

SUKKOT AND THE BIRTH OF YESHUA

How the Feast of Tabernacles Helps us to Pinpoint the Date of Messiah's Birth

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When was Yeshua (Jesus) born? Most people would say the 25th of December. But the Bible does not record that as a fact. The reason for this exclusion is the emphasis in ancient Hebraic culture on the death of people over their birth.¹ Thus we have no direct documentation of the precise birthdate of Yeshua because he lived in a Jewish culture that memorialized death instead of birth and the authors of the Gospels wrote their books in that same environment.

So where does the commemoration of December 25 come from? The early Church was overwhelmingly Jewish in nature. But, over time, as news spread about Yeshua and more and more non-Jewish people believed in him, the practices of other cultures began to influence the Church. One area of influence concerned this issue of emphasizing the birth of a person.

Many ancient cultures practiced astrology, which teaches that the configuration of the stars and planets on the day of one's birth influences the events throughout a person's life. While true believers in Yeshua have rejected the overt practice of astrology, nevertheless, an interest in the moment of one's birth became established in the believing community.

How the Birth Date of December 25 was Established

Because of this cultural influence, some early church leaders like Tertullian² and the harsh critic of the Jews, John Chrysostom,³ attempted to ascertain the birth date of Yeshua. They assumed that His conception and death had to occur on the exact same date of the calendar.

The Bible does state when He died on the Hebrew lunar calendar. He was crucified on the fourteenth day of Nisan at the same time when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in Jerusalem. Those church leaders said Nisan 14 equated to March 25 on the Roman solar calendar. Thus, nine months after His conception would be December 25 in their way of thinking. A short time later, the influential Gentile theologian Augustine confirmed this position by stating:

“For he [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived. . . corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried. . . So he was born, according to tradition, on December the 25th.”⁴

¹ This tradition carries forward in the Jewish community today in the custom of the *yahrzeit*, a commemoration of the anniversary of a person's death.

² *Adversus Judaeos* 8.

³ *Homilia in diem natalem Domini Nostri Jesu Christ.*

⁴ Sermon 202, “On the Trinity.”

This is the key to understanding how the date of Yeshua's birth on December 25 was set. It was based on the assumption by Gentile church fathers that He had to be conceived and die on the same day of the year, which they determined to be March 25. This was decided even though there was nothing in the Bible to warrant such a conclusion. It was just the opinion of influential men.

As time passed, the December 25 birth date gained traction in the Roman world because of an additional factor—namely the establishment of a pagan holiday called *Sol Invictus* on that same date. What was that about?

Many nations worshipped a sun God, like the Babylonians who called him Mithra. According to Mithraic legend, he conquered the sun and gave it rays like a crown, and then they became one and the same. Mithra was the primary deity revered in Babylon. Centuries later, worship of Mithra spread to the Roman Empire, as evidenced by the building of Mithraic temples in many cities, including fifty in Rome alone.

Belief in the sun god became the most popular cult in the empire. So in the year 274 A.D. the Roman Emperor Aurelian united all of these beliefs and he established as an official cult of Rome the veneration of *Sol Invictus*, “The Invincible Sun God.” Since the sun god was being worshipped under different names and in a variety of ways, Aurelian just unified them as one.

At that time, the Julian calendar was used. And according to that calendar the winter solstice took place on December 25. That date was important to worshippers of the sun god because it marked the time when the sun began staying in the sky for longer periods each day. That was considered to be like a rebirth of the sun. So December 25 became a day to recognize *Sol Invictus* in a ritual fashion, and that date was established as the day when *Sol Invictus* was born.

History shows that December 25 became the day of veneration of *Sol Invictus* at the same general time that Church leaders established that same date for the birth of Yeshua. Initially, that was just a coincidence. But in time, it became perceived as an opportunity for advancing Christianity within the Roman Empire.

The catalyst for bringing that occurrence about was the emperor Constantine. Initially he was a sun god follower. But later on during his rule, he professed to being a Christian. However, evidence points to the fact that even though he worshiped Jesus, he recognized the validity of many gods. A number of the coins minted in his name have the figure of *Sol Invictus* behind Constantine or on the reverse side, not Jesus.

