

SUKKOT AND THE BIRTH OF YESHUA

How the Feast of Tabernacles Helps us to Pinpoint the Date of Messiah's Birth

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When was Yeshua born? Most people would say December 25th. But the Bible does not record that as a fact. The reason for this exclusion is the emphasis in Hebraic culture on the death of people over their birth. This tradition carries forward today more or less in the practice of the *yahrzeit*, a commemoration of the anniversary of a Jewish person's death.

Thus we have no direct documentation of the precise birthdate of Yeshua because he lived in a Jewish culture that memorialized death instead of birth and the authors of the Gospels wrote their books in that same environment.

So where does December 25th come from? We recall that the early Church was overwhelmingly Jewish in nature. But, over time, as news spread about Yeshua and more and more non-Jewish people believed in him, the practices of other cultures began to influence the Church. One area of influence concerned this issue of emphasizing the birth of a person.

Many ancient cultures practiced astrology, which teaches that the configuration of the stars and planets on the day of one's birth influences the events throughout a person's life. While true believers in Yeshua would readily set aside the practice of astrology, the mere recognition of birthdays has survived and is widely practiced in Western culture today. We normally do not experience a tension over this custom. But it was a source of cultural conflict for the transitional Church. For that generation it became an important issue to establish the date of birth of Yeshua.

The date agreed upon was December 25 primarily as an accommodation of the Roman festival of Saturnalia which celebrated the winter solstice. The birth of Messiah was said to be compatible with Saturnalia's themes of light returning and hope for the upcoming year. Once this step of accommodation was taken, it was easy for succeeding generations to add yule trees from Teutonic nature worship, Santa Claus and his elves, and, of course, our modern day shopping mall madness.

In this light, then, it is important for us to have an accurate understanding of the real story of the birth of Yeshua, because there is a true blessing at the end of this quest. And we can have this understanding, not through myth and legend, but through factual evidence

Evidence regarding the shepherds

The first clue that suggests a problem with the timing involves climate and geography. According to the book of Luke, on the night of Yeshua's birth, shepherds were nearby guarding their flocks. Bethlehem is located on a high ridge between Hebron and Jerusalem. This is a cold region in mid-winter, especially at night, and at times receives snowfall. The hills during that part of the year also provide little growth for forage. The likelihood that shepherds would be tending their flocks near Bethlehem on December 25th is diminished.

On the other hand, it *was* the place to be in late September or early October. This

evidence points to a time that is a couple of months earlier in the year than what is traditionally observed around the world.

Evidence regarding the journey of Joseph and Mary

The second chapter of Luke describes how Joseph and Mary (Heb., Miriam) traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to register for the Roman census because it was Joseph’s ancestral home. The census was required as a means of taxation and it had to be performed before the end of the Roman year, which was December 31st. Taxation in that context offered no incentive to make the payment in an early fashion, and it would be typical for people to put off doing so, which mitigates against a springtime birth.

We also know that all adult males (often accompanied by their families) were required to make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the observance of *Sukkot* (Deut 16:16). So it seems reasonable to conclude that they may have decided to make one 180 mile round trip journey right before *Sukkot*, rather than one for the holy day as required by *Halakah* (Jewish law) and another trip in winter as required by Roman law. From Bethlehem, it would be easy to travel the five miles to Jerusalem for the feast. Because it is estimated that one and one-half million people descended upon Jerusalem for the feast, which would have an impact on surrounding communities, that might explain why there was no room at the inn.

In addition, we know that *Sukkot* is a feast that lasts eight days, with the first and eighth days marking the significant times of the feast (Lev 23:39). This corresponds precisely with the timing of circumcision of boys according to *Halakah* (Gen 17:12). We are told that Yeshua was circumcised on the eighth day (Lk 2:21). So if He was born on the first day of *Sukkot*, He would have been circumcised on the eighth and final day of *Sukkot*. This is not definitive evidence for Yeshua’s birth being on the feast, but the overall account from Scripture is consistent with the nature of the feast and the Law.

