



The Nativity, etching, 6 $\frac{5}{16}$ " x 8", 1881, by Carl Heinrich Bloch (1834-1890). Brigham Young University Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Robert and Lisa Wheatley.

Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ

Jeffrey R. Chadwick

In his 1915 classic entitled *Jesus the Christ*, Elder James E. Talmage maintained that Jesus Christ was born on April 6 in the year 1 BC.¹ Talmage was apparently the first LDS writer to propose this particular date. Nearly a century has passed since his book appeared, and in that time it has become practically axiomatic among Latter-day Saints that Jesus was born on April 6 of 1 BC. But was he?

In the last century, much new information has come to light about the New Testament. New data from archaeological and historical sources, combined with a reexamination of the scriptural accounts involved, suggest that the April 6 dating should be reconsidered. This article will demonstrate why I prefer a narrow window of time at the beginning of winter for the birth of the Savior and propose that Jesus was most likely born in December of the year 5 BC.

This proposal will probably come as a surprise, and perhaps even as a shock, to some Latter-day Saints. Aware that some readers suppose April 6 must be regarded, without question, as the authoritatively established birth date of Jesus, and thus that they may be inclined to reject this proposition from the outset, I invite readers to review the evidence presented below. A large amount of data is introduced in this study, and at first, some of these items may seem disconnected from others, but I hope to bring them all together in a series of coherent conclusions at the end of the study.

Published Views of LDS General Authorities

Before considering any other data, a brief review of LDS thinking on this subject is in order. During the nineteenth century, latter-day prophets from Joseph Smith to Lorenzo Snow evidently made no specific comments on the date of Jesus's birth. It is known that Joseph Smith celebrated Christmas day on December 25, but none of his recorded remarks attempt to

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I have been interested in Herodian period history and archaeology for many years now, and in the implications of the dating of Herod's death for the New Testament narratives of Jesus's birth. I also noticed, years ago, that President J. Reuben Clark and Elder Bruce R. McConkie, in studies they had written on the life of Christ, did not parallel some conclusions Elder Talmage had drawn in *Jesus the Christ*. These issues led to a decade-long study



(about 1996 to 2006) on many matters regarding the dating of Jesus's birth and death, which are brought together in this article.

My interests in these topics are the natural result of my faith, my career choices, and my professional academic training. I currently serve at BYU as Jerusalem Center Professor of Archaeology and Near Eastern Studies, as well as Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine. I earned my PhD in anthropology/archaeology from the University of Utah Middle East Center, after having studied and excavated in Israel with projects of Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I am now a Senior Research Fellow at the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem and serve on the board of trustees of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR). I also direct excavations in Area F of the Tell es-Safi/Gath Archeological Project in Israel at the biblical site of Gath, the hometown of Goliath (see 1 Samuel 17). My wife, Kim, and I have lived with our six children in Jerusalem, and I have been teaching, researching, and excavating each year in Israel since 1982.

justify that date, or any other date, as the birth date of Christ.² Nor did he ever interpret the wording of Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 to suggest that April 6 should be regarded as the Savior's birth date, although he said that it was "by the spirit of prophecy and revelation" that April 6 was pointed out to him as the precise day on which he "should proceed to organize" the Church of Jesus Christ in this dispensation.³ Similarly, as far as I have been able to ascertain, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow recorded no comments on the subject of Christ's birth either.

One LDS Apostle in the 1800s did offer a proposal for Jesus's birth date that was different from the traditional Christian date of December 25. Elder Orson Pratt proposed the date of April 11 in the year 4 BC as the Savior's birthday, based on his own calculation of the number of days between the signs of Jesus's birth and death as described in the Book of Mormon.⁴ But Elder Pratt's suggestion of April 11 never captured the imagination of the LDS public in his day and has been largely forgotten. Elder B. H. Roberts, however, felt that the passage in Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 did support the year 1 BC as the year of Jesus's birth, agreeing with what he called the "Dionysian computation" that produced the numbering of years in our current calendar.⁵ And the notion of Jesus having been born in the spring season was not uncommon among the Latter-day Saints in the late 1800s. In a 1901 Christmas message from the First Presidency, President Anthon H. Lund mentioned April as the month he preferred for the birth of the Savior.⁶

During the twentieth century, three different LDS Apostles published major studies on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and in them offered models for the date of Jesus's birth. The diversity of opinion in these three studies is of particular interest. The first, as already mentioned, was *Jesus the Christ* by Elder James E. Talmage. This book was commissioned by the First Presidency, written in the Salt Lake Temple, and officially published by the Church, becoming the first systematic commentary on the life of Christ prepared by a Latter-day Saint authority. Talmage based his statement about Jesus's birth date on the idea that D&C 20:1—which names Tuesday, April 6, 1830, as the date of the organization of the latter-day Church—means that exactly 1,830 years had passed (to the day) since the Savior's birth. President Joseph F. Smith immediately endorsed Talmage's book,⁷ while Elder Hyrum M. Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, in his 1919 commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants, expressed less certainty about the meaning of D&C 20:1. Although Elder Smith agreed that "in all probability the 6th of April is the anniversary of the birthday of our Lord," he acknowledged that "the organization of the Church in the year 1830 is hardly to be regarded as giving divine authority to the commonly accepted

calendar. There are reasons for believing that those who . . . tried to ascertain the correct time” of the Savior’s birth “erred in their calculations, and that the Nativity occurred four years before our era. . . . All that this Revelation means to say is that the Church was organized in the year that is commonly accepted as 1830, A.D.”⁸ A significant number of later General Authorities, including Church Presidents Harold B. Lee,⁹ Spencer W. Kimball,¹⁰ and Gordon B. Hinckley,¹¹ have commented on the April 6 date warmly and acceptingly but without explanation or greater specificity.¹²

Elder Talmage had stated his position in words perhaps implying that this view or belief was obligatory on the entire membership of the Church: “We believe that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea, April 6, B.C. 1.”¹³ This statement notwithstanding, the two highest-ranking General Authorities who subsequently published their writings on Jesus’s life and ministry took positions different from Elder Talmage’s. President J. Reuben Clark, who served as both First and Second Counselor in the First Presidency, published *Our Lord of the Gospels* in 1954. This book was reprinted as an official publication of the Church when it was released as a Melchizedek Priesthood manual for 1958. In *Our Lord of the Gospels*, Clark pointed to the traditional early winter time frame for the date of Jesus’s birth. He explained: “I am not proposing any date as the true date. But in order to be as helpful to students as I could, I have taken as the date of the Savior’s birth the date now accepted by many scholars,—late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C.”¹⁴ In the timetables he employed in his book, Clark listed his preferred time range for Jesus’s nativity as December of 5 BC, and the time range of the Annunciation to Mary as nine months earlier in March of 5 BC.¹⁵ While not insisting on a specific date (such as December 25), President Clark noted the historical strength of the early winter tradition.¹⁶

Elder Bruce R. McConkie was the third General Authority to prepare a systematic study of the life of Christ. Deseret Book Company published the four-volume series *The Mortal Messiah* beginning in 1979. In a lengthy study note appended to chapter 20 of the first volume (on the Savior’s nativity), McConkie discussed several models for dating the birth of Jesus. In contrast to Talmage, McConkie stated: “We do not believe it is possible with the present state of our knowledge—including that which is known both in and out of the Church—to state with finality when the natal day of the Lord Jesus actually occurred.”¹⁷ McConkie then reviewed the positions and reasoning of both Talmage and Clark with regard to Jesus’s birth date and stated that he would follow Clark’s course. Accordingly, McConkie dated the Annunciation to Mary in March or April of 5 BC, and the birth of Jesus in December of 5 BC (with the caveat that his birth could also have occurred from January to April of 4 BC). He also opined that the story of

the arrival of the wise men could perhaps be construed to point to a birth date earlier than December of 5 BC, perhaps as early as April of 5 BC, again repeating that “this is not a settled issue.” For a review of the substance of Elder McConkie’s study, see the endnotes.¹⁸

It seems clear from the different approaches presented in these three studies that there is no authoritative agreement or position on the issue of the birth date of Christ that must be regarded as binding on the membership of the Church. Comments by other General Authorities on the April 6 proposal have tended almost always to be heartfelt remarks that occurred during talks given on subjects other than the actual dating of the birth of Jesus.¹⁹ Thus, as far as General Authority statements are concerned, the only three sources offering data that may be scrutinized are Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ*, Clark’s *Our Lord of the Gospels*, and McConkie’s *The Mortal Messiah*. And of these three, the latter two prefer a different time frame than Talmage’s proposal of April 6 in 1 BC. In this regard, the present reexamination of the dating of Jesus’s birth seems appropriate. Toward that end, this article undertakes to address this perennial LDS topic, setting forth the pros and cons of various elements in this complex subject matter and hoping to contribute some new ideas to the discussion, especially about the possible dates for the death of Jesus, about the change in the Nephite reckoning of years at the beginning of 3 Nephi, and about the timing of the angel Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary.