In the year 321 A.D., Constantine enacted an edict called the “Venerable Day of the Sun.” It formally established Sunday as the day in the Roman Empire when businesses and the government would rest and would be closed.⁵

During the reign of Constantine, pagans continued to worship *Sol Invictus* on December 25. Some people say that the church began observing Christmas in order to suppress that pagan holiday, along with Saturnalia, which also took place about the same time. But there is no evidence for that claim. Even though Church leaders had established December 25 as the birth date of Jesus, there is no record of Christians observing a holiday for Jesus during the period when it was a pagan holiday.

But a half century later, under the reign of emperor Theodosius 1, sweeping changes were made. In 380 A.D., he issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which made Christianity the official

⁵ That set the stage for the later shift of worship among Christians from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week that was formally ratified at the Council of Laodicea in 363 A.D.

religion of the Roman Empire. Three years later, he put an end to all non-Christian religions in the empire, including their holidays like *Sol Invictus*. Since December 25 was now devoid of any significance and the birth of Jesus had previously been associated with that date, it became easy to establish a new holiday of Christmas on that day. This restored a reason for celebration in the middle of winter. Instead of worshiping the sun in the sky, it became worship of the Son of God.

Thus, the historical record shows how the establishment of December 25 as the birthday of Jesus was a process over time. It began with an assumption about the conception and death of Yeshua having to take place on the same day, and it ended up with an opportunity caused by the social vacuum left behind when pagan holidays were banned in Rome. And, as we now know, the celebration of His birth is institutionalized on December 25.

That is the factual origin of Christmas. But is it a true representation of His birth? For believers in Yeshua, our faith and practices should always be based on facts, not on myths and assumptions and opportunism. And the only way to ascertain the facts is to consider the Word of God in context.

Evidence regarding the shepherds for the birthdate of Yeshua

The first clue that suggests a problem with the timing involves climate and geography. According to the book of Luke, on the night of Yeshua's birth, shepherds were nearby guarding their flocks. Bethlehem is located on a high ridge between Hebron and Jerusalem. This is a cold region in mid-winter, especially at night, and at times, it receives snowfall. The hills during that part of the year also provide little growth for animals to eat. Thus, the likelihood that shepherds would be tending their flocks near Bethlehem on December 25 is diminished. So it had to occur at a different time of year than in the winter.

Evidence from the Biblical chronology

In order to determine more precisely the timing of Messiah's birth, we have to know the context surrounding the events. That includes the timing of when priests served in the Temple. 1 Chronicles 24 describes how their service was managed. It tells about how King David, in preparation for the building of the Temple, assigned the descendants of the 24 grandsons of Aaron (the original High Priest) to specific times of service.

Their groups were called *mishmarot* in the Hebrew, which is translated as “orders, courses or divisions.” Their dates were determined by lot. Twice a year they went to Jerusalem where they served for an entire week, rotating on midday on the Sabbath and then returning home. And in addition, all 24 divisions served during the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, *Shavuot* (Pentecost) and *Sukkot*.

Those divisions were established according to the following schedule:⁶

⁶ We do not know how their service was adapted for the periodic leap years that had an extra month of Adar added to the calendar. But for non-leap years, this was the pattern.

Schedule of service by the priests in the Temple			
Division	Name	First Service	Second Service
1	Jehoiarib	Tishri 1-7	Adar 29 - Nisan 5
2	Jedaiah	Tishri 8-14	Nisan 6-13
All		Tishri 15-21 (Sukkot)	Nisan 14-21 (Passover)
3	Harim	Tishri 22-28	Nisan 22-28
4	Seorim	Tishri 29 - Cheshvan 5	Nisan 29 - Iyar 5
5	Malchijah	Cheshvan 6-12	Iyar 6-12
6	Mijamin	Cheshvan 13-19	Iyar 13-19
7	Hakkoz	Cheshvan 20-26	Iyar 20-26
8	Abijah	Cheshvan 27 - Kislev 4	Iyar 27 – Sivan 3
All			Sivan 4-6 (Shavuot)
9	Jeshua	Kislev 5-11	Sivan 7-13
10	Shecaniah	Kislev 12-18	Sivan 14-20
11	Eliashib	Kislev 19-25	Sivan 21-27
12	Jakim	Kislev 26 - Tevet 2	Sivan 28 - Tamuz 4
13	Huppah	Tevet 3-9	Tamuz 5-11
14	Jeshebeab	Tevet 10-16	Tamuz 12-18
15	Bilgah	Tevet 17-23	Tamuz 19-25
16	Immer	Tevet 24 - Shvat 1	Tamuz 26 - Av 3
17	Hezir	Shvat 2-8	Av 4-10
18	Happizzez	Shvat 9-15	Av 11-17
19	Pethahiah	Shvat 16-22	Av 18-24
20	Jehezkel	Shvat 23-30	Av 25 - Elul 1
21	Jachin	Adar 1-7	Elul 2-8
22	Gamul	Adar 8-14	Elul 9-15
23	Delaiah	Adar 15-21	Elul 16-22
24	Maaziah	Adar 22-28	Elul 23-29

