

## **A review of *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives***

**Author: Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict**

**Published by Random House, 2012**

**ISBN: 978-0-385-34640-5**

**Reviewed by Robert Sungenis**

Headlines were made round the world a few months ago in the secular newspapers reporting that Pope Benedict apparently squashed a 2000-year old Catholic tradition as he rejected the belief that Jesus was born on December 25, 1 BC or 1 AD. The newspapers further remarked that the pope believes Jesus was not born in a manger and there were no animals at his birth. They had their fun with it. Now let's get serious.

In reading the reports one gets the impression that the pope wrote a lengthy treatise on Jesus' birth date and concluded from his vast research that Catholic tradition was not to be trusted. The secular press would be quite happy with such a conclusion since it would bring yet another blow to the traditional faith and mores of the Catholic Church and add to the cultural distance the modern world wishes to have with the medieval past.

Expecting the worst, I quickly ordered the book and read all of its 132 pages. The title is: "The Infancy Narratives: Jesus of Nazareth" with the author stated as "Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI," which is the same dual authorship he used for the first two volumes. We must note here that he is the first pope to engage in such a dualistic approach to the papal identity. My feeling is that Joseph Ratzinger likes being a biblical scholar much more than he likes being pope, and that he accepted his selection as pope only because he knew that the crop of liberal and heterodox cardinals in line to replace John Paul II would have been an even worse nightmare for the Church. Although I was admittedly confused by the pope's use of two names, I think at this point it may be healthier than I thought previously. It helps the Catholic populace at large to distinguish between the pope's official teaching and the speculative thoughts to which he is entitled as a private theologian. Anyone who has been in theology and biblical interpretation long enough knows that they are, to use an expression, not exact sciences. The pope's book helps us to distinguish the pope as a man and the pope as the vicar of Christ on earth. It also helps us to reject the virtual pope worship that many EWTN Catholics erringly cultivated during the reign of John Paul II when they refused to separate the vicar from the man.

While it is true that the Pope has doubts about the traditional dating of Jesus' birth, his book, by and large, is quite good. The Christian symbolism he draws out of the infancy narratives is very uplifting and it is one of the main draws of the book.

As to the manger issue, the pope suggests that Jesus was born in a cave and he cites Justin Martyr and Origen as support. He further suggests that the ox and ass usually depicted in a manger scene were added later in the tradition to symbolize Jews and Gentiles coming together under Christ, but that no oxen and asses were actually at the nativity itself (pp. 67-69). Although the spiritual application is good, the problem with the theory is that Luke 2:7-16 is quite clear that Jesus was born in a "manger," which is the Greek word *phaten* and means precisely, a manger, which is a feeding trough for animals. To verify this I looked up all the major Greek lexicons and all were agreed that *phaten* is a feeding trough or stable for

animals. Why the pope thinks he has the prerogative to side-step this fact is because he subscribes, at least in part these days, to the historical-critical theory, which claims that the history of Scripture can be in error, and we will see more of this in the remainder of the pope's book.

As regards the Magi, the pope is not so sure of their origin and finds the historical data rather confusing. Be that as it may, in trying to take the narrative at face value, he does a poor job in explaining the star that led the Magi to Christ. Without much argument, he accepts the "planetary conjunction" hypothesis (pp. 97-103), which seems to be the popular answer these days on EWTN. Unfortunately, this theory invariably skips right over the fact that Matthew 2:9 says "the star which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over where the Child was." If we are going to take these words at face value, then they mean the star was right over the house Jesus was in, which is how the Magi distinguished Jesus' house from every other house. In other words, this was a miracle, not a planetary conjunction.

Interestingly enough, in other instances we see the pope struggling in this book with whether to use the historical-critical approach to Scripture. After 85 years of learning, he has come to the point in which he is now rejecting a substantial amount of the historical-critical conclusions and has chosen to accept the veracity of Scripture's description of Jesus' birth. This is a little puzzling since he was much more favorable to the historical-critical approach in the first two books of *Jesus of Nazareth*, parts 1 & 2. But this has always been the case with Joseph Ratzinger since he was a priest in the 1960s to a cardinal in the 1990s. One day he would sound like a flaming liberal; the next day he would be an arch-conservative. You simply never knew what you are going to get from him. If there were ever one example to measure the schizophrenia in the Catholic Church after Vatican II, Joseph Ratzinger is a case study. Be that as it may, after one reads the entire third book of *Jesus of Nazareth*, I feel safe to say he will feel a little closer to Christ and his humble origins in Bethlehem, and that, of course, was the pope's main purpose in writing the book.

Concerning the dating of Christ's birth, the hullabaloo the secular press raised about the issue comes from just one small paragraph in the popes book! On pages 61-62, the pope starts from the currently accepted date of Herod's death in 4 BC, and thus Jesus would have been born in 6 or 7 BC. He then concludes that in 550 AD, Dionysius Exiguus must have made a mistake about our Christian calendar. That's it. No long dissertation is given. In fact, from this short paragraph it appears that 6 or 7 BC is just an after-thought and that the pope had no intentions of going deeply into the subject, unlike what the secular press made of it, besides the fact that the press knew the 6 BC date has been floating around for centuries in the scholarly world.