Evidence from the Biblical chronology

In order to determine more precisely the timing of Messiah's birth, we have to know the context surrounding the events. That means beginning with an understanding of when the priests served in the Temple. 1 Chr. 24 describes how their service was managed. It tells about how David, in preparation for the building of the Temple, assigned the descendants of the 24 grandsons of Aaron (the original High Priest) to specific times of service.

Their groups were called *mishmarot* in the Heb., which is translated as orders or courses or divisions. Their dates were determined by lot. Twice a year they went to Jerusalem where they served for an entire week, rotating on midday on Shabbat, and then returning home. And in addition, all 24 divisions served during the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot.

Schedule of service by the priests in the Temple

Division	Name	First Service	Second Service
1	Jehoiarib	Tishri 1-7	Adar 29 - Nisan 5
2	Jedaiah	Tishri 8-14	Nisan 6-13
All		Tishri 15-21 (Sukkot)	Nisan 14-21 (Passover)
3	Harim	Tishri 22-28	Nisan 22-28

4	Seorim	Tishri 29 - Cheshvan 5	Nisan 29 - Iyar 5
5	Malchijah	Cheshvan 6-12	Iyar 6-12
6	Mijamin	Cheshvan 13-19	Iyar 13-19
7	Hakkoz	Cheshvan 20-26	Iyar 20-26
8	Abijah	Cheshvan 27 - Kislev 4	Iyar 27 – Sivan 3
All			Sivan 4-6 (Shavuot)
9	Jeshua	Kislev 5-11	Sivan 7-13
10	Shecaniah	Kislev 12-18	Sivan 14-20
11	Eliashib	Kislev 19-25	Sivan 21-27
12	Jakim	Kislev 26 - Tevet 2	Sivan 28 - Tamuz 4
13	Huppah	Tevet 3-9	Tamuz 5-11
14	Jeshebeab	Tevet 10-16	Tamuz 12-18
15	Bilgah	Tevet 17-23	Tamuz 19-25
16	Immer	Tevet 24 - Shvat 1	Tamuz 26 - Av 3
17	Hezir	Shvat 2-8	Av 4-10
18	Happizzez	Shvat 9-15	Av 11-17
19	Pethahiah	Shvat 16-22	Av 18-24
20	Jehezkel	Shvat 23-30	Av 25 - Elul 1
21	Jachin	Adar 1-7	Elul 2-8
22	Gamul	Adar 8-14	Elul 9-15
23	Delaiah	Adar 15-21	Elul 16-22
24	Maaziah	Adar 22-28	Elul 23-29

With this background, then, the story of the birth of Yeshua is found in the Gospel of Luke. He describes in his first chapter how the angel Gabriel appeared to a man named Zacharias while he was conducting his priestly service in the Temple. Zacharias was part of the division of Abijah, which served one week that took place during the end of the month of Cheshvan and continued into the beginning of Kislev (late November/ early December). And they served another week that spanned the end of Iyar and the first part of Sivan, which then piggybacked with a short time of serving for Shavuot. So this second time of service would correspond to May/June.

Luke chapter 1 tells us that Zacharias was going about his business as he had been trained to do. They drew lots to see who would have specific responsibilities. And Zacharias was given the privilege of tending to the incense that burned in the Temple. We know that incense was symbolic of prayers rising up to God. And the passage tells us that the people were outside praying at that very moment. Moreover Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth had been praying for a child.

So while he was doing this, he receives his answer. The angel Gabriel appears, standing to the right of the altar of incense. And he tells Zacharias that his prayers had been heard, and his wife would bear a son named Yochanan (John, meaning “the Lord is Gracious”). Gabriel declares in Luke 1:17

"It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This proclamation is the fulfillment of God’s promise in Malachi 4:5 that He would send Elijah before the day of the Lord, a prophecy that in particular became incorporated into the

observance of Passover.

Now if this was Zecharias' time for service in the spring, he would have returned to his home during the second week of Sivan. Shortly thereafter Elizabeth became pregnant just as Gabriel had foretold. This would be late in the month of Sivan, which is the equivalent of mid to late June.