With this background, then, the story of the birth of Yeshua is found in the Gospel of Luke. He describes in his first chapter how the angel Gabriel appeared to a man named Zacharias while he was conducting his priestly service in the Temple. Zacharias was part of the division of Abijah, which served one week that took place during the end of the month of Cheshvan and continued into the beginning of Kislev (late November/early December). And they served another week that spanned the end of Iyar and the first part of Sivan, which then piggybacked with a short time of serving for Shavuot. So this second time of service would correspond to May/June. Luke does not tell us which time of service is the setting for this chapter. But it has to be one or the other.

Luke chapter 1 tells us that Zacharias was going about his business as he had been trained to do. They drew lots to see who would have specific responsibilities. He had been given the privilege of tending to the incense that burned in the Temple. We know that incense was symbolic of prayers rising up to God. And the passage tells us that the people were outside praying at that

very moment. Moreover, Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth had been praying for a child.

So while he was doing this, he received his answer. The angel Gabriel appeared, standing to the right of the altar of incense. He told Zacharias that his prayers had been heard, and his wife would bear a son named Yochanan (John, meaning “the Lord is Gracious”). Gabriel declared in Luke 1:17

“It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This proclamation is the fulfillment of God’s promise in Malachi 4:5 that He would send Elijah before the day of the Lord. This promise became a theme that was included in the observance of Passover, which carries over to today.

If this was Zecharias’ time for service in the spring, he would have returned to his home during the second week of Sivan, right after his annual priestly duties for the feast of *Shavuot*. Shortly thereafter Elizabeth became pregnant just as Gabriel had foretold. This would be late in the month of Sivan, which is the equivalent of mid to late June.

The story then moves ahead until Elizabeth is in her sixth month of pregnancy. Beginning in Luke 1:26, we are told that Gabriel appeared once again, this time in the city of Nazareth, to Elizabeth’s relative Miriam (Mary).⁷ She received the news from Gabriel that she was about to conceive, through the miracle of the Holy Spirit, and she would give birth to the promised Messiah of Israel. And, indeed, Miriam conceived Yeshua six months after Elizabeth conceived John.

Miriam then immediately left to go visit Elizabeth. When Miriam reached the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah, Elizabeth received spiritual discernment that Miriam was carrying the Messiah in her womb, and she spoke joyfully about that knowledge. This would be late in the month of Kislev, right around the time of Hanukkah, corresponding to the month of December.

Evidence from the birth of John the Baptist

Luke 1:56 indicates that Miriam stayed with Elizabeth for about three months before returning home to Nazareth. Then Elizabeth gave birth to John. If we count forward 280 days (the normal length of gestation for humans) from John’s conception in late Sivan, it brings us to the middle of the month of Nisan, which corresponds to the month of April, and it would be right at the time of Passover.

In the same way, if we count forward 280 days from Yeshua’s conception in late Kislev, it brings us to the middle of the month of Tishri, right at the time of *Sukkot*. This corresponds to late September/early October. And that is when Miriam gave birth to Yeshua after she had traveled to the town of Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7). So while there is some flexibility of a day or two here and there, this timeline shows that the birth of Yeshua was in the early fall around the time of *Sukkot*, not two months later in the dead of winter on December 25.

As we recall, the priests had two annual times of service for their individual division. Luke does not stipulate which one that it was. So it is possible that the beginning point of the timeline in Luke was during Zecharias’ springtime service, not in the fall. In that case, you can still do all the calculations and would end up with a birth date for Yeshua in the middle of the month of Nisan, perhaps on the 15th, which would correspond to Passover.

⁷ The text does not indicate how closely they are related. Many commentators propose that they were cousins.

