

EXPLANATION FOR THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM

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What was the Star of Bethlehem? There have been many astronomical theories. German astronomer Johannes Kepler saw it as a series of three conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn that occurred in 7 BC. However, there was a gap between these planets, so the conjunctions were not visually impressive. Other writers suggest that the star was a comet. Halley's Comet was visible in 12 BC. Uranus passed close to Saturn in 9 BC and Venus in 6 BC. But Uranus moves slowly and is barely visible to the naked eye. In 3–2 BC, there was a series of seven conjunctions, including three between Jupiter and Regulus and a strikingly close conjunction between Jupiter and Venus near Regulus on June 17, 2 BC. The fusion of two planets would be a rare and awe-inspiring event. But the objection is that since the conjunction would have been seen in the west at sunset, it could not have led the magi south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and also does not fit with an event seen at rising that might have started them on the journey to Jerusalem.

Astronomical theories can sound very convincing, but basically they all have two large problems to deal with.

The first is that the star was said to 'go before' the wise men toward Bethlehem and it STOOD OVER the young child, thus identifying him specifically as the king they were searching for. (Mat 2:9) How can an astronomical event such as a conjunction or a comet point specifically at an individual child? Even the moon, closer to the earth than any other heavenly body, cannot direct its light to identify a single individual on earth, but shines equally on all the countryside.

The second problem is that they have to deal with the generally accepted date of 4 BC for the death of Herod the Great because the scriptures tell us that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. And most of the information we have about the life of Herod is found in the writings of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.

One theorist identified the star of Bethlehem as the series of astronomical events occurring in 3 and 2 BC. To accommodate this theory, the death of Herod was moved to 1 BC instead of 4 BC.

Here is how this was done.

Josephus records the story of how the High Priest, Matthias, asked his kinsman Joseph to officiate for him on the day of the fast because he was defiled by a dream. Several days later, Herod removed Matthias from being High Priest and also burned alive another Matthias who had caused a sedition. He did this on the occasion of a lunar eclipse. Herod died sometime after this eclipse and before a Passover. Here are the lunar eclipses that occurred in the years that are postulated as the death of Herod.

7 BC No eclipses
6 BC No eclipses
5 BC Total eclipse March 23, 8:52 PM
5 BC Total eclipse September 15, 10:30 PM
4 BC Partial eclipse March 13, 4:04 AM
3 BC No eclipses

2 BC No eclipses

1 BC Total eclipse January 10 1:35 AM

Given this list, it is asked, “To which of these eclipses was Josephus referring?” And they answer based on the following reasonings.

* The eclipse of March 23 is rejected because it takes place only 1 day AFTER the Passover.

* The eclipse of Sept 15 is rejected because it is too far away from the Passover. (7 months).

Also it is reasoned that Herod would not remove the high priest during a crowded fall holy day season when thousands of Jews would be there to stir up a rebellion over such an event.

* The partial eclipse of March 13 is rejected because it is only 29 days before the Passover. The events Josephus depicts before and after Herod’s demise could not be squeezed into 29 days.

So the eclipse of 1 BC is selected which is a reasonable 12.5 weeks away from the Passover.

By choosing the eclipse of 1 BC, they run into the following problem. If Herod died between Jan 10 and Passover (April 7) 1 BC, then his sons took over his reign at that time. The problem with 1 BC involves the chronology of Philip, one of Herod’s sons and successors.

Josephus says of Philip:

Ant 18:4:6 “About this time it was that Philip, Herod's ' brother, departed this life, in the twentieth year of the reign of Tiberius, after he had been tetrarch of Trachonitis and Gaulanitis, and of the nation of the Bataneans also, thirty-seven years.”

As you see from the following chart, if Philip reigned 37 years from Herod’s death and died in the 20th year of Tiberius, then Herod’s death and Philip’s ascension took place in 4 BC, not in 1 BC where they want it to be.

