

# But Jesus Wasn't Born Dec. 25 – was He?

---



John Eidsmoe and Ben DuPré

December 24, 2009

[WorldNetDaily](http://WorldNetDaily.com)

The secularizers commonly defend the de-Christianization of Christmas by noting that America is a much more diverse nation than we used to be, that we shouldn't offend others, that saying "Merry Christmas" might be bad for business and that public Christmas observances might even violate the First Amendment.

Then they deliver their crowning blow: "Besides, everybody knows Jesus wasn't born in December."

But saying "everybody knows" begs the question, as saying "all scholars agree" defines anyone who doesn't agree as a non-scholar. At the risk of flying in the face of this collective modern wisdom, we suggest that there is substantial, though not conclusive, evidence that Jesus was born in December.

## **The biblical evidence**

What does the Bible say about the date of Jesus' birth? Luke 2:6 tells us that "the days were accomplished that she should be delivered," so we assume Jesus was a full-term baby, born nine months after His conception. Luke 1:26 says the angel Gabriel announced the conception of Jesus to Mary in the sixth month of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. So Jesus was conceived about six months after John the Baptist was conceived.

So when was John the Baptist conceived? That's more difficult, but the Scriptures suggest some answers. John's father was Zacharias, a Levite priest "of the course of Abia [Abijah]" (Luke 1:5). According to I Chronicles 24:7-19, King David had divided the priests into 24 orders, and these orders took turns serving in the temple for a period of eight days twice a year, separated from their wives and children. Zacharias and the other priests of the course of Abia served during the 10th and 24th weeks of the Jewish year.

The angel of the Lord spoke to Zacharias "while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course" (Luke 1:8), that is, while he was performing his service in the temple. After his course was finished he left the temple, returned to his wife, Elizabeth, and John was conceived (Luke 1:23-24). If this

was after the second course, that is, the 24th week of the year, John would have been conceived around September or October and born around June or July. Jesus' conception six months later would have occurred around March or April and His birth around December or January.

There is no certainty to this theory, especially given that the Jewish calendar (of only 360 days) may have been different from King David's time to Jesus' time. But based on the scriptural account of Zacharias's service in the temple, it is well within the realm of possibility that Jesus was born in December.

### **The extrabiblical evidence**

St. John Chrysostom (347-407 A.D.), whose status in eastern Orthodoxy is comparable to that of Augustine in western Roman Catholicism, argued strongly for a Dec. 25 birthdate because of the course of Zacharias' priestly service. But he also based his conclusion on the findings of Pope Julius. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (348-386 A.D.) had asked Pope Julius to ascertain the date of Christ's birth "from the census documents brought by Titus to Rome" after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Julius then determined the date of Christ's birth to be Dec. 25.

Julius, Cyril and Chrysostom were not alone in their reliance upon the census documents. Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.), in a detailed statement of the Christian faith addressed to Emperor Marcus Aurelius, stated that Jesus was born in Bethlehem "as you can ascertain also from the registers of the taxing." (Apology, I, 34). Likewise, Tertullian (160-250 A.D.) wrote of "the census of Augustus – that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome" (*Contra Marcion*, Book 4, 7).

Unfortunately, we do not have access to these census records today. But perhaps the better part of wisdom bids us to assume that these church fathers had access to information that we do not possess, and that they knew what they were talking about.

Some have said that Jesus couldn't have been born in December because shepherds did not keep their sheep in the fields past late autumn. But Alfred Edersheim, in his classic work *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1883), cites ancient Jewish sources to the effect that flocks of sheep "remain in the open alike in the hottest days and in the rainy season – i.e. all the year round" (Book 2, p. 186). There was also a special class of Levitical shepherds who kept sacrificial lambs in the field all year round because they were used for sacrifice every month of the year.

Winters can be cold in Palestine, but they vary greatly, and some Decembers are rather mild. A recent study of stalagmites and stalactites in caves near Jerusalem strongly suggests that the average annual rainfall dropped nearly 50 percent from about 3 feet in 100 A.D. to about 1.6 feet in 700 A.D. Average winter temperatures may have varied as well. If Mary could have given birth to a baby in a Bethlehem stable, then hardy shepherds could have watched their flocks in the fields at the same time.

Edersheim concludes, "There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date

(Dec. 25). The objections generally made rest on grounds, which seem to me historically untenable."

In the end, no one's Christian faith should depend upon whether Dec. 25 is the date of Jesus' birth, nor do such questions give us any reason to take Christ out of Christmas. We'd welcome responses from anyone who can prove or disprove this thesis. But sometimes it is comforting, and even fun, to learn that ancient scholars and ancient traditions may have been right all along.

And Merry Christmas, one and all – on Dec. 25!

## Epilogue

Saying that Jesus Christ wasn't born Dec. 25 seems to me like saying that St. Dionysius is "Pseudo-Dionysius" and that Church calendar is "astronomically inaccurate".

It's astonishing that people find modern scientific speculations more reliable than historical primary sources.

There are some more info on this matter here:

<http://ocafs.oca.org/FeastSaintsViewer.asp?SID=4&ID=1&FSID=103638>

### Excerpts:

1) The present Feast, commemorating the Nativity in the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, was established by the Church. Its origin goes back to the time of the Apostles. In the Apostolic Constitutions (Section 3, 13) it says, "Brethren, observe the feasts; and first of all the Birth of Christ, which you are to celebrate on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month." In another place it also says, "Celebrate the day of the Nativity of Christ, on which unseen grace is given man by the birth of the Word of God from the Virgin Mary for the salvation of the world."

2) In the second century St Clement of Alexandria also indicates that the day of the Nativity of Christ is December 25.

3) In the third century St Hippolytus of Rome mentions the Feast of the Nativity of Christ, and appoints the Gospel readings for this day from the opening chapters of St Matthew.

4) In 302, during the persecution of Christians by Maximian, 20,000 Christians of Nicomedia (December 28) were burned in church on the very Feast of the Nativity of Christ.

5) In that same [4th] century, after the persecution when the Church had received freedom of religion and had become the official religion in the Roman Empire, we find the Feast of the Nativity of Christ observed throughout the entire Church. There is evidence of this in the works of St Ephraim the Syrian, St Basil the Great, St Gregory the Theologian, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Ambrose of Milan, St John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church of the fourth century.

Where did you get the 10th and the 24th week of the year for the course of Abia? According to I Chronicles 24:10 Abia got the 8th lot and therefore his course served during the 8th and the 32nd week. Am I missing something here? And by the way, are there any Bible references for the claim that courses served twice a year one week at a time rather than just once a year and at that time two weeks in a row?

I think the author meant the 10th week and the 34th, not the 24th. Typo I guess. But yes, you are missing something, because you have to account for the three weeks in the year when all the priests were required to serve in the Temple. This is further explained here:

<http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Christmas/christmas.html>

As for the service twice a year, this is just logical based on the fact that obviously there are not only 24 weeks in a year.