Other LDS Researchers

Since the first volume of *The Mortal Messiah* appeared in 1979, surprisingly little has been done by LDS researchers with regard to identifying or analyzing models for dating Jesus’s birth. In 1980, *April Sixth*, a short, nonscholarly book appeared, authored by John C. Lefgren.²⁰ The book, which attempted to support the April 6 of 1 BC proposal for Jesus’s birth, was criticized in a 1982 review published in *BYU Studies* by S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, all professors at BYU.²¹ They noted the impossibility of a 1 BC birth year for Jesus, based on the accepted historical fact that king Herod the Great died no later than April of 4 BC and the clear indication in the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus was born prior to Herod’s death (see Matt. 2:1–20). A response to the review of Brown, Griggs, and Hansen was published by John P. Pratt in *BYU Studies* in 1983, arguing in favor of Lefgren’s interpretations and an April 6 birth date in 1 BC.²² Brown, Griggs, and Hansen replied to Pratt’s arguments in the same issue, repeating the fact that Herod had died at least three years too early for Jesus to have been born in 1 BC.²³

Since that exchange, John P. Pratt has written a series of articles in favor of both a birth date for Jesus on April 6 of 1 BC and a date for his death on April 1 of AD 33, utilizing Gregorian calendar dating. Articles in which he argued for these dates appeared in the *Ensign* in 1985 and 1994.²⁴ LDS-oriented website *Meridian Magazine* has featured others of his articles on numerous occasions.²⁵ Pratt also maintains his own website, where many of his studies, published and otherwise, can be accessed.²⁶ Pratt is, without question, the most prolific LDS writer to advocate the April 6 of 1 BC date for Jesus's birth. One of his most significant articles, "Yet Another Eclipse for Herod," was published in 1990 in a non-LDS venue, a journal called the *Planetarian*.²⁷ The proposition in that article, which suggests a date early in AD 1 for Herod's death (thus accommodating an April 6 of 1 BC birth date for Jesus), will be examined later in the present study.

Most recently, a study published by BYU professor Thomas A. Wayment appeared in 2005 as an appendix to the first volume of *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, a three-volume scholarly anthology published by Deseret Book. Wayment's appendix, "The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ," began by saying, "To assume that there is anything like a consensus on the birth date of the Savior would be to underestimate the complexity of the issue."²⁸ Wayment then discussed a series of ancient historical references and modern scholarly interpretations of New Testament passages. Like President Clark, Elder McConkie, and Professors Brown, Griggs, and Hansen, Wayment also noted that the most important historical consideration in dating Jesus's birth must be the date of the death of

Table 1
Dates Proposed by Latter-day Saints for the Birth of Jesus Christ

Orson Pratt (1870)	April 11, 4 BC
James E. Talmage (1915)	April 6, 1 BC
J. Reuben Clark (1954)	December, 5 BC (or early 4 BC)
Sidney B. Sperry (1970)	April 6, 1 BC
Bruce R. McConkie (1979)	December, 5 BC (or January to April, 4 BC; alternatively, as early as April, 5 BC)
John C. Lefgren (1980)	April 6, 1 BC
John P. Pratt (1982)	April 6, 1 BC
Thomas A. Wayment (2005)	Between spring and winter, 5 BC

Herod the Great, which occurred in the spring of 4 BC. Wayment maintained: “The first weekend of April A.D. 30 is the most likely time of the death of Jesus. His birth took place between spring and winter of 5 B.C.”²⁹ As summarized in table 1, Latter-day Saints have proposed a range of dates for the birth of Christ.

Notably, Elder McConkie, who rejected a 1 BC birth year and seemed to prefer an early winter window of time for Jesus’s birth, expanded that window to include at least the possibility of a birth date in either April of 4 BC or April of 5 BC. Likewise, Wayment, who rejects a 1 BC birth year and mentions winter of 5 BC in his window of time, also extends that window back to the spring of 5 BC, thus still allowing for the possibility of an April birth. Only President Clark’s analysis ruled out an April birth entirely. Aspects of each of these proposals will eventually be addressed below.

First, however, three primary issues involved in dating Jesus’s birth need to be discussed. These are (1) the date of the death of Herod the Great, (2) the date of the death of Jesus himself, and (3) the length of Jesus’s mortal life. The first two issues can be confidently addressed in relation to historical, archaeological, and astronomical evidence that has become generally available in recent times, and important information regarding the length of Jesus’s mortal life can be found in the Book of Mormon.

The Death of Herod the Great

The New Testament’s Gospel of Matthew reports that “Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king” (Matt. 2:1). This means, of course, that Herod the king was alive at the time of Jesus’s birth.³⁰ Sometime after the baby Jesus was taken to Egypt, Joseph was told by an angel that “Herod was dead” (Matt. 2:19). That this Herod is the king known to history as Herod the Great is clear from Matthew’s explanation that after the king’s death his son “Archelaus did reign in Judea in the room of his father Herod” (Matt. 2:22). It is well known from historical sources that Herod the Great ruled the entire land of Israel until 4 BC as a client king appointed by Rome, and that he had many sons, among whom were Archelaus, who inherited rule of Judea and Samaria in 4 BC, and Antipas, who inherited rule of the Galilee and Perea in 4 BC (both of these sons also carried the name “Herod”). The main source for this information is *Jewish Antiquities*, written by the late-first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.³¹

Josephus noted that an eclipse of the moon occurred in the days directly preceding the death of Herod the Great.³² It is the only lunar eclipse mentioned by Josephus in all of his works. Following that eclipse,

Herod, who was extremely ill, was taken for a short time to mineral baths at Calirrhoe, across the Jordan River, and then finally to his palace at Jericho, where he expired.³³ The combination of events reported by Josephus places Herod's death about ten days to two weeks after the eclipse and about ten days to two weeks before Passover. Astronomical research has indicated that the only lunar eclipse to occur during the final years of Herod's life that was visible in Jerusalem and that occurred near the season of Passover took place on the night of March 13 of the year 4 BC. This eclipse is recognized by an overwhelming majority of researchers as the event referred to by Josephus. From the account provided by Josephus, it appears that Herod the Great died at the end of March or beginning of April in 4 BC.³⁴

A lunar eclipse that had occurred six months earlier, on the night of September 15 of 5 BC, has been proposed by a few commentators as the eclipse referred to by Josephus, with the suggestion that Herod died in early winter of 5 BC (which is consistent with a late Jewish tradition that he died on the seventh day of the Jewish month of Kislev—late November by the



The Herodion, site of a sumptuous palace complex and hilltop fortress of Herod the Great. Herod was buried here in April of 4 BC in a special mausoleum built for his tomb on the eastern slope of the artificially built-up, cone-shaped hill. Courtesy Jeffrey R. Chadwick.



Excavated remains of the podium of Herod's tomb at the Herodium. Courtesy Jeffrey R. Chadwick.

Roman calendar).³⁵ However, this date fell months prior to Passover and is otherwise difficult to reconcile with the known length of time Herod is recorded to have reigned, as noted by Thomas A. Wayment's study. Wayment—and Brown, Griggs, and Hansen before him—seem willing to at least consider the September 15 eclipse of 5 BC as the one mentioned by Josephus, but they seem more convinced by the 4 BC eclipse of March 13.³⁶ The present study argues that a September eclipse and November death date for Herod in 5 BC are not possible in view of what is known about the length of Jesus's life.

John P. Pratt's 1 BC Eclipse Proposal

For all intents and purposes, the strength of the evidence for the 4 BC eclipse of March 13 and a death date for Herod at the end of March or beginning of April that same year should settle the question of how early Jesus was born—the historical and astronomical facts cannot accommodate Talmage's 1 BC model. However, John P. Pratt again attempted to defend the 1 BC model in his 1990 article "Yet Another Eclipse for Herod"

by proposing the occurrence of an eclipse on December 29 of 1 BC, one that previous researchers had not noticed or taken into account. Pratt identified this eclipse as the one referred to by Josephus and proposed that the death of Herod the Great must have occurred shortly thereafter, early in AD 1.³⁷ Because both of these suggested dates fall several months after April of 1 BC, Pratt concluded that the birth of Jesus can indeed have occurred on April 6 of 1 BC as proposed by Talmage.

But there is a flaw in Pratt's approach to the whole problem of dating Jesus's birth. In attempting to ascertain Herod the Great's death date, Pratt (like many other researchers) relies solely on Josephus's reference to the eclipse preceding Herod's death and takes no other data, historical or otherwise, into consideration. There is, however, other significant historical information offered by Josephus, entirely separate from the eclipse, that places Herod's death in 4 BC. As previously mentioned, Herod's son Archelaus succeeded him as the ruler of Judea—this is noted in both the New Testament (Matt. 2:22) and also in Josephus's *Antiquities*.³⁸ Josephus also reported that Archelaus reigned over Judea and Samaria for ten years and that in his tenth year, due to severe complaints against him from both Jews and Samaritans, he was deposed by Caesar Augustus, who removed him from his office in Judea and banished him to Vienna.³⁹ The legate or governor of Syria, whose name was Quirinius,⁴⁰ was assigned by the emperor to travel to Jerusalem and liquidate the estate of Archelaus, as well as to conduct a registration of persons and property in Archelaus's former realm. This occurred immediately after Archelaus was deposed and was specifically dated by Josephus to the thirty-seventh year after Caesar's victory over Mark Anthony at Actium.⁴¹ The Battle of Actium is a well-known event in Roman history that took place in the Ionian Sea off the shore of Greece on September 2 of the year 31 BC. This is a secular Roman historical date, not in any way dependent on the New Testament chronology. Counting thirty-seven years forward from the 31 BC Battle of Actium yields a date of AD 6 for the tenth year of Archelaus and his banishment from Judea. And since Archelaus was in his tenth year, counting back ten years from AD 6 yields a date of 4 BC for the year in which Herod the Great died. (In this counting, the beginning and ending years are both included in the count, since regnal years for both Augustus and the Herodians were so figured.) These calculations provide compelling evidence for the generally accepted date of Herod's death in 4 BC, independent of any particular eclipse date. Based on reliable historical evidence, Herod the Great could not have died in AD 1.

The Date of Jesus's Death

All four New Testament gospels appear to report that Jesus's death occurred on the day of the Passover preparation, when lambs for the festival were being sacrificed.⁴² In the Jewish calendar, this occurred on the fourteenth day of the spring month of Nisan. The Passover Seder meal took place that very evening. The four gospels also indicate that Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week, the day we know as Sunday (see Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). Jesus had been specific in explaining that he would rise again on the third day following his death (see Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33).⁴³ Another relevant fact is that Jesus was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect/governor of Judea and Samaria (see Matt. 27:24; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:24; John 19:16). Pilate's administration lasted from AD 26 to AD 36. These specific references allow identification of candidates for the year in which Jesus died.