This presents two problems, however. Yeshua does fulfill the role of the Passover lamb. But Passover is about the death of the lambs, not their birth. In fact the lambs had to be a year old.

However, the arrival of the prophet Elijah *is* a key element of Passover. Dating back into antiquity, during the Passover Seder Jews have set a place for Elijah and opened a door, calling out “Tonight? Is it tonight that you are coming?” So why not tonight? Why not send into this world the one fulfilling the role of the prophet on the very night of Passover?

Yeshua was very clear that John fulfilled the role of Elijah as the forerunner of the Messiah (Mat 11:14). So if Yeshua was born on *Sukkot*, then John was born on Passover and thus satisfies his connection with that day. But if it was the other way around, John loses the Elijah connection to Passover. The order of events in Luke 1 fits perfectly with this longstanding expectation during the Seder of the arrival of Elijah, which then supports a *Sukkot* arrival for Yeshua.

The complete chronology in the book of Luke		
Hebrew month	Modern month	Event
Late Iyar to early Sivan	May/June	The angel Gabriel appears to Zacharias, a priest in the 8th division of priests—Abijah (Lk 1:11)
Mid Sivan	June	Zacharias returns home (1:23)
Mid to late Sivan	June	Elizabeth conceives Yochanan—John the Baptist (1:24)
Late Kislev	December	Miriam conceives Yeshua (1:31) and then goes to visit Elizabeth who is in her sixth month of pregnancy (1:36-39)
Mid Nisan	March/April	Elizabeth gives birth to John after a 280 day full term (1:57)
Mid Tishri	Sept./October	Miriam gives birth to Yeshua after a 280 day full term (2:6,7)

Evidence regarding the journey of Joseph and Mary

The second chapter of Luke describes how Joseph and Miriam traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the Roman census because it was Joseph’s ancestral home. The census was required as a means of taxation and it had to be performed before the end of the Roman year, which was December 31. Taxation in that context offered no incentive to make the payment in an early fashion, and it would be typical for people to put off doing so, which mitigates against a springtime birth.

We also know that all adult males (often accompanied by their families) were required to make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the observance of *Sukkot* (Deut 16:16). So it seems reasonable to conclude that they may have decided to make one 180 mile round trip journey right before *Sukkot*, rather than one for the holy day as required by *Halakah* (Jewish law) and another trip in winter as required by Roman law.

From Bethlehem, it would be easy to travel the five miles to Jerusalem for the feast. Because it is estimated that one and one-half million people descended upon Jerusalem for the feast, that would have an impact on surrounding communities, which might explain why there was no room at the inn. This makes particular sense when you consider the negative implications of a pregnant woman having to make that journey twice.

Evidence from Hanukkah and the dedications of the Second Temple

Hanukkah and Sukkot are separated by 280 days on the Hebrew calendar, which matches exactly the normal gestation period for human babies. Are there any additional clues that point to the conception of Yeshua at Hanukkah? The word *hanukkah* is generally translated as “dedication,” but literally means “to initiate or to begin.” This terminology is a key to understanding the implications of the historical events associated with the holiday.

The apocryphal book 1 Maccabees records that nearly two centuries before the birth of Yeshua, the temple and the altar was defiled by the Syrian Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes. Then, after the altar was rebuilt by the victorious Maccabees, the sacrifices on the altar resumed and the dedication of the temple took place on the 25th day of Kislev (1 Macc 4:52). The same verse also tells us that the dedication and resumption of sacrifice took place first thing in the morning. So that means the temple was physically made ready the day before, on the 24th of the month. In other words, the act that made this new life of worship possible, took place on that day.

There are no coincidences in God’s way of doing things. Everything in His plan of redemption is purposeful and ordered in every detail. So we should not be surprised to see other similar occurrences on this same date.

The book of Ezra describes how 50,000 Jewish people returned from Babylonian exile in 538 B.C. and began rebuilding the temple, but they abandoned the task when they became discouraged by adversaries. Eighteen years after the return, God raised up the prophet Haggai to exhort the people to start building again and to make a greater commitment to worshiping God in purity. So the people resumed their work, and it was not long before they finished working on the foundation of the temple. We are then told in Haggai 2:18 that the foundation of the second temple was completed on the 24th day of the month of Kislev, the same date on the calendar three and one-half centuries later when the Maccabees would finish working on the restoration of that same temple for worship.