YEARS BC AD	REIGN OF AUGUSTUS	REIGN OF HEROD	LIFE OF JESUS	REIGN OF TIBERIUS	REIGN OF PHILIP HEROD’S SON	REIGN OF ARCHELAUS HEROD’S SON
40		1		Herod became King at Rome		
39		2				
38		3				
37		4	1	Herod became King of Judea		
36		5	2			
35		6	3			
34		7	4			
33		8	5			
32		9	6			
31	1 Battle of	10	7			
30	2 Actium &	11	8			
29	3 earthquake in	12	9			
28	4 7th yr of	13	10			
27	5 Herod	14	11			
26	6	15	12			
25	7	16	13			
24	8	17	14			
23	9	18	15			

22	10	19	16				
21	11	20	17				
20	12	21	18				
19	13	22	19				
18	14	23	20				
17	15	24	21				
16	16	25	22				
15	17	26	23				
14	18	27	24				
13	19	28	25				
12	20	29	26				
11	21	30	27				
10	22	31	28				
9	23	32	29				
8	24	33	30				
7	25	34	31				
6	26	35	32				
5	27	36	33	0	Jesus born in fall of 5 BC		
4	28	37	34	1	Left row reign	1	1
3	29	Herod died		2	of Tiberius	2	2
2	30	Spring of		3	Agrees with Luk	3	3
1	31	4 BC		4	3:1 - Baptism of	4	4
1	32			5	Christ - Tiberius	5	5
2	33			6	co-regent with	6	6
3	34			7	Augustus from	7	7
4	35			8	12 AD.	8	8
5	36			9	Right row reign	9	9
6	37			10	of Tiberius	10	10
7	38			11	Agrees with Jos	11	
8	39			12	Ant 18:4:6 -	12	
9	40			13	Philip's reign -	13	
10	41			14	Not counting	14	
11	42			15	co-regent years	15	
12	43			16	1	16	
13	44			17	2	17	
14	45			18	3 1	18	
15				19	4 2	19	
16				20	5 3	20	
17				21	6 4	21	
18				22	7 5	22	
19				23	8 6	23	
20				24	9 7	24	
21				25	10 8	25	
22				26	11 9	26	
23				27	12 10	27	
24				28	13 11	28	
25				29	14 12	29	

26	Jesus baptized 15 th yr of Tiberius	30	15	13	30	
27	fall of 26 AD age 30 - Luk 3:1,21	31	16	14	31	
28		32	17	15	32	
29		33	18	16	33	
30		33 1/2	19	17	34	
31			20	18	35	
32			21	19	36	
33			22	20	37 Philip died 33 AD, 20 th yr of Tiberius	
34			23	21		

So here is how they solve the problem of Philip's reign and move the death of Herod to 1 BC...

“It turns out that a copying error was a primary cause of the confusion about the date of Herod's death. A printer typesetting the manuscript of Josephus' Antiquities messed up in the year 1544. Every single Josephus manuscript in these libraries dating from before 1544 supports the inference that Herod passed in 1 BC.”

And where did they get this information?

David Beyer, a U.S. consultant and biblical hobbyist, gave a report to a 1995 convention of Bible scholars. He told of visiting the British Museum to examine all surviving copies of Josephus' work. He also checked editions at the Library of Congress. He says he discovered that not one of the two dozen oldest copies, dated 1544 or earlier, said “20th year.” Most said “22nd year”. And on this basis, Beyer rolled Herod's death to early in 1 BC.

Thus they cast doubt on all copies of Josephus that are in use today.

ANSWER I

First of all the problem of the eclipses could be resolved by paying closer attention to the text of Josephus. He tells us which eclipse it was. We do not need to guess.

Ant 17:6:4 “Now it happened, that during the time of the high priesthood of this Matthias, there was another person made high priest for a single day, that very day which the Jews observed as a fast. The occasion was this: This Matthias the high priest, on the night before that day when the fast was to be celebrated, seemed, in a dream, to have conversation with his wife; and because he could not officiate himself on that account, Joseph, the son of Ellemus, his kinsman, assisted him in that sacred office. But Herod deprived this Matthias of the high priesthood, and burnt the other Matthias, who had raised the sedition, with his companions, alive. And that very night there was an eclipse of the moon.”