The Jewish festival calendar was based on months that began with the new moon. The spring month of Nisan, for example, always began with the first day of that month marked by the new moon. Since it is possible through astronomical calculation to identify in the past the date and weekday of any new moon, and also the time of its observation on that date and day, the first of Nisan can often be figured to the exact day, and always within a tolerance of one additional day, in any year in antiquity. Through simple counting, the fourteenth day of Nisan can likewise be calculated.

Another factor to keep in mind is that Passover must occur after the onset of spring (after the vernal equinox, which usually occurs around March 20 or 21). Thus, the fourteenth of Nisan on which Jesus died has to have fallen in the few weeks following March 21. And it must also have occurred on a weekday no earlier in the week than Thursday so that no more than three days passed before the arrival of Sunday, the day on which he rose from the dead. (Tradition holds that Jesus died on a Friday, but alternative models have suggested Thursday as the more probable day).⁴⁴ Jesus cannot have died on a Saturday, since three days cannot have passed by the time Sunday arrived. Likewise, Jesus cannot have died on a Sunday, Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, since the arrival of the following Sunday would be more than three days later. Jesus must have died on a Thursday or a Friday.

From table 2, which has been adapted from the respected study of Colin J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington (who utilized Julian calendar dates),⁴⁵ it is evident that during the years when Pontius Pilate was prefect/governor of Judea and Samaria (AD 26–36) there were only three years when the fourteenth of Nisan fell on a Thursday or a Friday, late enough in the

Table 2
Weekdays and Julian Dates for the Fourteenth of Nisan during the
Administration of Pontius Pilate as Prefect of Judea and Samaria, AD 26–36

Year	New Moon Time	Earliest Possible Day for 14th of Nisan
AD 26	06:40, April 6	Sunday, April 21
AD 27*	20:05, March 26	Thursday, April 10, or Friday, April 11
AD 28	02:30, March 15	Tuesday, March 30
AD 29	19:40, April 2	Sunday, April 17, or Monday, April 18
AD 30*	19:55, March 22	Thursday, April 6, or Friday, April 7
AD 31	00:25, March 12	Tuesday, March 27
AD 32	22:10, March 29	Sunday, April 13, or Monday, April 14
AD 33*	12:45, March 19	Friday, April 3
AD 34	05:25, March 9	Wednesday, March 24
AD 35	06:10, March 28	Tuesday, April 12
AD 36	17:50, March 16	Saturday, March 31

* The only instances when the fourteenth of Nisan fell on a Thursday or a Friday.

week for three days to be counted as having passed away, or for Sunday to be noted as the “third day.” These three years were AD 27, AD 30, and AD 33.

The time of the new moon on the first day of Nisan in AD 33 leaves no doubt that the fourteenth of Nisan fell on a Friday that year. In AD 27 and AD 30, however, the time of the new moon on the first of Nisan was such that astronomical calculations can only say that the earliest possible day for the fourteenth of the month was a Thursday. This was the likely weekday, of course, since in Judea the new moons were counted mechanically from the date of the previously sighted new moon (meaning that the Aaronic priests would have counted either 29 or 30 days since the actual sighting of the previous new moon of the month of Adar). But because of the post-sundown appearance of that new moon (at 20:05 hours in AD 27 and at 19:55 in AD 30) there is a possibility that the new month of Nisan might have been counted from sundown the following day, putting the fourteenth of Nisan on a Friday rather than Thursday. This is as much as astronomical calculation can reveal, so the question of whether the fourteenth of Nisan fell on Thursday or Friday in AD 27 or in AD 30 must be settled from other evidence. But for

the purposes of this study, it is significant that both Thursday and Friday fall within a window of time three days prior to Sunday.

Having established that there were only three years when the day of Jesus's death, the fourteenth of Nisan, could have fallen on a Thursday or Friday—namely, the years AD 27, AD 30, and AD 33—the issue that remains for us to determine is the exact length of Jesus's mortal life, and which of those three years was the most likely for his death. That information will narrow the possibilities for the year of Jesus's death to only AD 30.

The Length of Jesus's Mortal Life

The New Testament itself does not specify how long Jesus lived. The record in Luke notes that Jesus “began to be about thirty years of age” (Luke 4:23) at the time of his temptations, but this is a rather imprecise statement. He may have been somewhat younger than thirty or, more likely, somewhat older than thirty. He may have been as old as thirty-one by the time he commenced his ministry. There is also no direct statement in the gospels of how long Jesus's ministry lasted prior to his Crucifixion. However, John gives some helpful evidence in this regard, since he notes three specific Passover festivals that occurred during Jesus's teaching activities. The first (see John 2:13–23) was at the very outset of his ministry, which involved his initial casting out of merchants from the temple. The second (see John 6:4) occurred while Jesus taught in Galilee. And the third (see John 12:1 and 19:14) was the Passover at which Jesus was crucified, which was also mentioned in the synoptic gospels (see Matt. 26:2, Mark 14:1, Luke 22:1). These references would seem to suggest that Jesus's teaching ministry lasted two years—the first year being the period from the Passover of John 2 to the Passover of John 6, and the second year being the period from the Passover of John 6 to the Passover of John 12.

Many LDS commentaries, however, are keyed to the so-called “four Passover theory,” which postulates that the “feast of the Jews” mentioned in John 5:1 was also a Passover, thus allowing for a ministry model of three years rather than two. Taking the “thirty years” of Luke 4:23 as a precise statement of age and utilizing a three-year ministry model, LDS commentaries generally assume that the New Testament is reporting Jesus's lifetime as having lasted thirty-three years, a figure coinciding with information from the Book of Mormon. It must be noted, however, that while the Book of Mormon may be relied upon for accuracy in its report for the length of Jesus's life, this does not necessarily mean that Jesus's ministry lasted three years. For one thing, there is a more likely festival than Passover for the “feast of the Jews” mentioned in John 5:1, namely, the Jewish New Year

known as Rosh HaShannah.⁴⁶ The imprecision of the reference to “thirty years” in Luke 4:23 could well indicate that Jesus did not actually begin his teaching activities until he was thirty-one, and that his ministry was indeed only two years long. The issue remains unsettled.⁴⁷

It is the Book of Mormon that gives a specific count to the number of years Jesus lived.⁴⁸ The book of 3 Nephi reports that a sign appeared in ancient America on the very day that Jesus was born on the other side of the world (see 3 Ne. 1:12–19). Some nine years later, “the Nephites began to reckon their time from this period when the sign was given, or from the coming of Christ” (3 Ne. 2:8). Then, thirty-three full years after the sign of Jesus’s birth, a great storm occurred, accompanied by significant destruction and three days of darkness, marking the day on which Jesus died (see 3 Ne. 8:5–23). In connection with this destructive sign of Jesus’s death, Mormon recorded that “the thirty and third year had passed away” (3 Ne. 8:2) and that the storm hit “in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month” (3 Ne. 8:5). In terms of how many years Jesus lived in mortality, the record in 3 Nephi seems clear.⁴⁹ Jesus lived thirty-three full years, not a year more or a year less.⁵⁰

The Length of Nephite Years

It is also virtually certain that the years referred to in 3 Nephi were 365 days long, the same length as the ancient Jewish lunar-solar year, and the same length as the modern secular calendar year.⁵¹ The Nephites were still observing the Law of Moses during the 3 Nephi period. The performances of the Law of Moses, as found in biblical writings available to the Nephites (on the brass plates of Laban), were keyed to the seasons of the 365-day solar year, beginning with a “first month” (see Ex. 12:2, 18), which was the spring month that the biblical record called Aviv (KJV “Abib,” a name that actually means “spring”; see Ex. 23:15; 34:18; Deut. 16:1). But the solar count notwithstanding, those biblical months ran on a lunar cycle, beginning with each new moon. In other words, the ancient biblical months were lunar counts, even though the Jewish agricultural and festival year was based on the seasons of the solar count. This is why the Jewish year is referred to as lunar-solar. The lunar count was intercalated to coincide with the solar count. A twelve-month lunar year is only 354 days long, on average, which is eleven days shorter than the 365-day year. Without adjustment, the first month of the lunar year would occur eleven days earlier each solar year. Within just a few years it would fall back to winter rather than spring, and within a few more to autumn instead of winter, and so on. So the ancient Israelites devised a system of intercalation that added an extra month to their year every three

years or so in order to ensure that their first month (according to lunar count) always stayed in early spring (according to solar count). Thus the Jewish way of counting months and years evolved as a lunar-solar system.

The Nephites apparently had a method of counting lunar months (as noted in the counting of “nine moons” in Omni 1:21), but their agricultural calendar, like that of the Jews and virtually every other ancient society on the planet, would undoubtedly have been a solar calendar that accounted for the equinoxes and solstices that mark the four seasons of the 365-day year. To properly observe the Law of Moses, the Nephites would have observed Passover in the “first month” (Ex. 12:2; 12:18), which their biblical record would have called Aviv, or spring (Ex. 23:15; 34:18; Deut. 16:1). That the first Nephite month did indeed fall in spring, at least at the time of Jesus’s death, seems clear from the account in 3 Nephi 8:5.

So, notwithstanding differences that must have developed between the ways the ancient Near Eastern Jewish calendar and the ancient American Nephite calendar separately evolved, it seems a reasonable conclusion that the Nephites were (1) observing a 365-day solar count, which (2) accommodated a first month that began in close proximity to the vernal equinox. LDS scholarly consensus currently identifies Nephite-Lamanite culture in general as a component of ancient Mesoamerican society and, in particular, the preclassic Mayan society of southern Mexico and Guatemala.⁵² The ancient Mayan calendar system is quite well understood by modern scholars. It featured a solar year of 365 days, which was called *Haab* and which was the primary annual count.⁵³ Other counts, including lunar cycles, were known and utilized by the Maya, but the primary annual count for agriculture and human events was the *Haab*. This, too, points to the likelihood that the years referred to in 3 Nephi were 365 days long.