Perhaps if he had gone more deeply into the subject, the pope would have found that the date of 4 BC for Herod's death is not certain, especially since the historian Josephus (who wrote in the late first century) is our only source for this date. Josephus, as recent studies have found, is incorrect about many dates.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, if the pope had done a thorough examination of the Fathers (other than Justin and Origen), he would have found that a December 25, 1 BC date for Christ's birth was the consensus long before Dionysius came many centuries later. So, dear Catholic, hold your head high. Your Catholic tradition survives and the pope, if he wants to be a biblical scholar, needs to do a bit more study on this subject before he gives the secular press a chance to mock it.

Contrary to the secular press, I am more interested in the dialectic the pope displays in this little book. We can see a virtual war going on in his mind between the face value testimony of Scripture over against the historical-critical hermeneutic (HCH), the latter often doing its best to make it appear as if the New

Testament is nothing but a biased collection of fallacious redactions from disgruntled late first century Christians. To his credit, the pope rejects the HCH conclusion that Jesus was born in Nazareth and instead opts for the biblical account that he was born in Bethlehem. Those of you not familiar with HCH might think that Bethlehem would be a slam dunk, but I can assuredly tell you that since the late 1940s every pope, cardinal, bishop and priest of the Catholic Church has had to struggle with that simple question due to the unbridled influence of the HCH school in the Catholic Church, which started with Protestant liberal heretics in the 1700 and 1800s and was given a lot of steam by Jewish scholars in the 1900s. If I am reading him right, our present pope seems to be swinging the pendulum back toward the literal and face value testimony of Scripture's history, and I hope this is a trend that continues.

It is easy to tell, despite the present struggles the pope has with HCH, that he was born and bred in German liberal theology. As he did in *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part 2, except in one or two instances (e.g., Rene Laurentin) the pope quotes only from German theologians, and they are often either from the liberal strain or from those who have denied major tenets of the Christian faith based on their devotion to HCH. In the first few pages of his book, Joseph Ratzinger gives us the major hermeneutical tenets of HCH when he says: "I am convinced that good exegesis involves two stages. Firstly, one has to ask what the respective authors intended to convey through their text in their own day – the historical component of exegesis...The second question posed by good exegesis must be: is what I read here true?" (p. xi).

Come again? Traditional Catholics are probably shocked to hear these words from the reigning vicar of Christ, but it relates right back to the "Bethlehem problem" I raised above. HCH scholars would feel no reticence concluding, against the clear testimony of Scripture, that Jesus was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. Why? Because, as of 1965 when they maligned Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* 11's statement "all Scripture is inspired...for the sake of our salvation" to now mean that only things in Scripture directly related to our salvation are inspired by God, they gave themselves a blank check to reject any historical statement in Scripture as being inaccurate. Since names, places and dates, in their view, have nothing directly to do with our salvation, then they can be classified as *adiaphora*. Even our pope, as did the previous pope, holds to this mistaken interpretation of *Dei Verbum* 11. Suffice it to say, the Church has always taught that all of Scripture is inspired and without error (which is strongly implied in *Dei Verbum* 11's footnotes as they quote from the Council of Trent, Aquinas, Augustine, and Leo XIII, but which the Catholic liberals invariably ignore). The tradition held Bethlehem to be the birthplace of Jesus because Matthew 2:1 is just as much God's inspired word as when the Gospels say "Jesus rose from the dead on the third day" or "in the beginning was the word...and the word was God."

Fortunately, as Joseph Ratzinger sees it: "Significant exponents of modern exegesis take the view that when Matthew and Luke say Jesus was born in Bethlehem, they are making a theological statement, not a historical one. In actual fact, these exegetes claim Jesus was born in Nazareth....I do not see how a basis for this theory can be gleaned from the actual sources. As far as the birth of Jesus is concerned, the only sources we have are the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke" (p. 65). This does not mean to say that if Fr. Ratzinger was convinced by some "actual sources" (whatever degree they are deemed more accurate than the testimony of holy writ) which said Jesus was born in Nazareth that he would not side with them. It only means that he is now ready to call into question the conclusions of his dear German theologians from the Tübingen school of biblical exegesis, the birthplace of HCH.

A good example of his pendulum swing away from HCH is his treatment of Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a child and shall call his name Emanuel"). The new Joseph Ratzinger discounts all the HCH efforts to tie this to a historical figure in Isaiah's time (the exegesis that Jewish scholars want very badly) and concludes that it can only refer to Christ (the exegesis that Jewish scholars repudiate). As

he puts it: "Indeed, I believe that in our own day, after all the efforts of critical exegesis, we can share anew this sense of astonishment at the fact that a saying from the year 733 BC, incomprehensible for so long, came true at the moment of the conception of Jesus Christ – that God did indeed give us a great sign intended for the whole world" (p. 51).

