

ascribed to Quirinius governing iterum, that is, a second time in the area of Syria, prior to his well-attested term which began in AD 6, appear to be unconvincing. We also have a full list of governors of Syria; C. Sentius Saturninus was the governor between 10/9 and 7/6 BC, followed by P. Quinctilius Varus from 7/6 to 4 BC.

Though it is not the obvious meaning of the term, the Greek word *prōtē* translated “first,” may have the sense of “prior” in a comparative sense, indicating that the census at the time of Jesus’s birth was prior to the more famous census under Quirinius.

The Eclipse and Herod’s Death

The author’s contention that the eclipse in 4 BC was probably not the eclipse to date Herod’s death, as it occurred late at night when most would be asleep, might seem, at first, a persuasive one, but it is a specious argument. Night watchmen could have observed such an eclipse.

For his purposes, the author cites the authoritative work on chronology by Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (1998), but he ignores Finegan’s charts (Tables 140 and 141), which clearly indicate that Herod’s regnal years ended in 4 BC. In order to support a later death, the author has to resort to the possibility of antedating by Herod’s successors.

The author cites (n. 31), an article from *Chronos, Kairos, and Christos II* edited by Jerry Vardaman. I was the co-editor with Professor Vardaman of *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989) [hereafter cited as CKC I], to which Ernest Martin contributed a chapter, “The Nativity and Herod’s Death.” The consensus for that work dated Herod’s death to 4 BC and was represented by Paul L. Maier, “The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus’ Life.” See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977).

The “Star” of Bethlehem

There have been innumerable suggestions as to the “star” of the Nativity (see my “The Magi Episode,” CKC I, 15–39). Ernest Martin considered the star to be the planet Jupiter, as did Konradin Ferrari-D’Occhieppo, emeritus professor of astronomy at the University of Vienna, in his chapter, “The Star of the Magi and Babylonian Astronomy” (CKC I, 41–53). Jerry Vardaman, “Jesus’ Life: A New Chronology” (CKC I, 55–82), on the basis of his identification of the star with Halley’s comet, dated Jesus’s birth to 12 BC!

More recently, two scholars have identified the star with a comet observed by the Chinese in 5 BC. See Colin Humphreys (Cambridge University), “The Star of Bethlehem—a Comet in 5 BC—and the Date of the Birth of Christ,” *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32 (1991): 389–407; see also James Sentell, *BLOG_POSTedit20a.pdf* (31 pages with data from the Jet Propulsion Lab). Among points with which I would disagree with Sentell is my persuasion that the Magi were Babylonian astrologers (see my *Persia and the Bible* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990], chap. 13, “The Magi”).

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Dating the Birth of Jesus from the Star of the Nativity

I read with interest the article by James A. Nollert entitled “Astronomical and Historical Evidence for Dating the Nativity in 2 BC” (*PSCF* 64, no. 4 [2012]: 211–19). The author goes into great detail discussing the available historical events regarding names of governors, two Roman censi, and lunar eclipses that occurred during the period 4–2 BC. Doing so, he tries to show that Herod died in 1 BC, or even AD 1, contra the commonly accepted date of 4 BC. If so, Christ’s birth would have occurred within 3–2 BC.

There are a number of astronomical arguments regarding the nature of the star of Bethlehem during the period 5–2 BC. A few astronomers mention a “recurring nova” recorded by the Chinese in 5 BC, which then reappeared a year later, thus setting Christ’s birth circa 4 BC. If, however, Christ’s birth was in 3–2 BC, astronomical calculations would point to the star of Nativity as a conjunction of planets (not a nova, supernova, or a comet). As reported in *The Christmas Star* by John Mosley in 1988, and illustrated by Clay Frost (see msnbc.com, “That Christmas ‘Star of Wonder’ still leaves plenty to wonder about,” http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Interactives/Technology_Science/Space/Star-of-Bethlehem/star.swf [click on image] updated 12/24/2012), it is said that there were nine major conjunctions that took place in the period from 3 BC to 2 BC.

But on August 12, 3 BC, there occurred a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter that would have had particular significance to astrologers who were also acquainted with the book of Daniel. It occurred between Venus and Jupiter in the constellation of Leo, near the star

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Regulus. Leo was the tribal sign of Judah. Jupiter was the king planet for the Babylonians and the name for Regulus was Sharru the king. Also Venus, named Ishtar, was the chief Babylonian goddess associated with femininity. Could it be that the magi, who were observing the heavens and studying prophecy, observed this phenomenon in the East and associated it with the impending birth of a Jewish king in Judea? Note that they did not *follow* the star but rather told Herod that they had *seen* the star in the East (Matt. 2:2). This portion of the trip would have been based on a *natural* phenomenon (with the timing ordained by God; see Gal. 4:4).

However, the trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was clearly a *supernatural* phenomenon. The following of

the “*star*” took place *only after the magi were willing* to travel to Bethlehem, away from the center of activities in obedience to what the scripture had predicted in Micah 5:2. This then led to a miracle, in response to their perseverance, when God specifically directs the magi to the exact location where the Christ child was (Matt. 2:9).

In any case, regardless of the precise timing of Jesus’s birth, that included both natural events and a supernatural guidance, the wonderful miracle of the Nativity is the same.

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“You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.”
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