

O Little Town of Bethlehem: The Archaeology of Christmas

Presentation: Dec. 15, 2018, Island Bible Chapel

SLIDE: TITLE SLIDE

- Welcome
- Associates for Biblical Research – BibleArchaeology.org

SLIDE: SANTA vs. BIBLE

- Many people approach the Christmas story in the Bible the same way they do the story of jolly old St. Nick. It's a nice tradition to celebrate during the festive season, and possibly based in some historical fact, but more myth than truth. I mean really, shepherds seeing angels? Wisemen bringing gifts? A virgin birth? (You do know how babies are made, right?!)
- However, the two earliest records of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth were written by a man who spent years following him (Matthew) and by a historian who carefully investigated the claims by speaking directly with eyewitnesses (Luke). Further, they were written within the lifetime of those who actually knew Jesus: his mother, his siblings, and his disciples.
- Finally, the accounts of that first Christmas contain numerous historical synchronisms and descriptions of specific places and customs.
- Tonight our goal is to investigate the historical reliability of the Christmas story, primarily through archaeology

SLIDE: FOUR QUESTIONS WE WILL ANSWER

1. Were the towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth occupied in the first century A.D. ?
2. Is there evidence of a census taken of the Roman Empire when Quirinius was governor of Syria?
3. When was Jesus born?
4. Are there any other details in the nativity accounts in the Bible that have been confirmed by archaeology?

ARCHAEOLOGY: The study of the human past based primarily on the discovery, analysis, and interpretation of the physical evidence of ancient peoples and their cultures.

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY: The study of the archaeological remains of the regions, cultures and periods in which the biblical texts were formed. (Dr. Aren Maeir – Bar-Ilan University)

SLIDE: QUESTION #1

1. Were the towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth occupied in the first century A.D. ?

SLIDE: THE BIBLE ON BETHLEHEM AND NAZARETH

- *In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary (Lk 1:26–27).*
- *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem... (Matt. 2:1)*

SLIDE: MYTHS AND ALTERNATE SITES

- Rene Salm's book tries to support the Christ Myth by arguing that Nazareth didn't exist until after 70 AD. If there is no Nazareth, he argues, there was no Jesus of Nazareth
- Archaeologist Aviram Oshri, believes Jesus was born in Bethlehem of the Galilee because there is little evidence for 1st Century A.D. Bethlehem of Judea
 - The major piece of evidence used against Bethlehem of Judea is its distance from Nazareth (175 km south, vs. 7km west for Bethlehem of the Gallilee
 - Keep in mind that every male made the trip to Jerusalem 3X per year (Ex. 34:23), and Mary and Joseph we're told went to Jerusalem from Nazareth each year for the Passover (Lk 2:41)
 - Much like people in southern Ontario can't fathom that we drive for an hour to get somewhere and think nothing of it, so it's difficult for us to think of walking for days to get somewhere, but the did it

SLIDE: NAZARETH

- Tombs with fragments of ossuaries have been excavated in Nazareth, indicating a presence there in the 1st century AD
- Hellenistic and early Roman artifacts, including pottery shards, a cooking jar, and lamps discovered in the 1969 Nazareth excavations led by Bellarmino Bagetti, come from a first-century context.
- In 1997 and 1998, excavations at Mary's Well, an ancient spring in Nazareth, led by archaeologist Yardenna Alexandra revealed coins from the Hellenistic and early Roman periods – coins that would have been used in the time of Jesus.
- In 2009, a first-century dwelling was discovered in which were found pottery and chalk stone vessel shards which date from the late Hellenic through Early Roman periods (100 BC to 100 AD)
- Another first-century courtyard house was recently excavated in Nazareth, which still had windows and doors intact. In 2015 Dr. Ken Dark, the lead archaeologist, noted evidence of early Christian veneration at the site, suggesting that it may have been honored as the childhood home of Jesus
 - It was discovered beneath the Sisters of Nazareth Convent nearby a cistern, tombs, and the remains of a Byzantine church. An account written by the Irish Monk Adomnán of Iona in the seventh century called *De Locis Sanctis* indicates that this site may have been venerated as the childhood home of Jesus.