It was interesting for me to read the pope's account of King Ahaz's dealing with the Sign offered by the prophet in connection with Isaiah 7:14 ("Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"). As the pope recalls the fact that Ahaz is caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place when he has to choose whether to side with the Assyrians and subsequently worship their gods, or side with the Syrians/Ephraim who want to fight against Assyria, Ahaz is offered a third option from God – the "Sign." As Joseph Ratzinger puts it: "Isaiah tells the king that he need not fear the two 'smoldering stumps of firebrands,' Syria and Ephraim, and that there is therefore no reason for the protection treaty with Assyria: he should rely on faith, not on political calculations" (pp. 47-48). I wouldn't be as disturbed by Joseph Ratzinger's critique of Ahaz except that I am privy to the fact that just about five years ago he sent a Catholic archbishop to the Russian patriarch to ask him if he would be offended if the Catholic Church did a consecration of Russia. The patriarch answered, yes, Russia would be offended. So the pope decided against doing a consecration of Russia, even though it has been commanded by heaven since 1929. So, for all of Joseph Ratzinger's newfound exegesis of Isaiah 7:14 that allows him to see it fulfilled only by Christ, he still has a substantial portion of Ahaz left in him.

Still, when he feels it convenient, the pope will swing back toward the HCH hermeneutic. For example, on page xi he speaks of exegeting Scripture based on the "intent" of the biblical author. That is, in order to interpret the author's meaning correctly, one must dig deep into the history to know the background of his statement. Sounds good, doesn't it? Yes, indeed. We should all try to know the intent of the words behind the words. It's a very good practice; ah, except, when you give yourself sole right to determine what the history and the intent are. The method then becomes a ploy to inject your own meaning into the text rather than a help to know what the text is actually saying. If, for example, you, like Joseph Ratzinger, believe it is a fact of history that man evolved from apes (and thus claim, through HCH, to know the "critical" or "real history" of mankind, you will inevitably conclude that the "intent" of the Genesis writer is not to give a literal six-day creation story. Likewise, if your HCH analysis leads you to believe that the first century was filled with misogynists, which might include St. Paul, you will then conclude that the "intent" of St. Paul was not to bar women from speaking or having rule in the Church, despite what he says in 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:11-15. Similarly, if HCH leads you to believe that St. Paul was a product of the first century cultural milieu that was "homophobic," then you've created room to question the real "intent" of his statements against the effeminate in (cf. 1 Cor 6:9-10; Rom 1:21-31). As you can see, basing interpretations on the "intent" of the author is an open-mine field. The new, or shall we say, more mature Joseph Ratzinger is now more ambivalent to this approach. Still, in typical Ratzinger style, he has two opinions on the subject. On the one hand he says things like, "It seems to me utterly futile to formulate [HCH] hypotheses on this matter" (p. 8) but on the other hand he says "naturally, modern 'critical' exegesis [HCH] will tend to dismiss such connections as naïve" (p. 16).

### **Dating the Birth and Death of Jesus**

Since the pope only relegated one paragraph to discussing the date for Christ's birth, it is obvious that he has never really put much study into the issue. If he had, I'm sure he would have run across alternative evidence that places Christ's birth precisely where our calendar has put it.

The date for the birth of Jesus has occupied the attention of scholars for centuries due to the amount of seemingly conflicting evidence in historical literature and astronomical signs. HCH scholars have maintained for quite some time that Jesus was born near 6 BC., or possibly even earlier. As noted, this conclusion was based on the information provided by Flavius Josephus that Herod died in 4 BC. Since the New Testament indicates that about two years before he died Herod had slaughtered the infants of Bethlehem, scholars were led to conclude Christ's birth took place in 5 BC or 6 BC.

But since the date of Herod's death is based only on the report of Josephus, it may not be correct. Although many scholars still accept Josephus' account, as noted above, many others have found a plethora of errors and discrepancies in his writings. These mistakes were due either to Josephus' original writing or they were created when different renditions of his works were later translated. By the Middle Ages, there existed a dozen or so manuscripts of his writings, each differing significantly from the other. As for Josephus himself, one account in *Grande Encyclopédie* by LADMIRAUT (Paris 1893) says Josephus was "boastful, proud and pretentious; one who falsified history to his own advantage and whose treatment of events is often inadequate." To deal with these discrepancies, various critical editions of Josephus' writings have been issued (e.g., Niese, 1881; Reinach 1902-1932, wherein Reinach adds glosses to Josephus accounts such as "this is a mistake" or "in another book...the figures are different..."). Some scholars suggest that Herod died in 1 AD because of the close proximity of the Dec. 29, 1 BC eclipse, an eclipse mentioned by Josephus but previously attributed to March 13, 4 BC. Another explanation holds that the conflicting dating can best be explained by the hypothesis that Josephus was not aware that Herod's successors had antedated their reigns.<sup>2</sup>

If these suspicions about the inaccuracies of Josephus' writings are true, we have sufficient reason to accept the alternative date given by the monk 'Dionysius the Little' (named "Little" because of his humility). In 532 Dionysius stated that Christ was born on December 25, 1 BC. Perhaps just as important, Dionysius also established that 1 AD corresponded to the 754<sup>th</sup> year of the beginning of Rome, a Roman dating system which serves as a solid foundation upon which to base the 1 BC date for the birth of Christ. In the Roman era there were two dating systems:

The first was a dating system based on the dates of the reigning monarch. In this system, the foundation date is 753 BC, which is the foundation date of Rome under Romulus. The Romans titled this foundation date as "urbe condita" (meaning: "from the foundation of the city"). Their year began on April 21st and had 355 days in their calendar. This inaccurate calendar remained in force until the time of Julius Caesar who in 46 BC, upon the tutelage of the Greek astronomer Sisogenes, increased the number of days in the year 46 BC to 445; and thereafter (45 BC and onward) there would be 365.25 days in the year and the year would begin on January 1st.