Thirty-three Years and a Few Months

The reference to thirty-three full years in 3 Nephi is most helpful in determining the *general* time of the birth of Jesus. But there is yet another factor involved, because thirty-three full years counted back from April of AD 30 arrives at April of 4 BC, a month impossible for the birth of Jesus to have occurred if we accept the historically established fact that Herod the Great died within days of the beginning of that very month. Jesus has to have been born a minimum of eight weeks prior to Herod’s death in order to accommodate the events reported in Luke 2 and Matthew 2 that occurred between his birth and Herod’s death. Those events include Jesus’s naming and circumcision at age eight days (see Luke 2:21) as well as the forty-day purification period Mary would have completed (see Luke 2:22) before she

and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem for a day to present the baby Jesus in the temple (see Luke 2:22–38)—this all equals six weeks. And it was only after the presentation in the temple that the “wise men from the east” arrived at Joseph and Mary’s house in Bethlehem seeking the newborn “King of the Jews” (Matt. 2:1–11). After the Magi departed, Joseph and Mary immediately took Jesus to Egypt (see Matt. 2:13–16), a trip of more than two hundred miles, which would have taken some two weeks. And it was only after their arrival in Egypt that an angel revealed to Joseph in a dream that Herod had died (see Matt. 2:19).

So, at a minimum, Jesus would have been born eight weeks prior to Herod’s death at the beginning of April. And it is likely that the above events were not compressed together without any intervening days, meaning that there were probably a few weeks between the presentation at the Temple in Jerusalem in Luke 2 and the arrival of the Magi in Matthew 2, and likewise a few weeks of Joseph and Mary living in Egypt prior to Herod’s death. All this would put the birth of Jesus as much as three or four months prior to Herod’s passing and points to a window of time around December of 5 BC for the birth of Jesus.

But this would also mean that Jesus was not exactly thirty-three years old when he died at the beginning of April in AD 30, but was closer to thirty-three years and three or four months. Of course, nothing in the New Testament would conflict with such a calculation of his age. But can the account in the Book of Mormon accommodate this suggestion? The answer is yes. One thing that the account in 3 Nephi does *not* specifically explain is whether the Nephites counted back to the actual day of the sign of Jesus’s birth (3 Ne. 1:15–19) as the beginning day of their new “year one,” or whether they had continued to utilize their regular monthly count and had simply regarded the normal arrival of their next New Year’s Day after the sign of his birth as the onset of their new “year one.” This is where evidence from the New Testament and Roman/Jewish history actually allows for a more precise understanding of a Book of Mormon issue, because from the discussion of historical and New Testament issues presented earlier it seems clear that Jesus must have lived a few months longer than thirty-three full years. Therefore, the Book of Mormon question can be answered: the Nephites, after deciding to count their years from the sign of Jesus’s birth, seem to have designated their new “year one” not from the very day of that sign, but from the arrival of their regular new year a few months later. As a consequence, and based on 3 Nephi 8:5, it seems that the Nephite year continued to begin in the spring, which is to be expected since the Nephites in 3 Nephi were still observing the Law of Moses and were likely still utilizing the month count noted in Exodus 12:2. In other words, from the Book

of Mormon it is clear that Jesus lived at least thirty-three full years, and absolutely not thirty-four years. And from the New Testament and Roman/Jewish history, it is demonstrable that Jesus lived about three months or so longer than thirty-three years. In any event, there is nothing in the Book of Mormon account that would necessarily conflict with this conclusion. A flexible reading of the Book of Mormon regarding the length of Jesus's life, one that does not arbitrarily impose the idea that Jesus lived exactly thirty-three years and no more, would allow for his birth to have occurred in December of 5 BC.

The Annunciation to Mary and the Timing of Her Conception

Another significant piece of evidence that points to a December date of birth for Jesus is actually the first event reported in the story of his birth. It is the account of the Annunciation to Mary found in the first chapter of Luke. That record reports that “in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God” (Luke 1:26) to announce to Mary that she would conceive and bring forth a son to be named Jesus (see Luke 1:27–31). In the Jewish context of the account, this would mean the month of Adar, the sixth month of the Jewish year. Adar was the late-winter month that paralleled the period from mid-to-late February through mid-to-late March. Adar was followed by the month of Nisan, which was the spring month in which Passover fell.

Even though for centuries, since Moses's time, the spring month of Aviv had been regarded as the first month of the year, major changes had occurred in Jewish calendar terminology by the time Jesus was born. For one thing, Mesopotamian names for lunar months had become adopted by the Jewish nation after the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BC. The name Nisan came to replace the name Aviv for the spring month in which Passover occurred. Additionally, by the first century BC, the early autumn month called Tishri had come to be regarded as the first month of the Jewish year. Tishri parallels the period from mid-to-late September through mid-to-late October. The first day of Tishri had become known to Jews as Rosh HaShannah, which means “head of the year”—the Jewish New Year.⁵⁴ And even though the Jewish months had Mesopotamian names, they were often designated numerically, rather than by name, so that to say “the first month” or “the second month” or “the sixth month” was a common figure of speech. Thus, at the time of Jesus's birth, the “first month” of the Jewish year was the autumn month of Tishri, and the “sixth month” of the Jewish year was the late winter month of Adar.

So the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary concerning her imminent conception took place in Adar, the "sixth month." And from the account in Luke it appears that the Annunciation actually occurred near the end of Adar (mid-to-late March) and that Mary conceived immediately or within a day or two of the angel's visit. This is all evident because Luke reported that after the Annunciation Mary traveled "with haste" (immediately) to Judea, where she stayed for three months with her older kinswoman Elisabeth, and that the older woman, six months pregnant with her own child, instantly recognized that Mary was also carrying a child in her womb (see Luke 2:39-43). (Coincidentally, the "sixth month" spoken of in Luke 1:26 was also the sixth month of pregnancy for Elisabeth.)⁵⁵ A young woman like Mary (who was probably not older than seventeen) would not have traveled alone from the Galilee to Judea, a distance of nearly one hundred miles on foot. She probably traveled with family or community members in a journey that is not specifically explained in the Luke account. The unstated reason for this trip could well have been to attend the Passover festival at Jerusalem, which took place during mid-Nisan, just two weeks following Adar. Because of the crowds at Passover, as well as the need to secure lodging, obtain a lamb and other supplies for the feast, and perform requisite washings and purifications, most Passover attendees arrived at Jerusalem several days in advance of the festival. Thus, Mary and her family probably arrived at Jerusalem by the seventh of Nisan or thereabouts, which means they had departed Nazareth four or five days prior to that, about the second or third of Nisan. And remember, Mary (and her travel party) had come very soon ("with haste") after the Annunciation.

All these indicators point to the Annunciation and conception having happened near the end of the month of Adar, which would be sometime in mid-to-late March. This would place the birth of Mary's child nine months later, near the end of the Jewish month of Kislev, sometime in December. And since the Jewish festival of Hanukkah began on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev and lasted for eight days, it is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that Jesus was born during Hanukkah at the end of 5 BC.

As noted earlier, the primary model for the timing of events surrounding Jesus's conception and birth, which was accepted by President Clark and followed by Elder McConkie, was that the Annunciation and conception took place in March of 5 BC, with the birth of Jesus nine months later in December of 5 BC. The above explanation of events, including the Passover festival in Jerusalem as the likely reason for Mary's journey to Judea, accounts for why the widely accepted March and December dates are so plausible.

Evaluating the Historical Possibilities

The celebrated mystery novelist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, through the mouth of his famous character, the detective Sherlock Holmes, often made this observation: “It is an old maxim of mine that when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”⁵⁶ With this in mind, the summary list of possibilities for Jesus’s birth date, which was outlined earlier, can now be evaluated to see which proposals are unlikely, if not impossible, at least in view of what is known from the scriptural records, historical records, and archaeological and astronomical research. What remains will be the most likely date for Jesus’s nativity, a day in December of 5 BC. However, in contrast to the qualifier in Holmes’s maxim, this date is not at all improbable.

April of 1 BC. It does not appear possible for any date in April of 1 BC to have been the time of the birth of Jesus. The New Testament indicates Jesus was born prior to the death of Herod the Great. Herod is known, with a high degree of historical certainty, to have died within a few days of the beginning of April in the year 4 BC. This timing is secured not only by Josephus’s notation of the lunar eclipse that occurred shortly before Herod died (dated positively to March 13 in 4 BC), but also independently by Josephus’s explanation of the years of the reign of Herod and his son Archelaus in relation to the Battle of Actium. In short, Herod died in 4 BC. Jesus cannot have been born after that year.

April of 4 BC. Though the reasoning is somewhat redundant to the preceding explanation, this month, too, can also be ruled out as the time of Jesus’s birth. Orson Pratt’s suggestion of April 11 of 4 BC as the Nativity date and McConkie’s caveat regarding April of 4 BC cannot be accommodated by the historical evidence. The reasons just outlined concerning Herod’s death apply to April of 4 BC as much as to any later date. Herod died within days of the beginning of April that year, and Jesus has to have been born at least two months, and more likely three to four months, prior to Herod’s death in order for all of the events described in Luke and Matthew to have taken place before Herod’s passing. This would push the latest historically plausible date for Jesus’s birth back to late December of 5 BC.

April of 5 BC. Any date in April of 5 BC, whether it be April 6 or some other day, is likewise unworkable as the natal date of Jesus. The death of Jesus must have occurred in early April of AD 30, the only year in which Passover fell late in the week and which also allows Jesus to have lived thirty-three full years from his birth. But April of 5 BC was thirty-four full years prior to Jesus’s death, and the language of the Book of Mormon

does not allow for thirty-four full years to have passed from Jesus's birth to his death.

