

What does the Bible say about the date of Jesus' birth?

By Bob Young

While the Bible does not specifically state the date (time of year) of Jesus' birth, it gives more clues to help determine an approximate date than many realize. This article seeks to help believers understand Christmas—historical backgrounds, the date, and what the Bible says. It begins with a brief history of the Roman festival of Saturn held December 17-23 and the celebration in the Roman Empire of December 25. It then suggests how the biblical clues can help determine an approximate date for Jesus' birth.

The Roman festival of Saturn (December 17-23) celebrated Saturn's role in agricultural bounty and was marked by gift-giving and a focus on social equality as Roman social norms were temporarily cast off. The festival of light at the time of the darkness of the winter solstice included the use of candles which symbolized the quest for knowledge and truth. The popularity of the festival continued into the third and fourth centuries AD and some of its practices likely influenced the celebrations that came to be associated with Christmas and the New Year. Later the coming of the New Year was celebrated on December 25, the "Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun." Christians may have wanted their own celebration to avoid the excesses of the pagan festivals, which would help account for the syncretism (mixing) of pagan and Christian practices.

To analyze the biblical evidence related to the date of Jesus' birth, one can begin with the ministry of Zechariah in Luke 1. The Hebrew religious year began at Passover (during our March-April). For the purposes of this article, we can identify an approximate date near our April 1, recognizing the possibility of some variation either way. (The Hebrew year was flexible, adjusted periodically with an intercalary month to maintain the beginning of the New Year near the spring equinox.)

Zechariah was of the eighth priestly division, that of Abijah. The twenty-four priestly divisions probably ministered in order during the 12 months of the calendar year. A question exists about whether the priestly divisions ministered twice a year for one week, or once a year for two weeks. In the first case, the division of Abijah ministered in the 8th and 32nd weeks of the year, that is, around June 1 and December 1. In the second option, which I think more likely, the division of Abijah ministered in the 15th and 16th weeks of the year, or around our July 15 to August 1.

According to the biblical text, John the Baptist was born nine months after the priestly ministry of Zechariah and Jesus was born six months after John. Therefore, an approximate date is derived from adding 15 months to the date of Zechariah's service. That calculation yields three possible dates: around September 1 (June 1 + 15 months), around March 1 (December 1 + 15 months), and the most likely option—about October 15 to November 1 (15 months added to the late July date).

We do not know the date of Jesus' birth. Given the history of the festival of Saturn and Roman festivals of the winter solstice season, it is highly unlikely that December 25 is the correct date. A more likely option is to think of an autumn date in late October or early November, although that date must also be considered uncertain without better information concerning the rotations of priestly service in the Old Testament.