SLIDE: BETHLEHEM

- *The Bethlehem Bulla* is the earliest archaeological evidence that Bethlehem existed during the First Temple period. It is the clay impression of a seal that likely sealed a shipment of tax payments from Bethlehem to the king in Jerusalem. Based on the dating of the seal, the king who received the taxes was either Hezekiah, Manasseh or Josiah. It dates to the 7th or 8th century BC.
- This is the earliest reference to the town of Bethlehem outside of the Bible. We also know there was a village there in the time of Constantine in the 4th century AD. The fact that the village of Bethlehem existed 700 years before Jesus and 300 years afterwards suggests it was there during the time of Jesus.

SLIDE: BETHLEHEM VIDEO BY SOURCEFLIX

- A recent excavation led by Shimon Gibson next to the Church of the Nativity turned up pottery and other first-century material culture, proving the existence of the village of Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.
- The reality is that it was likely a small, seemingly insignificant village in the first century. This would certainly be in keeping with the humble way our Savior entered the world.

SLIDE: QUESTION 2

- Is there evidence of a census taken of the Roman Empire when Quirinius was governor of Syria?

SLIDE: THE BIBLE ON THE CENSUS

- *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. (Luke 2:1-3)*
- Critics say:
 - "Luke has thoroughly confused the facts," (Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*)
 - "There is in fact no alternative but to recognize that the evangelist based his statement on uncertain historical information," (Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*)

Why?

1. Nothing is known in history of a general census during the time of Augustus (although absence of evidence is not evidence of absence!)

2. Josephus records nothing of a Roman census in Palestine in the time of Herod – rather the census of A.D. 6-7 was something new among the Jews (Although Luke knew this and refers to it in Acts 5:23);
3. A census held under Quirinius could not have occurred during Herod's reign for Quirinius was not governor until after Herod's death."

SLIDE: THE BIBLE SAYS THREE THINGS ABOUT THE CENSUS

- 1) Caesar Augustus ordered a census
- 2) People had to go to their hometown to be registered
- 3) This was the first census that occurred when Quirinius was governing Syria (Luke mentions a second one in Acts 5:23)

SLIDE: CAESAR AUGUSTUS AND CENSUSES

- *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* ("The Deeds of the Divine Augustus"): the official autobiography of Augustus (14 AD) survives as an inscription in Ancyra (modern Ankara).
- Caesar Augustus himself records numerous censuses:
 - 28 B.C. – 4,063,000 Roman citizens
 - 8 B.C. – 4,233,000 Roman citizen
 - 14 A.D. – 4,937,000 Roman citizens
 - 2 B.C. – An enrollment of individuals from across the empire where peoples of the great nations were to take an oath to Caesar calling him the "Father of the Country."
 - **NOTE:** Early Christian writer Orosius (ca. 400 AD) links this registration with the birth of Jesus saying that "all of the peoples of the great nations were to take an oath"

New Testament historian Jack Finegan says, "As to the taking of such an enrollment in general, it is known from discoveries among the Egyptian papyri that a Roman census was taken in Egypt, and therefore perhaps also throughout the empire regularly, every fourteen years. Many actual census returns have been found, and they use the very same word (*ἀπογράφω*) which Luke 2:2 uses for the "enrollment."

SLIDE: THE CENSUS AND RETURNING HOME

- Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 255 – ca. 48 AD.
 - Declaration from Thermoutharion and Appollonius, his guardian, that the document accurately records those who have **returned to his household** for the census.
- Census Order - Egypt Papyrus 904
 - Contains a command in Greek from the Prefect Gaius Vibius Maximus for all those in his area of authority to **return to their own homes** for the purposes of a census

SLIDE: QUIRINIUS

- The Aemilius Secundus Inscription was discovered in Venice on the tombstone of a Roman officer named Aemilius Secundus. He states that he was commanded by Quirinius to conduct a census of Apamea's 117,000 citizens. In the inscription, P. Sulpicius Quirinius is given the titles "Legate of Caesar in Syria" and "Prefect of the first Augustan cohort."
- The Quirinius Inscription (Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae #9502) Names P. Sulpicius Quirinius as chief magistrate.
- We know that Quirinius began to reign as Legate (Governor) of Syria in 6 AD (Tacitus & Josephus)
- Luke doesn't use the Greek word for the office of Legate...he uses a more general term that means "ruling" (*hēgemoneuō hayg-em-on-yoo'-o*)