Do you see the word ‘fast’ in this text? It is used twice. The day that the Jews observe as a fast is the annual Day of Atonement. And the only eclipse in the above list of eclipses that occurred near the Day of Atonement was the total eclipse of 5 BC, September 15, 10:30 PM. In this year September 16 was the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles and the Fast of the Day of Atonement occurred five days earlier on September 11. So there can be no doubt as to which eclipse Josephus meant. (Please see endnote for verification of eclipses in 5 BC)

As Herod died sometime between this eclipse September 15, 5 BC and the next Passover, April 11, 4 BC, the birth of Jesus must have occurred prior to his death.

ANSWER II

In order to conclusively prove or disprove the claim that Josephus manuscripts dating from after 1544 contain a copyist error, I would have to visit the British Library in London or the American Library of Congress myself and look it up. I did not do that. But I did find the following statement in the online Wikipedia about the Josephus texts. It says that the texts OLDER than 1544 are based on Latin translations and they are 'imperfect' translations, whereas the texts printed AFTER 1544 are more accurate because they are based on the original Greek. This tells us that Mr. Beyer changed Herod's death to 1 BC based on what he found in 'imperfect' Latin translations of Josephus.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus>

“For many years, the works of Josephus were printed only in an imperfect Latin translation from the original Greek. It was only in 1544 that a version of the standard Greek text was made available, edited by the Dutch humanist Arnoldus Arlenius. The first English translation, by Thomas Lodge, appeared in 1602, with subsequent editions appearing throughout the 17th century. However, the 1544 Greek edition formed the basis of the 1732 English translation by William Whiston which achieved enormous popularity in the English speaking world (and which is currently available online for free download by Project Gutenberg). Later editions of the Greek text include that of Benedikt Niese, who made a detailed examination of all the available manuscripts, mainly from France and Spain. This was the version used by H. St J. Thackeray for the Loeb Classical Library edition widely used today.”

EIGHT TEXTS OF JOSEPHUS SHOWING THE REIGN OF HEROD

As you study the above chart, consider that if Herod's death is changed to 1 BC, this will change and cause problems with a multitude of other dates, not only the one having to do with Philip's reign. The following eight references in Josephus pertain only to the reign of Herod. All these separate texts agree with and confirm one another. Changing Herod's death to 1 BC will change every one of these texts. They would all have to be 'messed up' by the typesetter in 1544 'with the earlier texts showing different dates than what we have here.

1. Ant 14:14:5 Herod became king at Rome 40 BC. This is dated by Olympiad and ruling period of two Roman consuls.
2. Ant 14:16:4 Herod procured Antigonus to be killed and conquered Jerusalem 37 BC. This is dated by Olympiad and ruling period of two Roman consuls
3. Ant 14:15:14 Herod conquered Jerusalem 37 BC. This specifies that it was the third year after he had been made king at Rome
4. Ant 15:2:5 Battle at Actium confirms beginning of rule of Augustus and earthquake in Judea in the seventh year of Herod's reign
5. Ant 17:6 4 Herod removed Matthias the High Priest and burned alive Matthias who raised the sedition by pulling down the golden eagle in the temple. This was at the time of a lunar eclipse several days after the fast of the Day of Atonement. This was Sept of 5 BC.

6. Ant 17:6:5 This shows how Herod's health declined greatly after the execution of Matthias and he went to the warm mineral baths at Callirrhoe beyond Jordan. From there he went to his winter palace in Jericho and died at Jericho sometime in the spring of 4 BC.

7. Ant 17:18:1 Herod's death is here dated precisely 37 years from when he had been made king at Rome and 34 Years from when he conquered Jerusalem. Both dates end in 4 BC.

8. Ant 17:9:3 Herod is now dead since his son Archelaus is seen here reigning in April, 4 BC during the Feast of Unleavened Bread and seeking to prevent a sedition that might arise at the crowded feast on account of Herod's deed of removing Matthias the previous September.

In addition to the above texts of Josephus that show the reign and death of Herod, the following quote is taken from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

“The date of 4 BC for Herod's death is confirmed by the evidence for the duration of the reigns of his three sons.