We see the exact same timing with the conception of Yeshua. For just as the building where the worship of God was made ready for worship twice on the identical date on the calendar, Yeshua was also conceived or “made ready for worship” on that same date. That reality is hinted at in the verses that followed in the second chapter of Haggai. He asks rhetorically:

“Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree, it has not borne fruit. Yet from this day on I will bless you” (v. 19).

In the immediate context, the prophet was alluding to the state of the temple at that moment. Like a seed in a barn that had not yet grown into a plant that produces fruit, the foundation was done, but the growth of the entire building was incomplete. Yet, even though they couldn’t see the final product, they already had the promise of a future blessing when the temple would be finished.

In the same way, the conception of the Messiah was only an initial action or beginning. You couldn’t see the final product, for it would be nine months before He would be born. Then He would mature, producing the sweetest fruit and the greatest blessing of all— everlasting life for all who believe in Him.

Then, wanting to emphasize the tremendous significance of this occurrence, God declared “a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month. . .I am going to shake the heavens and the earth” (vv. 20-21). That describes an act without parallel. God dwelling in the midst of humanity is an earth-shaking act that has changed history.

Thus, Haggai has given us a glimpse of what God has done in this world. The establishment of the building where people worshiped Him was done in such a way that it perfectly foreshadowed the way that God would come and walk this earth, right down to the very details of the timing of His plan. The conception of Yeshua at the time of *Hanukkah* is consistent in purpose and the historical record of the two dedications of the second temple. As a result, this reality gives further confirmation that Yeshua was born nine months later at the time of *Sukkot*.

Evidence of the theme of *Sukkot*

In ancient times *Sukkot* was a holiday that portrayed the God of Israel as One who seeks to fellowship with His people. To those who were looking for the fulfillment of God's promises, it would have not been a surprise to see these truths revealed during the observance of *Sukkot*.

For that very reason He sent Messiah to live among us. The Hebrew Scriptures foretold his coming, including Isaiah's prophecy (7:14) that a son born to a virgin would be called *Immanuel*, meaning "God with us." What greater fulfillment of God's desire to have a close relationship with mankind than for Him to dwell with us and to begin that time of dwelling on the actual feast day that had the theme of God dwelling with humanity—the Feast of Tabernacles.

This is all consistent with the declaration in Scripture: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt (tabernacled) among us" (John 1-14).

Conclusion

We need to be historically accurate

This is not just about getting the date right in the same way that we all like to have our own birthdays and anniversaries correctly acknowledged. It is about having a credible testimony. Many people think of Christianity as being based on myths and legends. And because Christmas has become so entangled with its own mythology, to a great extent, it has become a distraction that distorts and diverts people from the original story.

But there is a reality to the Messianic faith. It is based on real historical events so that our salvation and our eternal hope can be much more than mere wishful thinking. So we need to reflect that reality to the world, and, in so doing, we can help others to believe in the same way. That is what *Sukkot* can do for our testimony.

Yeshua's birth during *Sukkot* helps us to understand God's control over the world

The Hebrew word *moed*, translated as feast, literally means "an appointed time." So it has a sense of someone with authority determining when an event will take place. Such is the nature of the feasts. God set fixed times of the year when specific feasts were to be observed.

But it is not just the feasts that are appointed times. God also has a very intentional plan in which He appoints fixed times when He accomplishes great acts in this world. When we read the Bible, it becomes apparent that even the dates themselves have significance in that plan, because the timing reduces the sense of randomness and coincidence and it reinforces the fact that God is always in control of the circumstances of this world.

These appointed times provide us with an opportunity to depict God's great redemptive plan for humanity. We can show how Adonai, who is the Master of creative authority, caused His redemptive acts to coincide with the feasts that symbolize them. We know that to be true with the Passover and the sacrificial death of Messiah. And the same is true for *Sukkot* and the birth of Messiah.

The birth and the death of Yeshua made it possible for Him to complete His purpose for coming to dwell on this earth, and that is to provide the atonement for our sins and to provide a place for us to dwell with Him in eternity. So He made all this begin as a *moed*—an appointed time. This reality is reflected by Paul when he wrote, “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4).

The message of Sukkot is a declaration that God is always in control. Sometimes that might not seem to be the case. But if God could exercise His power long ago by bringing about His plan in the midst of the complex matters of that day, we can also be confident that He will complete His work in our world and in our lives today.