The report in Matthew 2 that Herod had the children of Bethlehem "from two years old and under" slain has led some commentators to suggest that the wise men did not arrive until a year or more after Jesus's birth. However, since it is virtually certain that Herod's death occurred at the beginning of April in 4 BC, to count a full year or more back from that event (that is, to suggest a birth date for Jesus in April of 5 BC or April of 6 BC) does not yield feasible results, since those dates would be thirty-four or thirty-five full years prior to the death of Jesus in April of AD 30, and the Book of Mormon reckoning does not allow for that much time.

Spring to Autumn of 5 BC. For the reasons just stated, a date anytime in the spring of 5 BC, as suggested by Wayment, does not appear possible. Summer and autumn of that year can likewise, for all practical purposes, be ruled out. The date of Jesus's death, in April of AD 30, was more than thirty-three and a half years after the end of the summer of 5 BC, a span too long to fall within even a flexible model of what the 3 Nephi account would allow for Jesus's lifespan. A date in autumn of 5 BC might fall within such a flexible model, but another factor disqualifies autumn: the reference in Luke 1 to the "sixth month" for the Annunciation to Mary. Elizabeth's pregnancy notwithstanding, the term "sixth month" is an unmistakable reference to the Jewish month of Adar, indicating that Gabriel's visit to Mary and the miraculous conception she experienced immediately afterward occurred in March. This necessarily places the birth of Mary's son nine months later, near the end of the Jewish month of Kislev, which would fall in December.⁵⁷

Any Time Prior to 5 BC, Such as 6 BC or 7 BC. While proposals as early as these are not among the LDS models noted earlier, it is important to eliminate them anyway. A date in 6 BC might be postulated on account of Herod having the children of Bethlehem "from two years old and under" slain (Matt. 2:16). But a birth date in 6 BC would not match Jesus's thirty-three-year (and a few months) lifespan to any date AD when it was possible for him to have been executed (he cannot have been crucified in AD 28, since the fourteenth of Nisan fell on a Tuesday that year). The year 7 BC could mathematically be reconciled with a death date in AD 27, when the fourteenth of Nisan fell on either a Thursday or a Friday. But AD 27 is too early for Jesus to have died, since Luke noted that John the Baptist's ministry began "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" (Luke 3:1), the commencement of which can be confidently dated to autumn AD 27.⁵⁸ Jesus cannot have died the same year John began preaching, since Jesus himself only began preaching at Passover (spring AD 28), just months after John's advent.



Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity (traditional birthplace of Christ, and not at all improbable that it is the actual birthplace). Courtesy Jeffrey R. Chadwick.

December of 5 BC. Because the above proposals all contradict some part of the historical and scriptural evidence, the beginning of winter in 5 BC, specifically the month we know as December, remains as the only proposed window of time in which the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem can logically have occurred. In its favor, this period falls nine months after the Annunciation to Mary in late Adar (March), making it consistent with the time of the Nativity from the perspective of Luke's gospel. It also falls thirty-three full years and three to four months prior to April of AD 30, accommodating the Book of Mormon reference to the thirty-third year having passed away at the time of Jesus's death. As noted, President Clark utilized the December of 5 BC date in his book *Our Lord of the Gospels*. And this was also Elder McConkie's primary preference. Wayment also allowed for the winter of 5 BC in his dating model. When all is said and done, the facts from the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the history of Josephus, combined with input from archaeological and astronomical research, all point to a day in December of 5 BC (late in the Jewish month of Kislev) for the date of Jesus's birth.

Conclusions

Two conclusions emerge from this study. The first is this: in the five-year period examined (5 BC to 1 BC), there is no year in which April 6 could have been the birth date of Jesus. This conclusion may disappoint some Latter-day Saints who have been conditioned to think of April 6 as the Savior's birthday. However, Latter-day Saints' appreciation for this calendar date should in no way be diminished, because the intent of D&C 20:1 was not to fix the date of Jesus's nativity; rather, the intent (as with D&C 21:3) was to designate April 6 as the day on which the Church of Jesus Christ was organized in its latter-day dispensation. This noble and divinely inspired event makes the date of April 6 a sacred latter-day anniversary in its own right.⁵⁹

The second conclusion perhaps goes without saying: the traditional date of Christmas, December 25, falls within the window of time in which it would appear that Jesus must have been born. It is just as possible that Jesus was born on the calendar date we call December 25 as on any other date in the few weeks preceding it or the week following it. But this study in no way concludes that December 25 was actually the birth date of Jesus.⁶⁰ While people may always see things differently, the totality of the evidence presented above allows only one conclusion: that his birth occurred within those December weeks that we now commonly refer to as the Christmas season.

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1. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to the Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 102–4.

2. Joseph Smith mentioned having received the revelation known as Doctrine and Covenants 87 on Christmas day of 1832. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:301 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*). He mentioned enjoying himself with his family at home in Kirtland, Ohio, on Christmas day in 1835 (*History of the Church*, 2:345, December 25, 1835). He further mentioned preparations on December 23, 1843, for a Christmas dinner party at his Nauvoo, Illinois, home (*History of the Church*, 6:133), and enjoying the party with about fifty other couples on the afternoon of Christmas day (*History of the Church*, 6:134).

3. *History of the Church*, 1:64; also current headnote to Doctrine and Covenants 20. For a discussion of D&C 20:1, see note 12 below.

4. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 13:126–27, April 10, 1870; and 15:256–57, December 29, 1872.

5. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (1893; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1927), 17.

6. Anthon H. Lund, “Christmas Reflections,” in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 4:29, December 21, 1901.

7. Joseph F. Smith, Charles W. Penrose, and James E. Talmage, “‘Tidings of Comfort and Joy’ from the First Presidency,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:347, December 18, 1915.

8. Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjodahl, *The Doctrine and Covenants: Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the Prophet* (1919; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1923), 138. See also note 18 below.

9. Harold B. Lee, “Strengthen the Stakes of Zion,” *Ensign* 3, no. 7 (July 1973): 2. At the annual conference of the Church on April 6, 1973, President Lee noted: This “is a particularly significant date because it commemorates not only the anniversary of the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in this dispensation, but also the anniversary of the birth of the Savior, our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.” He went on to explain that “Joseph Smith wrote this, *preceding a revelation* given at that same date” and, after quoting D&C 20:1, added, “*Traditionally* since that time, the spring conferences of the Church are held on the days of each year which include April 6.” Lee, “Strengthen the Stakes,” 2, emphasis added. President Lee seems have struck a sensitive balance between profound regard for this inspired commemorative date and the fact that this information was written in a preface that perhaps only preceded the beginning of the actual words of revelation. See note 12.

10. Spencer W. Kimball, “Remarks and Dedication of the Fayette, New York, Buildings,” *Ensign* 10, no. 5 (May 1980): 54. At a landmark occasion celebrating four great moments in time, President Spencer W. Kimball was thrilled to speak by a videotaped broadcast to the entire Church from the Peter Whitmer farm home, where the Church was organized, and then from the chapel in Fayette, New York. He saw that occasion as representing “something of the marvelous progress made by the Church during the 150 years of its history,” and said, “My brothers and sisters, today we not only celebrate the Sesquicentennial of the organization of the Church, but also the greatest event in human history since the birth of Christ on this day 1,980 years ago. Today is Easter Sunday.” Kimball, “Remarks and Dedication,” 54. It would understandably appear that President Kimball’s attention was focused on the organization of the Church that day and hence solely on D&C 20:1. Edward Kimball, the son and biographer of Spencer W. Kimball, reports in an email to John W. Welch dated November 16, 2010, that he is unaware of any other comment by President Kimball about the dating of the birth of Jesus.

11. Gordon B. Hinckley, First Presidency Christmas Devotional, December 7, 1997, in *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley, Volume 1: 1995–1999* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 409. While President Hinckley did not specifically mention the date of April 6 in this address, the implication is obvious: “While we now know through revelation the time of the Savior’s birth, we observe the 25th of December with the rest of the Christian world.”

On several December occasions in the 1990s, President Gordon B. Hinckley voiced his gratitude “beyond power of expression” during the “glorious and wonderful” Christmas season “for the plan of salvation, for the gift of the Son of God, who gave His life that we might have eternal life,” testifying “of His living reality [and] of the divinity of His nature. . . . This is what Christmas is really all about.” *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 60–61. While he indeed said in December 1997, “While we now know through revelation the time of the Savior’s birth,” we may assume (although he did not say) that he had D&C 20:1 in mind, in the context of explaining to a public audience that Latter-day Saints gladly celebrate Christmas on December 25. *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley*, 409. Latter-day Saints are not committed by revelation to any particular date. At least one knowledgeable publication by Deseret Book since the time of this statement by President Hinckley has not taken notice of it in discussing the dating of the birth of Christ. On that publication, see text accompanying notes 28 and 29 below.

12. It appears that whenever Latter-day Saints connect the date of Jesus’s birth with April 6, they have D&C 20:1 in mind. This verse is the opening preface that dates the “Church Articles & Covenants,” which were evidently transcribed on April 10, 1830, after the Church was organized as a religious association (which is different from a religious corporation) under New York law on April 6, 1830. For this date and the earliest manuscript of this document, see Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Manuscript Revelations Book*, facsimile edition, first volume of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 75, which is page 52 in the Book of Commandments and Revelations. Without detracting from the overall revelatory importance of D&C section 20 as a whole, it appears that this verse, which is part of the initial heading of the section, is not a part of the revelation proper. If the Lord were speaking in 20:1, one would wonder why he would speak of “the coming of *our* Lord” and of “the laws of *our* country,” as this verse reads. Likewise, it would seem significant that what is now D&C 21:3 originally read, “which church was organized and established in the year of *our* Lord eighteen hundred and thirty, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April,” as it reads in the 1831 manuscript (*Manuscript Revelations Book*, 27, which is page 28 in the Book of Commandments and Revelations) and also in the 1833 Book of Commandments. This phrase, “year of our Lord,” was changed to read “year of your Lord” when these words appeared as part of section 46 in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, apparently to make the grammar of this verse blend with the preceding and following verses. For this reason, many people have thought, and probably correctly so, that these words are simply a way of stating the date on which the Church was organized. Indeed, in the historical record the Lord commanded John Whitmer to keep (see D&C 47:1), Whitmer used the exact language employed in D&C 20:1, but in reference to a different date: “It is now June the twelfth, one thousand eight hundred and thirty one years, since the coming of our Lord and Savior in the flesh.” F. Mark McKiernan and Roger D. Launius, eds., *An Early Latter Day Saint History: The Book of John Whitmer* (Independence, Miss.: Herald Publishing House, 1980), 25; see also <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/JWhitmer-history.html> (accessed November 18, 2010).