Archelaus was deposed in 759/6 (Dio Cassius iv.27 in the consulship of Aemilius Lepidus and Lucius Arruntius) in the 10th year of his reign (Ant., XVII, xiii, 2; compare BJ, II, vii, 3 which gives the year as the 9th).

Antipas was deposed most probably in the summer of 792/39 (Ant., XVIII, vii, 1-2; compare XVIII, vi, 11; XIX, viii, 2; BJ, II, ix, 6; Schurer, op. cit., I, 448, note 46 and 416, note 167).

Philip died after reigning 37 years, in the 20th year of Tiberius--August 19, 786/33-787/34 (Ant., XVIII, iv, 6). There is also a coin of Philip from his 37th year (Madden, op. cit., 126).

Thus Archelaus, Antipas and Philip began to reign in 750/4”

CONCLUSION

It is the Jewish historian Josephus (and not speculative astronomical events) who is the key to finding the birth of Jesus Christ. This is because the reign of Herod and the birth of Jesus are connected according to the scriptures. And it is because of Josephus that we know such a great deal about the life and times of Herod the Great. He recorded Herod's life in great detail. Although he lived 75 to 100 years after Herod, his works, *The Antiquities* and *The Wars* were both based on a history written by Nicolaus of Damascus, who had been Herod's personal secretary.

If the above evidence for the reign and death of Herod is combined with the evidence of the Course of Abijah when Zacharias the father of John the Baptist served in the temple, the conclusion is that Jesus was born in the fall of 5 BC around the time of the Feast of Tabernacles. The only significant astronomical event that occurred at that time was the total lunar eclipse of Sept 15. Since Herod removed Matthias as High Priest at that time and burnt alive the other Matthias who had caused the sedition, we know that he was in Jerusalem for these events. And it was in Jerusalem where he received the wise men shortly after Jesus' birth. Josephus tells us that not long after he had removed Matthias and executed the other Matthias, his health declined and he left Jerusalem for the mineral baths at Callirrhoe beyond Jordan. And from there he went to Jericho where he died in the spring of 4 BC. He never returned to Jerusalem.

The question still remains, “What was the star of Bethlehem?”

These scriptures show that a star in the Bible can be symbolic of an angel.

* Job 38:7 When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

* Rev 1:20 The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.

* Rev 12:4 And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.

The star that appeared to the wise men in the east went before them until it came and ‘stood over’ the young child. This star specifically identified Jesus as the King by standing over him. It did not just shine down on Bethlehem in general, but stood over Jesus specifically. This is how the wise men knew exactly who to give their gifts to. They did not need to search the population in that area to see who had just had a baby. Astronomical events CANNOT identify an individual. And since there are scriptures showing that stars can be symbolic of angels, it is reasonable to say that the Star of Bethlehem was an angel.

Endnote:

Two total lunar eclipses are verified for the year 4 BC by the NASA Catalog

[^ NASA lunar eclipse catalog Lunar Eclipses: -0099 to 0000 \(100 BCE to 1 BCE\)](#)

Cat Num	Calendar Date	TD of Greatest Eclipse	Luna Num	Saros Num	Ecl. Type
04811	-0004 Mar 23	21:17:09	-24784	61	T
04812	-0004 Sep 15	23:07:42	-24778	66	T
Data acknowledgment: "Eclipse Predictions by Fred Espenak and Jean Meeus (NASA's GSFC)"					

Why are these eclipses listed under the year 04 BC and not 05 BC? This is explained when you click on the Saros number and scroll to the heading ‘calendar’.

It states:

“The Gregorian calendar is used for all dates from 1582 Oct 15 onwards. Before that date, the Julian calendar is used. The Julian calendar does not include the year 0. Thus the year 1 BCE is followed by the year 1 CE. This is awkward for arithmetic calculations. Years in this catalog are numbered astronomically and include the year 0. Historians should note there is a difference of one year between astronomical dates and BCE dates. Thus, the astronomical year 0 corresponds to 1 BCE, and astronomical year -1 corresponds to 2 BCE, etc..”

So the two lunar eclipses listed under the year 04 BC actually took place in 05 BC.