SLIDE: QUESTION 3

- When was Jesus born?
- NOTE: B.C./A.D (B.C.E/C.E) – Calendar dating system devised by Sythian Monk, Dionysius Exiguus in AD 525, but not used widely until after AD 800

SLIDE: CLUES TO WHEN JESUS WAS BORN

- Jesus was born “in the days of Herod” (Matt. 2:1)
- Jesus was born around the time of a Roman Census called by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-2)
- Josephus Records that there was a lunar eclipse shortly before Herod died and that Passover was celebrated shortly after he died (Partial Eclipse on **March 13, 4 B.C.**...29 days before Passover & Total Eclipse on **January 10, 1 B.C.**...89 days before Passover)
- Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23) during the 15th year of Tiberias Caesar in 29 A.D. (Luke 3:1-3)
- Jesus was condemned by Pontius Pilate (26-36 A.D.)
- Jesus was crucified on a Preparation Day (the day before the Sabbath) on the day before Passover. This only occurred twice when Pilate was governor (April 7 of 30 A.D. and April 3 of 33 A.D.)

NOTE: **Silanus Antioch RPC 4270 Coin Dates the first year of Tiberius’ Reign to 14 AD (when Caesar Augustus Died)**

SLIDE: SCHOLARS VIEWS ON WHEN JESUS WAS BORN

SCHOLAR	HEROD’S DEATH	JESUS’ BIRTH	JESUS’ DEATH
Harold Hoehner (<u>Chronological Aspects on the Life of Christ</u>)	4 B.C.	5 B.C.	A.D. 33
Jack Finegan (<u>Handbook of Biblical Chronology</u>)	1 B.C.	3/2 B.C.	A.D. 33
Andrew Steinmann (<u>From Abraham to Paul</u>)	1 B.C.	3/2 B.C.	A.D. 33
Rick Lanser (<u>Associates for Biblical Research</u>)	4 B.C.	5 B.C.	A.D. 30
Roger Young (<u>Associates for Biblical Research</u>)	1 B.C.	3/2 B.C.	A.D. 33

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

- All 29 manuscripts of Josephus prior to 1544 lead to dating Herod’s death in 1 B.C. Manuscripts after this have lead to dating Herod’s death in 4 B.C. Explanation: a mistake was propagated in copies after that time.
- Early Christian writers including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hyppolytus of Rome, Origen, Eusebius, etc. all date Christs birth at 3/2 B.C.
- A 2 B.C. birth fits well with the census/enrollment of individuals from across the Roman empire where “peoples of the great nations were to take an oath to Caesar”

MY CONCLUSION:

- I believe the evidence – the beginning of Jesus ministry in 29 AD when he was about 30 years old, the new data that suggests Herod died in 1 BC, and the census/enrollment being carried out in 2 BC would suggest a birth date of 2 BC.

SLIDE: WHY DECEMBER 25?

MYTH: “Christians stole the pagan Roman celebration of the Sun God on Dec. 25th and turned it into their own holiday.”

- The Roman Sol Invictus (the Roman “unconquered sun” God) feast officially began on Dec. 25, 274 AD.
- Clement of Alexandria in 200 AD wrote about different groups who proposed different dates including May 20, March 21, April 15 and April 21.
- Later two other dates became popular, Dec. 25 and April 6.
- Why Dec. 25? There was a belief at that time that Jesus was both conceived and crucified on the same day – March 25...and nine months after that is Dec. 25th.
- Christians began celebrating Christmas around 250AD and began celebrating it on Dec. 25th in the fourth century AD.

POINT: Christians have been celebrating Christmas since before the Roman Sol Invictus celebration

SLIDE: QUESTION #4

Are there any other details in the nativity accounts in the Bible that have been confirmed through biblical archaeology?

SLIDE: THE STABLE

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk 2:6–7).

