

The Birth of Jesus: The Prophetic Fulfillment, Dating and Symbolism

I would like to reflect on the birth of Jesus from three perspectives;

1. How the birth of Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the expected Messiah.
2. The evidence for the birth of Jesus on December 25th.
3. The symbolic meaning hidden in the Nativity account.

Old Testament Prophecy

Born in Bethlehem. The Old Testament foretells of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:2 says: "But you, Bethlehem (Ephrathah), though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Born of a virgin. Isaiah 7:14 says: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

The Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. Genesis 49:10, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

The Messiah would be revealed from the "tower of the flock" (Migdal Eder) which is connected with the town of Bethlehem.

Micah 4:8, "And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem."

The shepherds' fields outside Bethlehem are linked to a unique biblical location called Migdal Eder, which translated means the "tower of the flock". **So the Messiah would be revealed to the world by the shepherds from Migdal Eder.**

"And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. **And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.** But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

The Birth of Jesus on December 25th

The Protestant Polemic

There are many Christians who don't believe that Jesus was born on December 25th. They claim that the early Church (the Catholic Church) was corrupted by the Emperor Constantine (4th century) and falsely chose the date of December 25th to coincide with the day the Roman pagans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the Sun-god.

This was done in order to turn the people from their pagan observance of the winter solstice to reverence for Christ. Such a similar practice is seen with the missionary spread of the Catholic Church, where pagan shrines were demolished and new churches built on the sites.

Furthermore, December 25th couldn't possibly be the birthday of Jesus because shepherds were not in the fields during the winter rainy season. December is cold and rainy in Judea; it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night.

Arguments for the December 25th Birthday of Jesus:

The early Church believed it. The earliest record supporting the December twenty-fifth birth of Jesus was written by Hippolytus (ca. 165-235 AD) in the early third century, 100 years before Constantine was Emperor.

St. John Chrysostom bishop of Constantinople in 386 AD delivered a sermon in Antioch on December 25, which he claimed that the day of the birth of Jesus was December 25th. He lived within 50 years of the rule of Constantine and surely would not have preached a homily on a fabricated date. St. John Chrysostom would have drawn his information from reliable sources and from the Catholic/Christian tradition that was prevalent and available at the time.

The shepherds from Migdal Eder were located near Bethlehem on the road that connects Bethlehem with Jerusalem (a distance of 5 miles). The flocks under their care were not ordinary flocks but those destined for sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. Temple sacrifices took place every day, all year-round, therefore the shepherds would be tending these flocks all year-round including the rainy winter months of December.

Zechariah's mysterious vision in the Temple:

“In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah; and he had a wife of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. **Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, according to the custom of the priesthood, it fell to him by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense.** And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense.” (Luke 1:5-10)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were the parents of John the Baptist, and Zechariah was also a priest belonging to “the division of Abijah.” At that time, the Jewish priesthood was organized as twenty-four divisions or “courses,” each of which went to serve at the temple twice a year for one week at a time. The division of Abijah was the eighth of the twenty-four courses.

Further analysis of the priestly divisions and when they served can shed light on the date of the birth of Jesus. Let us reference “**The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah**” by Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889). Alfred Edersheim was a Jewish convert to Christianity and a Biblical scholar.

The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah

Citing the date of the destruction of the Temple on August 5, 70AD, ‘the course of Jehoiarib,’ which was the first of the 24 priestly courses, was on duty at the Temple when it was destroyed. Counting back from this date, if this calculation be correct (of which, however, we cannot feel quite sure), then counting ‘the courses’ of priests backwards, **the course of Abijah would, in the year before the birth of Christ have been on duty from the 2nd to the 9th of October. This also would place the birth of Christ in the end of December of the following year.**

If Zechariah was ministering in the Temple the first week of October and received a vision that both he and Elizabeth would bear a son and after completing his weekly Temple service, Zechariah returned home and Elizabeth conceived, then John the Baptist would have been born 9 months later in June. If Mary, after the Annunciation went to visit Elizabeth and at the time of the Visitation, Elizabeth was six months pregnant then the Annunciation must have occurred in March and the birth of Jesus 9 months later in December.

Furthermore, Edersheim continues in his book that Jewish sources reveal that within the ancient Jewish tradition, the 9th day of Tebeth was marked as a fast day, and it is added that the reason for this fast day was that it was the day which the Messiah was expected to be born. The Jewish month of Tebeth corresponds to the months of December /January. It is interesting to note that the 9th of Tebeth frequently falls on the 25th of December.

Symbolism

Bethlehem --The House of Bread

The Nativity account of the birth of Jesus is packed with symbolism and hidden meaning. The word Bethlehem means “House of Bread”. Jesus in John’s Gospel claims to be the “Bread of Life” and instructs us to “Eat His Body”. So the Bread of Life is born in the House of Bread and is laid in a manger which is a feeding trough for animals... Would this imply that Jesus clearly wants us to eat Him?

Also, Jewish Tradition held that when the promised Messiah came, He would reinstitute the Miracle of the Manna that fed the Israelites for 40 years in the desert. The Jews called this “Heavenly Bread” and expected this miraculous bread to reappear in Messianic times. Has this “bread” reappeared?

The Shepherds

In Christ's day, shepherds stood on the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder. They shared the same unenviable status as tax collectors and dung sweepers. Shepherds were deprived of all civil rights. They could not fulfill judicial offices or be admitted in court as witnesses. Smug religious leaders maintained a strict caste system at the expense of shepherds and other common folk. Shepherds were officially labeled "sinners"—a technical term for a class of despised people. Shepherds were under a Rabbinic ban, ritually unclean and forbidden to worship God in the Temple. Isn't it ironic that the shepherds who are forbidden to enter the presence of God and worship in the Temple are the first ones to enter the presence of God and worship Jesus in the cave in Bethlehem.

The Shepherds at Migdal Eder raised the lambs for the daily sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple. They were entrusted with keeping the lambs from becoming injured or blemished so that they would be an acceptable sacrifice for the Temple. Did they visit Jesus? Is Jesus the Lamb of God to be sacrificed? Is it possible that Jesus allows the shepherds to verify that he is a lamb without blemish; a fit and acceptable lamb to be sacrificed?