The second dating system was based on the dates of significant events. In this realm, the commencement of the Olympic games in 776 BC is the foundation date. Every four years, the Greeks would record the date of the games or "Olympiads," and the event was abbreviated "OL." Augustine verifies this counting.<sup>3</sup> Each segment of four years began on the first full moon of summer. We also see other Church Fathers use the Olympic calendar. Cyril of Jerusalem uses it in his dating of the prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the Roman system, although it is close to our present calendar, Julius Caesar did not use the numerals 1 to 31 to designate the days of the month. Rather, he used the ancient Roman names "Calends, Nones and Ides." In this system, Calends was the first day of the month, Nones was the fifth and Ides was the thirteenth (except in March, May, July and October the Nones fell on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and the Ides fell on the 15<sup>th</sup>). The days between were noted on how close they were to Calends, Nones and Ides. The number placed before the calendar name would be subtracted from the calendar date. For example,

the “8<sup>th</sup> day of Calends” would subtract 8 days from January 1st, which equals December 25. Incidentally, this is where the Irish get the expression “The Ides of March.”

Actually, there were two ways to mark the calendar based on the reigning monarch. The years could be signified by Ordinal numbers (e.g., first, second, third, fourth). When Ordinal numbers were used, they reflected the year in which the monarch was nominated or acceded to the throne. His ascension year would be the first year and the following year would be the second year.

But the years could also be signified by Cardinal numbers (e.g., one, two, three, four). In this case, the year “1” would be a year after the monarch ascended the throne. The ancient Jews used a similar dual system in marking off the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah, making a distinction between the ascension year of the king as opposed to the following year.<sup>5</sup> We do something similar with our dates. Presently, we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but our present date does not begin with 2113 but 2013. Similarly, we can say either that “John is in his 31<sup>st</sup> year,” or “John is 30 years old.” These distinctions are important, since it is known that all the Greek and Latin historians marked dates based on one of the above systems. Thus, they had the following systems available to them: (1) the Olympiad (OL); (2) the “urbe condita” (UC); (3) years of the monarch; (4) years of the Julian calendar. As a result, the same event might have different dates attached to it depending on which dating system was used. For example, Luke 3:1 says: “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee.” The fifteenth year could either be 15 years from the date he ascended the throne (which we know is August 14 AD) or 16 years from the date of his ascension. Further, the beginning day of his reign could be designated either January or August.

To further complicate things, towards the end of the Roman Empire under the reign of Constantine, another system of dating was established, which was based on the land-tax occurring every 15 years, and was known as the “Indictions.” This 15-year cycle had originated in the reign of Diocletian but was implemented as a calendar under Constantine.

Another complication is that the Greeks, besides using the Olympiad calendar, celebrated the nativity of Jesus on January 6 whereas the Latins celebrated it on December 25, which is not only a twelve day difference but also a different calendar year.

Here is where ‘Dionysius the Little’ comes into the picture. Although Armenian by birth, he eventually settled at Rome. He began his work by translating texts from Greek into Latin, noting that the Greeks and Latins did not celebrate Christmas or Easter on the same dates. Relying upon the testimony of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, as well as the historians such as Julius Africanus and Orosius, he calculated that Christ was born precisely 532 years before the date he had begun his work.

Julius Africanus made an extensive study of the Hebrew and Greek calendars, and attempted to make an accurate match-up of the two.<sup>6</sup> Here is an example of his elaborate calculations: “From Artaxerxes, moreover, 70 weeks are reckoned up to the time of Christ, according to the numeration of the Jews. For from Nehemiah, who was sent by Artaxerxes to people Jerusalem, about the 120<sup>th</sup> year of the Persian empire, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes himself, and the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad, up to this time, which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad, and the 16<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, there are given 475 years, which make 490 Hebrew years, since they measure the years by the lunar month of 29½ days, as may easily be explained, the annual period according to the sun consisting of 365¼ days, while the lunar period of 12 months has 11¼ days less. For which reason the Greeks and the Jews insert three intercalary months every eight years. For 8 times 11¼ days make 3 months. The 475 years, therefore, contain 59 periods of 8 years and three months over: thus, the three intercalary months for every 8 years being added, we get 15 years, and these together with the 475 years make 490 years. Let

no one now think us unskilled in the calculations of astronomy, when we fix without further ado the number of days at 365¼. For it is not in ignorance of the truth, but rather by reason of exact study, that we have stated our opinion so shortly. But let what follows also be presented as in outline to those who endeavor to inquire minutely into all things.”<sup>7</sup> We note here that 475 years = 202 Olympiads minus 83 Olympiads = 119 Olympiads; and  $119 \times 4 = 476$  years. Deducting 1 year since there is no year “0,” leaves 475 years. Comparing lunar years with solar years we have: 475 years  $\times$  365.25 days = 173,493 days; and 490 years  $\times$  354 days (*i.e.*, 12 months of 29.5 days) = 173,460 days, which is a difference of only 33 days.