The story then moves ahead until Elizabeth is in her sixth month of pregnancy. Beginning in Luke 1:26, we are told that Gabriel appeared once again, this time in the city of Nazareth to Elizabeth's relative Mary. She received the news from Gabriel that she was about to conceive, through the miracle of the Holy Spirit, and give birth to the Messiah. So Mary immediately left to go visit Elizabeth. By the time Mary reached the home of Zacharias and Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah, the Holy Spirit would have come upon her and she would have conceived Yeshua. This would be late in the month of Kislev, right around the time of Hanukkah, corresponding to the month of December.

Evidence from Hanukkah and the dedications of the Second Temple

Hanukkah and Sukkot are separated by 280 days on the Hebrew calendar, which matches exactly the normal gestation period for human babies. Are there any additional clues that point to the conception of Yeshua at Hanukkah? The word *hanukkah* is generally translated as "dedication," but literally means "to initiate or to begin." This terminology is a key to understanding the implications of the historical events associated with the holiday.

The apocryphal book 1 Maccabees records that nearly two centuries before the birth of Yeshua, the temple and the altar was defiled by the Syrian Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes. Then, after the altar was rebuilt by the victorious Maccabees, the sacrifices on the altar resumed and the dedication of the temple took place on the 25th day of Kislev (1 Macc 4:52). The same verse also tells us that the dedication and resumption of sacrifice took place first thing in the morning. So that means the temple was physically made ready the day before, on the 24th of the month. In other words, the work that made this new life of worship possible, took place on that day.

There are no coincidences in God's way of doing things. Everything in His plan of redemption is purposeful and ordered in every detail. So we should not be surprised to see a foreshadowing of this occurrence previously recorded in His inspired written Word.

The book of Ezra describes how 50,000 Jewish people returned from Babylonian exile in 538 B.C. and began rebuilding the temple, but they abandoned the task when they became discouraged by adversaries. 18 years after the return, God raised up the prophet Haggai to exhort the people to start building again and to make a greater commitment to worshiping God in purity. So the people resumed their work, and it was not long before they finished working on the foundation of the temple. We are then told in Haggai 2:18 that the foundation of the second temple was completed on the 24th day of the month of Kislev, the same date on the calendar three and one-half centuries later when the Maccabees would finish working on the restoration of that same temple for worship once again.

This parallel is consistent with conception of Yeshua. For just as the building where the worship of God was made ready for worship on the same date on the calendar, Yeshua was also "made ready" or conceived on that date, so that he might later receive worship that was rightly His as God incarnate. That reality is hinted at in the verses that followed in the second chapter of Haggai. He asks rhetorically:

"Is the seed still in the barn? Even including the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the

olive tree, it has not borne fruit. Yet from this day on I will bless you” (v. 19).

In the immediate context, the prophet was alluding to the state of the temple at that moment. Like a seed in a barn that not yet grown into a plant that produces fruit, the foundation was done, but the growth of the entire building was incomplete. Yet, even though they couldn’t see the final product, they already had the promise of a future blessing when the temple would be finished.

In the same way, the conception of the Messiah was only an initial action or beginning. You couldn’t see the final product, for it would be nine months before He would appear as a man, yet fully divine, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit. And then He would mature, producing the sweetest fruit and the greatest blessing of all—a new beginning that is everlasting life for all who believe in Him.

Then, wanting to emphasize the tremendous significance of this occurrence, God declared “a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month. . .I am going to shake the heavens and the earth” (vv. 20-21). That describes an act without parallel. God dwelling on this earth among us is an earth-shattering act, just as it will be when He returns in the midst of our world in great conflict.

But the point is that Haggai has given us a glimpse at what God was doing in this world. The establishment of the building where people worshiped Him was done in such a way that it perfectly foreshadowed the way that God would come and walk this earth, right down to the very details of the timing of His plan. The conception of Yeshua at the time of *Hanukkah* is consistent in purpose and the historical record of the two dedications of the second temple. As a result, this reality gives further confirmation that Yeshua was born nine months later at the time of *Sukkot*.