“inn” – *kataluma*

(guest room, as in the Last Supper in the upper room in Luke 22:11)

“inn” – *pandocheion* (public lodging place, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:34)

PHOTO 1 – Reconstructed first century house – stable/storage room & upper/guest room

PHOTO 2 - A domestic stable room inside a first-century house with a fenestrated interior “window” wall at Khirbet el-Maqatir.

SLIDE: THE SHEPHERDS

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:8–10).

SLIDE: MIGDAL EDER

Midgal Eder means “Tower of Eder” or “Watchtower of the flocks” – Mentioned in Scripture

Gen 35:20-21 - *Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.*

Some Scholars interpret Micah 4:8 as a Messianic Prophecy stating that the Messiah would be revealed from Migdal Eder. – “The watchtower of the flock”

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, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem.*

“Migdal Eder was not the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheepground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds.” Alfred Edersheim in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*

It is interesting that there was likely a group of shepherds near Bethlehem tending the paschal lambs that were bound for sacrifice in Jerusalem the night that Jesus was born. It’s quite possible that the angel brought to these shepherds the glad tidings of great joy of the final Pascal Lamb’s birth (1 Cor. 5:7).

SLIDE: DEDICATION AT THE TEMPLE

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons” (Lk 2:22).

In this passage we learn three things about Jesus. We learn that his parents were devout Jews who took the law seriously, coming to present their son to the Lord and offer purification sacrifices. We learn that Jesus was born into a poor family, as the sacrifice for purification was actually a year-old lamb (Lv 12:6), and only if she could not afford that could she offer two birds as Mary did. Finally, we learn that Jesus made his first trip to the temple in Jerusalem, the same temple where he would spend much time later in life.

The Southern Steps, are the ancient steps that Jesus’ parents likely walked on to enter the temple, as they form one of the primary access points to the temple and they face south towards Bethlehem, from which they would have made their journey.

SLIDE: KING HEROD’S PALACE

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:1–2).

Herod the Great was a notoriously paranoid tyrant who had three of his own sons killed because he suspected them of plotting against him. In fact, when Caesar Augustus heard about the deaths, he reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than son.”

The birth of a rival king worries King Herod and so he summons the Magi to get more details.

Remains of King Herod’s palace have been discovered beneath the Tower of David Museum in Jerusalem. Excavations have revealed two massive walls from the Herodian period, as well as an ancient drainage system that transported sewage from King Herod’s palace outside the city walls.

SLIDE: GIFTS FROM THE MAGI-1

Unlike most Christmas cards and nativity sets, which show the wisemen present the night of Jesus’ birth, they likely arrived some two years later. Matthew uses the Greek word *paidion* which means child or toddler, to describe Jesus, not the word baby. Remember that Herod ended up killing all of the boys two years of age and younger, in keeping with the information he received from the magi.

- Gold – a precious metal
- Frankincense - a perfume or incense
- Myrrh - was used as an anointing spice at that time.

These were standard gifts that were given to honour kings and gods in antiquity. All three are recorded among the gifts offered by King Seleucus II Callinicus at the temple of Miletus to Apollo in 243 BC.

All three are found in the Middle East – importantly, all three are found east of Bethlehem

Ancient Gold mines in Saudi Arabia. Myrrh native to Yemen. And Frankincense in Jordan.

SLIDE: GIFTS FROM THE MAGI-2

The Treasury of Petra, Jordan, is an ancient Nabataean temple carved out of the sandstone rock face, and part of a wealthy city during the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Since the Nabataeans held a monopoly on the frankincense trade, and Petra is on the route many believe the magi would have traveled from the east to Jerusalem, it is possible that they purchased their gift for the newborn King here.

SLIDE CONCLUSION

The description of the Christmas story in the Bible is historically accurate. Many of the people and places described have been verified through archaeology.

Furthermore, from the writings of other ancient historians such as Tacitus, Pliny The Younger, Suetonius, and Josephus, as well as from the ancient Jewish Talmud, we know that Jesus of Nazareth existed, that he lived in the place and time the Bible describes, and that many people in the first-century believed him to be the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior of the world.

SLIDE: Q&A

-Answer questions from the audience

SLIDE: RESOURCES

-BibleArchaeology.org