Dionysius then affirmed that year 1 of Christ’s life corresponded to the Roman year 754 UC, both of which commenced on January 1<sup>st</sup>. We notice here that Dionysius has placed the birth of Christ on the 8<sup>th</sup> day before the Calends of January (that is, January 1<sup>st</sup> AD minus 8 days = December 25, 1 BC). [Incidentally, the year beginning January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1 AD coincides with the fourth year of the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, at least up to the first full moon in July, which would then change to the first year of the 195<sup>th</sup> Olympiad].

After Dionysius did his painstaking work of comparing calendar against calendar, all historians accepted his dating system. In fact, those who went further back into history before the birth of Christ began to put their dates in negative figures. Likewise, those who dated an event after Christ would designate it as “Anno Domini” (that is, “the year of Our Lord”). Thus, Dionysius’ calendar has been accepted by the whole Western world up to our day.

As such, we can use the various calendars and coordinate the various dates for specific events in Christ’s life. For example, 8 Days after the birth of Christ is the date: 195<sup>th</sup> OL, 754 UC, or 1 AD. Additionally, Jesus in temple at 12 years (Lk 2:42) is the date: 198<sup>th</sup> OL, 766 UC or 13 AD; the baptism of Jesus is the date: 202<sup>nd</sup> OL, 782 UC or 29 AD; and the crucifixion of Jesus is the date: 203<sup>rd</sup> OL, 786 UC or 33 AD.

From the apocryphal work, *Gospel of Nicodemus*, Part I, *The Acts of Pilate*, it states: “In the fifteenth year of the government of Tiberius Caesar, emperor of the Romans, and Herod being king of Galilee, in the nineteenth year of his rule, on the eighth day before the Calends of April, which is the twenty-fifth of March, in the consulship of Rufus and Rubellio, in the fourth year of the two hundred and second Olympiad, Joseph Caiaphas being high priest of the Jews.”<sup>8</sup> This coincides precisely with all the information we have gathered thus far and shows that the calendar of Dionysius was right on target. For the high priesthood of Joseph Caiaphas we have the following datings in coincidence: The 15<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius Caesar; which equals the 19<sup>th</sup> year of Herod; which equals the 4<sup>th</sup> year of 202<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad; which equals the Calends of April 8; which equals March 25, 30 AD.

### **Testimony of the Fathers on the precise date of Christ’s birth**

**Eusebius of Caesarea** says: “It was in the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of the reign of Augustus and the 28<sup>th</sup> after the subjugation of Egypt and the death of Antony and Cleopatra, with whom the dynasty of the Ptolemies in Egypt came to an end, that our savior and Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem and Judea, according to the prophecies which had been uttered concerning him. His birth took place during the first census, while Cyrenius was governor of Syria.” (Church History, Ch 5, 1). Here Eusebius has the reign of Augustus begin with the death of Julius Caesar (which Josephus also does), which puts the birth of Christ in 753 UC (1 BC). Eusebius records that Caesar Augustus reigned for 56 years and 4 months.<sup>9</sup> Having ascended the throne in 43 BC, the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of his reign would have begun on April 1, 1 BC and ended April 1, 1 AD. Thus Luke 2:1 states: “Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.” The significance of the 42<sup>nd</sup> year will be seen below.<sup>10</sup> In his book: *Chronicles*,<sup>11</sup> he records that Christ was born in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad; that in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of Christ (when he was age 2 and before his 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday), Herod gave the order to kill the innocents;

that Herod died in 5 AD, being eaten by worms; that the Passion of Christ (33 AD) occurred in the 1st year of the 203rd Olympiad, and in the 18th year of Tiberius.

**Jerome** records that Herod was recognized as king of the Jews in year 2 of Caesar Augustus, and puts Herod's death in the year 6 of Christ or 6 AD, requiring a reign of 46 years for Herod. He writes: "Jesus Christ the Son of God was born at Bethlehem of Judah and from this year begins the salvation of Christians. In 3 AD Herod had all the male children of Bethlehem killed, and in 6 AD he died a wretched but well merited death, his body riddled with worms."<sup>12</sup> According to his calculations, the year of Christ's birth is in the year 40 of Herod, or the year 42 of Augustus; the baptism of Christ occurred in 30 AD; the passion of Christ occurring in 33 AD; the martyrdom of Stephen and conversion of Paul in 34 AD; Matthew's writing of the Gospel of Matthew in 41 AD.