It is interesting that John Whitmer was also the scribe who recorded the “Church Articles & Covenants” (D&C 20) in the Book of Commandments and Revelations (BCR) and composed the headnotes to the revelations. Steven C. Harper, one of the Joseph Smith Papers editors who prepared the BCR for publication, made this observation: “Another significant chronological contribution of the BCR is Whitmer’s preface to the text he titled ‘Church Articles & Covenants,’ Doctrine and Covenants section 20, which he dated April 10, 1830, four days *after* the Church’s organization on April 6. In my judgment, the fact that this text was written after, not on or before April 6, strengthens the argument that its introduction is not necessarily revealing, as some have argued, the day and year of Christ’s birth.” Steven C. Harper, “Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 57.

One may certainly argue that the main (if not exclusive) purpose of this dating information in D&C 20:1 and 21:3 is to give the date of the organization of the Church, a date directed by God as a monumentally important date in its own right identified on the calendar used by people in that day and age. D&C 20:1 speaks of “the rise of the Church of Christ in these last days, being one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh, it being regularly organized and established agreeable to the laws of our country, by the will and commandments of God, in the fourth month, and on the sixth day of the month which is called April.” The points here seem to emphasize (1) the fact that the Church was rising again “in these last days,” (2) that these are the “last days,” even 1,830 years since the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, and then (3) that the Church was legally organized by commandment of God on April 6. As Joseph wrote several years later in *History of the Church*, 1:64, it was “by the spirit of prophecy and revelation” that “the precise day upon which . . . we should proceed to organize His Church once more here upon the earth” was given. Two points seem clear in this regard: first, D&C 20:1 does not directly connect the specific date of April 6 with the coming of Christ, for that date appears in the second half of the verse and modifies “it,” meaning the legal organization of the Church; and second, Joseph’s statement in *History of the Church* makes no mention of the coming or birth of Christ. I thank John W. Welch for providing the historical context of D&C 20 reproduced in this note and Roger Terry for making me aware of the quotation from the Book of John Whitmer.

13. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 104.

14. J. Reuben Clark, *Our Lord of the Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), vii.

15. Clark, *Our Lord of the Gospels*, 31–33, 168, 174. For the Annunciation to Mary, President Clark follows the dating of Andrews, which is expressed as March–April of 5 BC (essentially Adar).

16. Clark, *Our Lord of the Gospels*, 162.

17. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 1:349.

18. From note 2 at the end of chapter 20 in McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 1:349–50: “We do not believe it is possible with the present state of our knowledge—including that which is known both in and out of the Church—to state with finality when the natal day of the Lord Jesus actually occurred. Elder James E. Talmage takes the view that he was born on April 6, 1 B.C., basing his conclusion on

Doctrine and Covenants 20:1, which speaks of the day on which the Church was organized, saying it was ‘one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the flesh.’ April 6 is then named as the specific day for the formal organization. Elder Talmage notes the Book of Mormon chronology, which says that the Lord Jesus would be born six hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem. (Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 102–4.)

“Elder Hyrum M. Smith of the Council of the Twelve wrote in the *Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*: ‘The organization of the Church in the year 1830 is hardly to be regarded as giving divine authority to the commonly accepted calendar. There are reasons for believing that those who, a long time after our Savior’s birth, tried to ascertain the correct time, erred in their calculations, and that the Nativity occurred four years before our era, or in the year of Rome 750. All that this Revelation means to say is that the Church was organized in the year commonly accepted as 1830, A.D.’ Rome 750 is equivalent, as indicated, to 4 B.C.

“President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., in *Our Lord of the Gospels*, a scholarly and thoughtful work, says in his preface that many scholars ‘fix the date of the Savior’s birth at the end of 5 B.C., or the beginning or early part of 4 B.C.’ He then quotes the explanation of Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 as found in the *Commentary*, notes that it has been omitted in a later edition, and says: ‘I am not proposing any date as the true date. But in order to be as helpful to students as I could, I have taken as the date of the Savior’s birth the date now accepted by many scholars, —late 5 B.C. or early 4 B.C., because Bible Commentaries and the writings of scholars are frequently keyed upon that chronology and because I believe that so to do will facilitate and make easier the work of those studying the life and works of the Savior from sources using this accepted chronology.’ This is the course being followed in this present work, which means, for instance, that Gabriel came to Zacharias in October of 6 B.C.; that he came to Mary in March or April of 5 B.C.; that John was born in June of 5 B.C.; and that Jesus was born in December 5 B.C., or from January to April in 4 B.C.

“To illustrate how the scholars go about determining the day of Christ’s Nativity, we quote the following from Edersheim: ‘The first and most certain date is that of the death of Herod the Great. Our Lord was born *before* the death of Herod, and, as we judge from the Gospel-history, very shortly before that event. Now the year of Herod’s death has been ascertained with, we may say, absolute certainty, as shortly before the Passover of the year 750 A.U.C., which corresponds to about the 12th of April of the year 4 before Christ, according to our common reckoning. More particularly, shortly before the death of Herod there was a lunar eclipse which, it is astronomically ascertained, occurred on the night from the 12th to the 13th of March of the year 4 before Christ. Thus the death of Herod must have taken place between the 12th of March and the 12th of April—or, say, about the end of March. Again, the Gospel-history necessitates an interval of, at the least, seven or eight weeks before that date for the birth of Christ (we have to insert the purification of the Virgin—at the earliest, six weeks after the Birth—The Visit of the Magi, and the murder of the children at Bethlehem, and, at any rate, some days more before the death of Herod). Thus the birth of Christ could not have possibly occurred after the beginning of February 4 B.C., and most likely several weeks earlier.’ (Edersheim 2:704.)

“We should add that if the slaughter of the Innocents by Herod occurred not weeks but a year or so after our Lord’s birth, as some have concluded from the recitation in Matthew 2, then this whole reasoning of Edersheim would be extended an appreciable period, so that Christ could have been born on April 6 of 5 B.C. We repeat, as President Clark suggested, that this is not a settled issue.”

19. See notes 9–11 above for examples of such remarks.

20. John C. Lefgren, *April Sixth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980).

21. S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, review of *April Sixth*, by John C. Lefgren, *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 (1982): 375–83.

22. John P. Pratt, letter to the editor, *BYU Studies* 23, no. 2 (1983): 252–54.

23. S. Kent Brown, C. Wilfred Griggs, and H. Kimball Hansen, untitled response, *BYU Studies* 23, no. 2 (1983): 255.

24. John P. Pratt, “The Restoration of Priesthood Keys on Easter 1836, Part 1: Dating the First Easter,” *Ensign* 15 (June 1985): 59–68; John P. Pratt, “The Restoration of Priesthood Keys on Easter 1836, Part 2: Symbolism of Passover and of Elijah’s Return,” *Ensign* 15 (July 1985): 55–64; John P. Pratt, “Passover: Was It Symbolic of His Coming?” *Ensign* 24 (January 1994): 38–45.

25. *Meridian Magazine*, an online publication, is found at www.meridianmagazine.com. John P. Pratt’s contributions to this online publication can be found by utilizing the *Meridian Magazine* search function and the “exact phrase” option when searching for “John P. Pratt” (accessed October 20, 2010).

26. John P. Pratt’s articles are all available online at his website, www.johnpratt.com (accessed October 21, 2010).

27. John P. Pratt, “Yet Another Eclipse for Herod,” *The Planetarian* 19 (December 1990): 8–14.

28. Thomas A. Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ, Volume One*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 383.

29. Wayment, “Birth and Death Dates,” 394.

30. Some commentaries (see, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [New York: Doubleday, 1977, 1993], 412–14, 547–56) suggest that Matthew’s report of Jesus’s birth during the reign of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1, 18–22) cannot be reconciled with Luke’s report (Luke 2:1–2) of a census (KJV “taxing”) conducted during the administration of the Syrian legate Quirinius (KJV “Cyrenius”). That census, which was conducted in Judea in AD 6–7, followed a ten-year reign by Herod Archelaus, who had succeeded his father Herod the Great following the latter’s death in 4 BC. If, indeed, the setting of Luke 2 is placed in the year AD 6–7, it is at least a decade out of harmony with the setting of Matthew 2, which must be dated no later than 5–4 BC. However, other commentaries see no contradiction between the dates implied in Matthew and Luke. For example, noted New Testament historian Frederick Fyvie Bruce suggested that “it may be best to follow those commentators and grammarians who translate Luke 2:2 as “This census was before that which Quirinius, governor of Syria, held.” F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents—Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981), 88. The Greek term translated in KJV Luke 2:2 as “first” is *proto*, a word that can legitimately be understood as “first,” “prior,” or “before,” always indicating an ultimate priority. Reading *proto* in Luke 2:2 as “before” rather than “first” places the events of Luke 2 *before* or *prior to* the administration of Quirinius and his

census. Another consideration is that Greek terms in Luke 2 translated in KJV as “taxed” and “taxing,” are *apographesthai* and *apographi*, and literally mean “registered” and “registration.” And though modern New Testament translations have usually interpreted the Greek terms to mean that Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the Roman Empire, this idea cannot be correct. Augustus never ordered any census on an empirewide basis. Conducting a census was very expensive, so the procedure was infrequently employed. And whenever a census was conducted, it was on a provincial basis or smaller, certainly not empirewide. It is known, however, that city registers were kept in the Roman Empire as early as the reign of Augustus. City registers were functions of the local governments and included the recording of names and residential locations of people living in each town, as well as rural locations in the vicinity of those communities. This is probably the process referred to in Luke 2, where each person went to be registered in his own city. The registers were used for taxing purposes, of course, as well as certifying residency. They could also be totaled together to come up with regional population counts. Such counts were more practical than actual census taking. In any event, such registrations would be different than the census made by Quirinius, and thus the Luke 2 account of Joseph and Mary registering in Bethlehem would not be a contradiction with the Matthew 2 account of Jesus’s birth during the reign of Herod the Great.

31. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books 15–17*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Ralph Marcus, Loeb Classical Library, 10 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and London: William Heinemann, 1963), 8:459.

32. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:449.

33. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:449–55, 459–61.

34. Josephus’s record indicates that Herod’s lavish funeral and subsequent burial at the Herodion (southeast of Bethlehem) took place less than a week after his death. His immediate heir, Archelaus, is reported to have observed the seven days of mourning known as *Shiva*. At the Passover festival that occurred just a few days later, a major riot broke out that led to harsh military reprisals ordered by Archelaus against the Jewish rioters. This was followed by further unrest and reprisals that lasted throughout the summer and into autumn, resulting in thousands of Jewish deaths. Some commentators have argued that events directly following Herod’s death, which led to the Passover riots, must have taken a considerable amount of time and therefore argue that while Herod died in the spring of 4 BC, the Passover of the rioting must have been a year later in 3 BC. However, a careful reading of Josephus reveals that the events following his *Shiva* (seven day mourning period) and the subsequently mentioned Passover (of the rioting) can easily have taken place in four or five days, thus assuring that Josephus was indeed describing the Passover of 4 BC as the Passover of the rioting. This means that Herod must have died about midway between the March 13 eclipse and the mid-April Passover of 4 BC, that is, at the very end of March or in the first few days of April. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:459–75.

35. See, for example, Timothy D. Barnes, “The Date of Herod’s Death,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (April 1968): 209.

36. Wayment, “Birth and Death Dates,” 386 and note 9. See also Brown, Griggs, and Hansen, book review, 378, contrasted with Brown, Griggs, and Hansen, untitled response, 255.

37. Pratt, “Yet Another Eclipse,” 9.

38. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:459.

39. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8:531.

40. As mentioned in note 27, this Quirinius was the “Cyrenius” of KJV Luke 2:2, although the registration of AD 6 was not the same event as the “taxing” (KJV) (more properly “registration”) ordered by Augustus prior to the birth of Jesus.

41. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 9:23.

42. John specifically noted that the day of the Crucifixion was “the preparation of the Passover” (John 19:14, compare John 18:28). Matthew notes simply that the day was “the preparation.” Mark and Luke state that it would be followed by “the sabbath” (Matt. 27:62, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54). This has led some commentators to suggest that the synoptic gospels were recording Jesus’s death on a day other than the fourteenth of Nisan. However, John, who noted that the day was “the preparation” followed by “the sabbath” (John 19:31), also clarified the situation by explaining “that sabbath was an high day” (John 19:31), a reference to the first day of Passover, which was always considered a Sabbath regardless of what day of the week it fell upon. This in turn clarifies the references in the synoptics—the clear implication is that they, too, were referring to the Passover preparation. This also suggests that Jesus’s death need not be necessarily considered to have occurred on a Friday, the day prior to the Saturday Sabbath, since the only clear reference to the nature of the Sabbath in question is that it was a holiday Sabbath, namely, the first day of Passover. This leaves wide open the question of whether Jesus died on a Friday or on a Thursday.

43. Seven passages portray Jesus as saying he would rise “the third day” after his death (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33). Jesus’s statement in John about rebuilding the temple “in three days” was taken by his disciples to be a prediction of his Resurrection (John 2:19–22). Jesus also specifically said that he would be in the grave “three days and three nights” (Matthew 12:40). His foes remembered that he had said he would rise “after three days” (Matt. 27:63), and Mark as well reports that Jesus said he would rise “after three days” (Mark 8:31). On the Sunday of the Resurrection, Cleopas explained that it was “the third day since” the Crucifixion. In all of these cases, the phraseology is more supportive of a Thursday crucifixion than a Friday crucifixion, Christian tradition notwithstanding.

44. Jesus’s prophecy concerning the duration of his burial, found in Matthew 12:40, specifically notes three days and three nights—“so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” A Friday crucifixion allows for the counting of three days, if one includes Friday, Saturday, and Sunday in the count, but cannot accommodate three nights, since only Friday night and Saturday night would have passed before dawn on Sunday. A Thursday crucifixion, however, allows for three nights to have passed prior to the Resurrection on Sunday morning, as well as something closer to three real days. See also above, notes 42 and 43.

45. Colin J. Humphreys and W. G. Waddington, “Dating the Crucifixion,” *Nature* 306 (December 22, 1983): 743–46 (tables, p. 744).

46. See my discussion of this issue in Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Temple, the Sadducees, and the Opposition to Jesus,” in *Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ, Volume One*, ed. Holzapfel and Wayment, 84–85 and note.

47. While the length of Jesus's ministry, two years or three years, remains an unsettled issue, I prefer the two-year model.

48. Caution may be in order when considering at least some of the year counts listed in the Book of Mormon. It would seem that there were occasions when Mormon himself was not absolutely sure of the year count or the exact year in which an event he was reporting actually happened. See, for example, his use of the word "about" in Mosiah 6:4 when calculating the year count connected to the beginning of the reign of king Mosiah. Even in 3 Nephi 8:2, Mormon accommodates the possibility of errors in the Nephite year count with the caveat "if there was no mistake made." That having been said, the rather short passage of thirty-three years (the life span of Jesus) indicated in 3 Nephi 8:2 seems reliable for our purposes, and even to Mormon himself. I am indebted to John W. Welch for pointing out to me the passage in Mosiah 6:4 and its significance.

49. There is a potential ambiguity in the wording of 3 Nephi 2:5–8, and it is thus possible to read the passage alone in such a way as to conclude that Jesus was only thirty-two years old at the time of his death. In my opinion, however, when the passage is read in connection with 3 Nephi 1:1, it becomes clearer that Jesus must have been thirty-three years old at the time of his death (which has been the usual consensus among LDS readers). I am indebted to Roger Terry, who suggested that this issue be addressed.

The problem is as follows: 3 Nephi 1:1–19 indicates that the sign of Jesus's birth was given during year 92 of the Nephite judges. Later in the text, 3 Nephi 2:5 notes that one hundred years had passed away since the end of the Nephite monarchy (the one hundredth "year of the judges" had passed away). Immediately thereafter, 3 Nephi 2:6–8 notes three things: (1) that 609 years had passed away since Lehi left Jerusalem, (2) that nine years had passed away since the sign of Jesus's birth had been given, and (3) that the Nephites began to reckon their time (essentially their year count) from the time of that sign. In my opinion, it is a mistake to read verse 5 as referring to the same year referred to in verses 6–8. Such a reading would equate year 100 of the judges with year 9 since the sign of Jesus's birth (the 609th year since Lehi's departure). Since Jesus was born during year 92 of the judges, and would have turned eight years old during year 100 of the judges, this incorrect reading would place Jesus's eighth birthday during the ninth year since the sign was given (year 609 since Lehi's departure). And that interpretation would lead to the conclusion that Jesus turned thirty-two years old during the thirty-third year since the sign was given, and would have been only thirty-two years and a few months old (rather than thirty-three years and a few months old) at the time of his death, which occurred just days after year 33 ended (see 3 Ne. 8:2–5).

This interpretation, however, is incorrect if one understands that the ninth year spoken of in 3 Nephi 2:7 is not the same year as the one hundredth year spoken of in 3 Nephi 2:5. It seems clear that 3 Nephi 2:7 is referring to the year following the one hundredth year of the judges, namely the 101st year of the judges. However, since the Nephites had abandoned the "year of the judges" terminology in that very year, Mormon had to refer to it as the ninth year since the sign of Jesus's birth, rather than referring to it as year 101. The statement in 3 Nephi 2:6, referring to the 609th year since Lehi's departure, was Mormon's segue from the old dating terminology to the new dating terminology. Having mentioned that the one hundredth year had passed away, Mormon then referenced the passing

of the following year, but instead of calling it year 101 he refers to an even older counting system and calls it the 609th year since Lehi's departure, then notes that it was simultaneously the ninth year since the sign of Jesus's birth. Thus, Jesus would have turned nine years old (not eight) during the ninth year, and thirty-three years old (not thirty-two) during the thirty-third year, and would have died at age thirty-three and a few months just days after the end of year 33, as alluded to in 3 Nephi 8:2–5. Support for this interpretation of 3 Nephi 2:5–8 also comes from a careful reading of 3 Nephi 1:1, which notes that the ninety-first year of the judges had passed away, and then says "it was six hundred years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem." Important here is the fact that it does not say six hundred years had *passed away* since Lehi's departure, but rather that "it was six hundred years" since that departure. Because Mormon was so careful in his use of language, the conclusion to be drawn is that the 600th year since Lehi's departure had commenced, not ended, with the onset of the 92nd year of the judges, the year in which Jesus was born. And since Jesus was born in year 92 (or 600), it means he turned eight in year 100 (or 608), and that year 101 (or 609), the ninth year since the sign of his birth, would have been the year of his ninth birthday. Thus, the year of Jesus's thirty-third birthday was year 33 of the new Nephite count, and he died just days after the end of year 33, at age thirty-three years and a few months.

