the very same ground we could date it from the second time the course of Abijah served which was six months later. That is in the spring of the year. If Zachariah, John the Baptist's father, was serving in the second service, then Jesus would have been born six months later than the fall date. That would mean that Christ was not born in the fall, but in the spring. That date is just as possible based on the course of Abijah as the fall date. Thus, if Jesus was born in the spring, the dating from the course of Abijah still matches.

(INTERESTING NOTE LUKE 6:1. Do, only if time.)

Let me add another interesting note here. Look at Luke 6:1 (read). The NKJV says, "Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first..." If this verse is translated literally it reads, "Now it happened on the second first Sabbath..." What does that mean? Well, there were 24 courses of priests. Each served for one week, going into service on a Sabbath and going out on the next Sabbath. But these 24 courses served twice in the year. The first course began service on the first month of the religious year, Nisan. You can read all this in the OT. But on the seventh month they started all over again. So it has been suggested that the first Sabbath in the second six month was called the second first Sabbath. And then came the second, second Sabbath and so on. And I believe that Zachariah served in the second half of the religious year and this would indicate that Jesus was born when the lambs were being born.

The second matter, those who come to a fall date miss is that at no time would the shepherds have watched their sheep at night more carefully than in the spring, when it was lambing season.

CONCL: So, in conclusion, I had for some time come to believe that Jesus was born when the sacrificial lambs were born. The only thing I could base that on was that so many other things regarding the sacrificial lambs and Christ were precisely the same. But when I found that Christ's baptism and John chapters 1-2 are so closely connected that I had my first strong evidence.

I might add here as well, that most scholars note that Jesus' began His ministry at about 30 years of age. That was the age at which the priest in the OT began to minister. His ministry began a few days after His testing by Satan. So His 40 days of temptation may have begun some 40 days before that and so Luke speaks of, "...when Jesus began to be about 30 years of age..." All of this allows for Jesus to have been born exactly when the lambs were born!

And so, this morning we have examined the words of Dr. Luke in 3:23 when he said, "Jesus began to be about thirty years of age." My conclusion is that it gives very strong evidence that Jesus was born in the spring time of the year. So let us go to John 1:29 (read). Now John 1:35-36 (read). He was indeed the lamb of God! This is my conclusion: He was born WHEN the lambs were born! He was born WHERE the lambs were born! He was swaddled like the lambs were swaddled! At His death He traveled the path the lambs traveled to Jerusalem! He entered the gate the sheep entered! He was tested for four days when the lambs were tested for defects! No fault was found in Him, as any sacrificial lamb had to have no faults! He was condemned to die for others, though no fault was found in Him, just like the sacrificial lambs! He died by shedding His blood, just as the lambs died! He died exactly WHEN the sacrificial lambs died!