**Justin Martyr** records that Christ's passion occurred in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of Tiberius, which began in August 32 AD to August 33 AD.<sup>13</sup> **Tertullian** states that the nativity of Jesus took place in the year 41 of Caesar Augustus. Although this is one year earlier than Jerome's, this is due to the fact that Tertullian is going strictly by the Latin dating (which, as we saw earlier, places the nativity one calendar year prior to the Greek calendar, since December 25 is a calendar year prior to January 6), and it is known that Jerome, though a Latin, was using Greek sources when he was living in Palestine.<sup>14</sup> He also records that the sun stopped shining in the middle of the day at the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>15</sup> A corroborating text comes from a secular historian known as Phlegon who was a freed slave of Hadrian the emperor (117-138 AD): "...in the fourth year of the 202<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad there was an eclipse of the sun which was so remarkable that nothing comparable had ever been seen before. At the sixth hour of the day [noon], the darkness was such that one could see the stars."<sup>16</sup> NB: This phenomenon would not have been an eclipse caused by the moon, since darkness only occurs over specific areas of the earth in a total eclipse, and does not last very long in any case. The gospels record that the sun stopped shining for three hours.

**Origen** (d. 254) corroborates Phlegon's testimony: "The eclipse which took place at the time of Tiberius, during whose reign Christ was crucified, and the great earthquakes of the same time, were noted by Phlegon in his Books 13 & 24."<sup>17</sup> **John Malalas** (d. 578), records: "In the 4<sup>th</sup> month of the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of Augustus, on the 8th of the Calends of January [that is, December 25th] at the seventh hour of the day, our Lord Jesus Christ was born at Bethlehem....He was baptized in the Jordan on the sixth day of the month of Audynae (*i.e.*, January)...In the year 18 of the reign of Tiberius, in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed by Judas His disciple. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, the third day of the moon, the fifth day of the week at the fifth hour of the night [11 pm], He was led before Caiphas...On the following day he was taken to Pilate...He was crucified on the fourteenth day of the moon...At that time the sun was bereft of its light and darkness covered the whole earth."<sup>18</sup> **Paul the Deacon** (d. 799) records: "In the twelfth year of the reign of Tiberius, at Fidenae, an amphitheater collapsed burying 20,000 people. Seven years later, at the time when Our Lord was suffering his Passion, there was an immense earthquake. Rocks were split in the mountains. On the same day, the sun was darkened from the 6th to the 9th hour. Darkness covered the whole of the earth and the stars appeared."<sup>19</sup> As noted, **Julius Africanus** records: "In the year of the world 5533, that is 33 of Christ, namely the first year of the 203<sup>rd</sup> Olympiad, at the moment when Christ suffered his Passion horrific darkness covered the world and rocks were broken by an earthquake."<sup>20</sup> **Orosius** (d. 418) records that Christ was born in December of 1 BC; that in the year 3 of Christ, Herod slaughtered the innocents; that in the year 6 A.D., Herod died, eaten by worms; records that in the year 28, Tiberius sent Pilate to be governor of Judea; that in the year 33, the passion took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> of the Calends of April, which is March 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>21</sup> **Cassiodorus** (d. 580) records that the passion of Christ took place in the year 18 of Tiberius, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of the Calends of April, during an eclipse of the sun. He also writes: "Jesus Christ the Son of God was born at Bethlehem in the year 41 of the reign of Augustus."<sup>22</sup> **Sulpitius Severus** (d. 420) records that Christ was born in the year 33 of Herod, on the 8th of the

Calends of January [December 25], and that Herod died four years later; and that Christ was crucified in the 24<sup>th</sup> year of Herod the Younger (i.e., Herod Antipas).<sup>23</sup> **Epiphanius** (d. 403) records that Christ was born in the Julian year 45 (1 BC on our calendar), the fourth year of the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, and that the passion took place in the 18th year of Tiberius on March 25, and the Resurrection on the 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>24</sup> **Venerable Bede** (d. 735) records similar testimony.<sup>25</sup>

NB: As noted, discrepancies are often explained by the differences in ordinal and cardinal numbers in the various dating systems. My thanks to John Daly for some of the information supplied here.

Robert Sungenis

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of errors in Josephus works: Ezra 6:15 says: "This temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius." But Josephus says "The whole was complete in the ninth month of the 28th year of Xerxes," a difference of 45 years (*Antiquities* Bk 11, v. 179); 1 Maccabees 6:30 says: "The number of his forces was a 100,000 foot soldiers, 20,000 horsemen, and 32 elephants accustomed to war," but *The Jewish War* (Bk 1, v. 41) says there were 50,000 soldiers, 5,000 cavalry and 80 elephants, yet in *The Antiquities* (Bk. 12, ch. 9, v. 366) he quotes the figures from 1 Macc 6:30; *The Jewish War* (Bk. 1, ch. 2, v. 68) says that Hyrcanus reigned for 33 years; in *Antiquities* (xii, v. 299) for 32 years; in *Antiquities* (xx) for 30 years; in *The Jewish War* (Bk 1, ch. 3, v. 70) it says Aristobulus put the diadem upon his brow 471 years after the return from exile. In *Antiquities* (Bk 13, v. 301) he says it is 480 years. Both are wrong, since it is 490 years; In *The Jewish War* (Bk. 1, ch. 4, v. 105) he says Alexander captured Gamala and expelled the governor, but in *Antiquities* (Bk. 13, v. 394) Alexander puts him to death; in *Antiquities* (Bk 15, ch. 11, v. 1) says "Herod undertook the restoration of the Temple in the 18th year of his reign," but in *The Jewish War* (Bk 1, ch. 21, v. 401) says "it was in the 15th year."