50. Thomas A. Wayment maintains that "the time period between the sign of Jesus's birth and the signs of His death was thirty-four years" and then adds parenthetically "thirty-three years if counted inclusively." See Wayment, "Birth and Death Dates," 393. But a thirty-four year count is not correct. A thirty-fourth year could not be counted unless the year had passed away, but the text of 3 Nephi 8:5 specifies that the thirty-fourth year had just barely begun and also specifies that thirty-three years had passed away (3 Ne. 7:23, 26). Therefore, the number of years that had passed was not "thirty-three years if counted inclusively," as Wayment suggests, but simply thirty-three years.

51. Thomas A. Wayment maintains that "we do not know whether the Book of Mormon peoples used a solar or a lunar calendar or exactly how their years correspond to our Julian calendar." See Wayment, "Birth and Death Dates," 393. But all indications in the Book of Mormon, and particularly in 3 Nephi, are that a solar calendar was in place and utilized by the Nephites. The scholarly consensus that Nephite society was a part of greater preclassic Mayan culture suggests that it was almost certainly the Mayan solar year, known as *Haab*, which was counted by the Nephites. The Mayan calendar, and how it relates to other modern calendar systems, is quite well understood.

52. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).

53. See Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 7th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 60–65, 223–25.

54. The designation of Tishri as the first month of the Jewish calendar, placing the Jewish New Year (Rosh HaShannah) at the beginning of autumn, was a development of the late Second Temple Period but was influenced by trends coming out of the Babylonian captivity. The same month was noted as the "seventh month" in the Hebrew Bible (the autumn holidays are noted as occurring in the "seventh month" in Leviticus 23:23–36). During the First Temple Period, the era of the Israelite and Judean monarchies, the first month of the Israelite year was

indeed during the spring month of Aviv (Nisan). But the change to counting the initial autumn month of Tishri as the first month, for strictly practical reasons, had occurred by the time of Hillel and Shammai, a generation prior to Joseph and Mary, and two generations prior to Jesus's birth. This is clear from Mishnah Rosh HaShannah 1:1 (Talmud, tractate Rosh HaShannah) where the positions of both Hillel and Shammai are mentioned in the same passage that states, "On the first of Tishri is the new year for years." This Mishnah, put into writing in the late second century AD, reflects the practical and literary counting of the Jewish calendar in the time of Hillel and Shammai, namely, the late first century BC and into the first century AD. In other words, the first of Tishri was known as Rosh HaShannah by the time Jesus was born, which means that Tishri was regarded as the first month and Adar as the sixth even before the nativity of Jesus.

55. In some commentaries, the phrase "in the sixth month" is explained by claiming that Luke was referring to the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, since Luke 1:36 records the angel Gabriel as telling Mary, "This is the sixth month with her, who was called barren." The phrasing of Luke 1:24, which reports that "Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months," is cited to justify this interpretation. However, the use of the phrase "in the sixth month" in Luke 1:26, in a separate sentence by itself, without any qualifying clause identifying it as Elisabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, is still more satisfactorily explained by the common Jewish usage of the term "sixth month" as a reference to the month of Adar. Actually, a combination of these explanations likely offers the best understanding—that Adar, the sixth Jewish month, also happened to be the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy. This would also mean that Zacharias's ministration in the temple of Herod at Jerusalem, six months earlier, had been during the autumn holiday season during the month of Tishri, which includes Rosh HaShannah (the first day of Tishri), the Days of Awe (second through ninth of Tishri), Yom Kippur (the tenth of Tishri) and Sukkot, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles (fifteenth through twenty-first of Tishri), with Elisabeth having conceived within a few days of Zacharias finishing his priestly assignment. The priestly course of Abijah, to which Zacharias belonged, would have been serving at the temple of Herod by mandate during the fall holidays, as would all other of the Aaronic courses.

56. Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet," in *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Books, 1979), 164. The quotation appears in roughly the same wording in several other Sherlock Holmes adventures.

57. The reference to the "sixth month" in Luke 1:26 can work only in the Jewish monthly count that regards late-winter Adar as the sixth month. It cannot refer to Elul, the late-summer sixth month in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) monthly count, since a nine-month gestation would place birth near the end of March or early in April, a time frame not possible for Jesus's nativity in either 5 BC or in 4 BC, as noted in this study.

58. On the dating of the commencement of Tiberius's fifteenth year, see Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, 6.

59. For the discussion of D&C 20:1, see note 12 above.

60. Latter-day Saints and other modern Christians who may be ambivalent concerning December 25, believing there is no possibility it could be the real birth date of Jesus, or perhaps because of the date's association with a pagan Roman

holiday, may wish to reconsider both the reasoning of fourth-century gentile Christians who chose it as a fixed date for celebrating the Nativity as well as the genuine biblical symbolism that they could have associated with the date.

It is important to remember that Jesus was a Jew. He was born into a Jewish family, in a Jewish town, in a Jewish province, and into a Jewish setting. The date of his birth would have been a Jewish date in the Jewish calendar, a day late in the Jewish month of Kislev. Again, it is entirely possible, indeed essentially probable, as noted previously, that Jesus was born during the eight day Jewish festival of Hanukkah, which began on the twenty-fifth of Kislev. But regardless of what day late in the month of Kislev he was born, the date would not have been thought of in terms of Roman calendar reckoning. No one during Jesus's lifetime would have thought of his birth as occurring in "December." They would have referred to it as occurring in Kislev. And since the Jewish calendar employs lunar months, the run of the days in Kislev did not exactly match the run of days in the Roman month of December. From year to year, the run of days in Kislev would be different when compared to the Roman calendar. That is to say that a Jewish calendar date such as the twenty-fifth of Kislev might fall on the date we know as December 18 one year, but on December 8 the next year. The result is that even if someone at the time of Jesus's birth had noted both the Jewish calendar date and the Roman calendar date, the latter would not have remained constant. If, for example, Jesus had been born on the twenty-seventh of Kislev in 5 BC, and that date happened to be December 16 in 5 BC, it would not have been December 16 in 4 BC or 3 BC or so on. It is not likely that anyone personally associated with Jesus ever expressed his birthday in terms of the Roman calendar.

The early members of the Church of Jesus Christ in the first century AD were overwhelmingly of Jewish origins, and because of the report in Luke the many thousands of his Jewish disciples would have eventually become aware that Jesus had been conceived late in Adar and therefore born late in Kislev. There is no indication that they celebrated Jesus's birthday (although birthday celebration was not improper in Jewish society). During the second century AD, however, the demography of the Church changed dramatically, and in time the vast majority of Christians were gentiles. Jewish and apostolic influences within the Church disappeared. Gentile Christians were largely unfamiliar with the Jewish calendar and how it related to the gospel of Luke. As time passed, they appear to have retained a memory that Jesus had been born early in winter. But no one knew the exact day, and even if they had known the exact Jewish calendar date, it would not have been possible to establish that date precisely in the Roman calendar.

December 25 had been designated in AD 274 by the emperor Aurelian as a Roman holiday called *Sol Invictus*—the Invincible Sun. The winter solstice (shortest day of the year) usually occurred on December 21 or 22, and December 25 was the first day after the solstice that the sun was in the sky for a measurably longer time after the year's shortest day. The *Sol Invictus* festival celebrated the supposed rebirth of the sun, which some Romans, including those who worshiped Mithra, held as a deity. In simple terms, December 25 became the "sun's birthday" in Rome. By the middle of the fourth century, Christianity had become the favored religion of the empire. Roman Christians, recalling the memory that Jesus had been born in early winter, desired to have an early winter date in their calendar on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and simply decided to utilize the *Sol Invictus*

holiday on December 25 for this purpose. It appears that Pope Liberius, the bishop of Rome from 352 to 366, gave official Church approval to the December 25 observance, probably in the year 354. There seem to have been at least three legitimate considerations involved in the decision.

First, by the fourth century AD, the New Testament canon was essentially agreed upon as consisting of the same books in our present New Testament, and the implications of Luke's report about the Annunciation to Mary in the "sixth month" resulted in the commemoration of Jesus's conception in late March (early Christian scholars, unlike gentile Christians in general, still retained a knowledge of the Jewish seasons, and knew that March paralleled the Jewish "sixth month"). This, incidentally, is the origin of the Catholic celebration of the Annunciation each March.

Second, the general recollection of an early winter birth date for Jesus pointed toward late December, nine months following the Annunciation to Mary. By coincidence, the already established festival of *Sol Invictus* occurred in this very period. It was essentially a matter of practicality to shift the focus of the festival from a pagan celebration of the "sun's birthday" to a Christian celebration of the birth of the Son of God. Doing this gave the Church a set calendar day on which to celebrate Jesus's birth, something that they had never had before. Since they knew the birth had occurred early in winter, but did not know the exact date, December 25 was as good a day as any on which to celebrate. And it had the advantage of already being recognized as a holiday. The only difference would be that the day now honored the true and living Son of God rather than the notion of a pagan deity.

The third consideration seems to have been Christian recollection of earlier Jewish traditions that identified the coming of Messiah with the symbol of the rising sun. The book of Malachi foretold the coming of Messiah with this phrase: "unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings" (Malachi 4:2). The Hebrew term in this passage of Malachi reads *shemesh tzedakah*, literally "the righteous sun." The symbolic connection of the rising sun to the coming of Messiah was also mentioned by Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, when he prophesied that John would prepare the way for the Anointed One's arrival "to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:77-79). The word "day-spring" in the King James Version of Luke 1 is simply another term for the rising sun—the Greek term is *anatoli*, literally "sunrise." Jews at the time of the New Testament, including Jesus's disciples, identified Messiah's coming with the symbol of the rising sun. And this symbol seems to have been remembered into the fourth century by gentile Christian bishops, who saw no problem in using the *Sol Invictus* festival, which honored the sun, as a day to commemorate the birth of the "Sun of righteousness."

The early gentile Christian designation of the December 25 holiday as a celebration of the nativity of Jesus seems entirely appropriate when viewed in its historical and symbolic context. Though we cannot fix the birth of Jesus to that very day, there are reasons to think it occurred in the weeks of December that we now call the Christmas season.