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough study of this issue and a corresponding alternative, see the paper written by John Pratt, reprinted from *The Planetarian*, vol. 19, no. 4, Dec. 1990, pp. 8-14 at <http://www.johnpratt.com/items/docs/herod/herod.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Anything, then, that we learn from history about the chronology of past times assists us very much in understanding the Scriptures, even if it be learnt without the pale of the Church as a matter of childish instruction. For we frequently seek information about a variety of matters by use of the Olympiads, and the names of the consuls; and ignorance of the consulship in which our Lord was born, and that in which He suffered, has led some into the error of supposing that He was forty-six years of age when He suffered, that being the number of years He was told by the Jews the temple (which He took as a symbol of His body) was in building. Now we know on the authority of the evangelist that He was about thirty years of age when He was baptized; But the number of years He lived afterwards, although by putting His actions together we can make it out, yet that no shadow of doubt might arise from another source, can be ascertained more clearly and more certainly from a comparison of profane history with the gospel. *On Christian Doctrine*, 2, 28, 42.

<sup>4</sup> "From the going forth of the word for making answer, and for the building of Jerusalem, until Messiah the Prince are seven weeks and three score and two weeks. Now three score and nine weeks of years contain four hundred and eighty-three years. He said, therefore, that after the building of Jerusalem, four hundred and eighty-three years having passed, and the rulers having failed, then cometh a certain king of another race, in whose time the Christ is to be born. Now Darius the Mede built the city in the sixth year of his own reign, and first year of the 66<sup>th</sup> Olympiad according to the Greeks. Olympiad is the name among the Greeks of the games celebrated after four years, because of the day which in every four years of the sun's courses is made up of the three (supernumerary) hours in each year. And Herod is king in the 186<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, in the 4<sup>th</sup> year thereof. Now from the 66<sup>th</sup> to the 186<sup>th</sup> Olympiad there are 120 Olympiads intervening, and a little over. So then the 120 Olympiads make up 480 years: for the other three years

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remaining are perhaps taken up in the interval between the first and fourth years. And there thou hast the proof according to the Scripture which saith, From the going forth of the word that Jerusalem be restored and built until Messiah the Prince are seven weeks and sixty-two weeks." *Catechetical Lectures*, 12, 19.

<sup>5</sup> See Edwin Thiele's "The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings."

<sup>6</sup> "Up to the time of the Olympiads there is no certain history among the Greeks, all things before that date being confused, and in no way consistent with each other. But these Olympiads were thoroughly investigated by many, as the Greeks made up the records of their history not according to long spaces, but in periods of four years. For which reason I shall select the most remarkable of the mythical narratives before the time of the first Olympiad, and rapidly run over them. But those after that period, at least those that are notable, I shall take together, Hebrew events in connection with Greek, according to their dates, examining carefully the affairs of the Hebrews, and touching more cursorily on those of the Greeks; and my plan will be as follows: Taking up some single event in Hebrew history synchronous with another in Greek history, and keeping by it as the main subject, subtracting or adding as may seem needful in the narrative, I shall note what Greek or Persian of note, or remarkable personage of any other nationality, flourished at the date of that event in Hebrew history; and thus I may perhaps attain the object which I propose to myself." *Extant Fragments*, 3, 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Extant Fragments*, xviii, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Other mentions of the Olympiad are: Clement of Alexandria (40<sup>th</sup> Olympiad): "The disciple of Crates was Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic sect. He was succeeded by Cleanthes; and the latter by Chrysippus, and others after him. Xenophanes of Colophon was the founder of the Eleatic school, who, Timaeus says, lived in the time of Hiero, lord of Sicily, and Epicharmus the poet; and Apollodorus says that he was born in the fortieth Olympiad, and reached to the times of Darius and Cyrus"; "Herodotus in his first book agrees with him. The date is about the fiftieth Olympiad. Pythagoras is ascertained to have lived in the days of Polycrates the tyrant, about the sixty-second Olympiad. Mnesiphilus is described as a follower of Solon, and was a contemporary of Themistocles. Solon therefore flourished about the forty-sixth Olympiad" (*Stromata*, 1, 14). Hippolytus: "This philosopher [Anaxagoras] flourished in the first year of the 88<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, at which time they say that Plato also was born." Socrates Scholasticus: "In Britain, however, Constantine was proclaimed emperor, instead of his father Constantius, who died in the first year of the two hundred and seventy-first Olympiad, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July"; The Emperor Constantine lived sixty-five years, and reigned thirty-one. He died in the consulate of Felician and Tartan, on the twenty-second of May, in the second year of the 278th Olympiad. This book, therefore, embraces a period of thirty-one years. (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Ch 2 and Ch 40); "Thus was that war concluded which had been undertaken on account of the suffering Christians in Persia, under the consulate of the two Augusti, being the thirteenth of Honorius, and the tenth of Theodosius, in the fourth year of the 300<sup>th</sup> Olympiad: and with it terminated the persecution which had been excited in Persia against the Christians" (*Ecclesiastical History*, Book 7, Ch 20); Theophilus of Antioch: "When Cyrus, then, had reigned twenty-nine years, and had been slain by Tomyris in the country of the Massagetae, this being in the 62<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad, then the Romans began to increase in power, God strengthening them, Rome having been rounded by Romulus, the reputed child of Mars and Ilia, in the 7th Olympiad, on the 21<sup>st</sup> day of April, the year being then reckoned as consisting of ten months. Cyrus, then, having died, as we have already said, in the 62<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad, this date falls 220 A.V.C., in which year also Tarquinius, surnamed Superbus, reigned over the Romans..." (*Autolytus*, iii, 27).

<sup>9</sup> "In Hyrcanus' reign, in the (?) 184th Olympiad Julius Caesar became emperor of the Romans, for 4 years and 7 months. And after him, Augustus (Sebastos in Greek) was emperor for 56 years and 6 months. In his reign, Herodes was the first foreigner to be made king of the Jews by the Romans; his family came from Ascalon, and he had no right to the throne. In Herodes' reign, Christ the Son of God was born in Bethlehem of Judaea. After Augustus, Tiberius became emperor. In his 15th year, the fourth year of the 201st Olympiad [28 A.D.], our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, appeared amongst men. So from Antiochus Epiphanes until the 15th year of Tiberius, is 201 years. And from

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Alexander of Macedonia until the same year of Tiberius, is 352 years. And from the second year of Dareius [until the same year of Tiberius], is 548 years. [p131] And from the 15th year of Tiberius until the final siege of Jerusalem in the second year of Vespasianus, is 42 years." From Chronicles we have "He records that the Passion of Christ (33 AD) occurred in the 1st year of the 203rd Olympiad, and in the 18th year of Tiberius," which matches "After Augustus, Tiberius became emperor. In his 15th year, the fourth year of the 201st Olympiad [28 A.D.], our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, appeared amongst men," since the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the 201<sup>st</sup> OL would make 32 AD the fourth year of the 202<sup>nd</sup> OL, and thus the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the 203 OL is 33 AD.

<sup>10</sup> Migne, PG xix, col. 287.

<sup>11</sup> As noted in Alfred Schoene's (editor) book *Eusebi Chronicorum Libri*, p. 144, in reference to Migne, PG xix, col. 530.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by J. S. Daly and Rev. F. Egregyi, "Jerome's Interpretation of the Chronicles of Eusebius Pamphilius," Migne, PL xxvii, col 559 in sequence.

<sup>13</sup> *Apologia*, Migne, PL vi, col. 383 in sequence.

<sup>14</sup> *Against the Jews*, Migne, PL II, col. 614.

<sup>15</sup> "He wrought many wonders that were appropriate to such a death. Thus, at the time when the sun was in the middle of its orbit, the day was suddenly deprived of its brightness so that those who did not know that this prodigy had been foretold for the death of Christ did not understand the reason for it. Later they denied that it had happened, but you can find [the record of] this worldwide event stored in your archives." *Apologeticum*, Bk. 1, ch 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Fragmenta Historicum Graecorum*, Didot. Paris 1849, vol. iii, Phlegon, Bk 13, ch. 14, as cited in J. S. Daly's "The Controversy Concerning the Dates of the Birth and Death of Jesus Christ."

<sup>17</sup> *Contra Celsus*, Bk. 2, n. 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Chronographia*, Migne, PG xcvi, col. 351 in sequence.

<sup>19</sup> *Miscellaneous History*, Migne, PL xcv, col. 858-864.

<sup>20</sup> Extant Fragments, PG x, col. 90.

<sup>21</sup> *History Against the Pagans*, PL xxxi, book 7, col. 1059

<sup>22</sup> *Chronicle*, Migne, PL lxxix, col. 1228.

<sup>23</sup> *Historia Sacra*, Migne, PL xx, col. 144.

<sup>24</sup> De Anno Natali Christi and De Anno Passionis Christi, Migne, PG xiii, cols. 902 and 978.

<sup>25</sup> The Birth of Christ. In the forty-second year of Augustus Cæsar, in the twenty-seventh from the death of Antony and Cleopatra, when Egypt became a Roman province, in the third year of the 193rd Olympiad, and in the 752nd from the building of the city, in the year when all commotions of nations were stilled throughout the whole world, and, by the appointment of God, Cæsar established real and durable tranquillity, Jesus Christ consecrated by his advent the sixth age of the world. In the forty-seventh year of the reign of Augustus, Herod died a miserable and justly merited death, Herod's miserable death. his body being dropsical and swarming with worms. His son Archelaus was appointed in his stead by Augustus, and reigned 9 years unto the end of Augustus's reign. For then the Jews, no longer able to endure his ferocity, made accusation against him before Augustus; whereupon he was banished to

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Vienne, a town of Gaul; and with a view to lessen the greatness of the kingdom of Judæa, and to bridle the insolence of the people, his four brothers, Herod, Antipater, Lysias, and Philip, were made Tetrarchs: of whom Philip and Herod, who was before called Antipas, had been made Tetrarchs, while Archelaus was yet alive. <http://www.elfinspell.com/MedievalMatter/Bede/Giles-MinorHistoricalWorks/ChronicleOfTheSixAgesOfTheWorld-6.html>