Evidence from the birth of John the Baptist

Returning to the chronology in the first chapter of Luke, Elizabeth’s pregnancy began just under six months prior to Mary. Luke 1:56 indicates that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months before returning home to Nazareth. Then Elizabeth gave birth to John. If we count forward 280 days from John’s conception in late Sivan, it brings us to the middle of the month of Nisan, which corresponds to the month of April. And that would be during the time of year when Passover occurs.

As we recall, the priests had two annual times of service for their individual division. Luke 1 does not stipulate which one that it was. So it is possible that the beginning point of the timeline in Luke was during Zecharias’ springtime service, not in the fall. In that case, you can still do all the calculations and would end up with a birth date for Yeshua in the middle of the month of Nisan, perhaps on the 15th, which would correspond to Passover.

This presents two problems, however. Yeshua does fulfill the role of the Passover lamb. But Passover is about the death of the lambs, not their birth. In fact, the lambs had to be a year old and could have been born in the late winter or early spring of the previous year.

Moreover, linking Yeshua’s birth to Passover would create a problem for the association of the prophet Elijah with that holy day. According to Malachi 4:5, the prophet Elijah would be sent to herald the coming of the Messiah. Dating back into antiquity, Jews incorporated this Messianic anticipation into the Passover Seder by setting a place for Elijah and opening a door while calling out “Tonight? Is it tonight that you are coming?” Yeshua was very clear that John fulfilled the role of Elijah as the forerunner of the Messiah (Mat 11:14). Thus the birth of John the Baptist at the time of Passover preserves the historical Elijah connection to that feast. But moving the birth date of John six months to the time of *Sukkot* would break this connection. And it would associate John

with a feast that has no connection to Elijah.

Thus the order of events in Luke 1 fits perfectly with the nature of both Passover and *Sukkot* and it confirms that the overall chronology begins with the priestly service of Zacharias in the fall, not the spring. Based on the complete evidence given to us in Scripture, if we count forward 280 days from Yeshua’s conception in late Kislev, it brings us to the middle of the month of Tishri, right at the time of *Sukkot*. This corresponds to late September/early October. That is when Mary gave birth to Yeshua after she had traveled to the town of Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-7).

So while there is some flexibility of a day or two here and there, clearly the birth of Yeshua was in the early fall around the time of *Sukkot*, not two months later in the dead of winter, which we traditionally observe on December 25th.

The complete chronology in the book of Luke

Hebrew month	Modern month	Event
Late Iyar to early Sivan	May/June	The angel Gabriel appears to Zacharias, a priest in the 8th division of priests—Abijah (Lk 1:11)
Mid Sivan	June	Zacharias returns home (1:23)
Mid to late Sivan	June	Elizabeth conceives Yochanan—John the Baptist (1:24)
Late Kislev	December	Mary conceives Yeshua (1:31) and then goes to visit Elizabeth who is in her sixth month of pregnancy (1:36-39)
Mid Nisan	March/April	Elizabeth gives birth to John after a 280 day full term (1:57)
Mid Tishri	Sept./October	Mary gives birth to Yeshua after a 280 day full term (2:6,7)

This timeline reinforces the primary theme of *Sukkot*—dwelling with God. In the midst of the festive nature of this holiday, it is important to keep in mind its original intent – the people were to be reminded of the importance of dwelling with God.

In ancient times *Sukkot* was a holiday that portrayed the God of Israel as One who seeks to fellowship with His people. To those who were looking for the fulfillment of God's promises, it would have not been a surprise to see these truths revealed during the observance of *Sukkot*.

For that very reason He sent Messiah to live among us. The Hebrew Scriptures foretold his coming, including Isaiah’s prophecy (7:14) that a son born to a virgin would be called *Immanuel*, meaning “God with us.” What greater fulfillment of God's desire to have a close relationship with mankind than for Him to dwell with us and to begin that time of dwelling on the actual feast day that had the theme of God dwelling with humanity—the Feast of Tabernacles.

Why is this important?

We need to be historically accurate

It’s not just about getting the date right in the same way that we all like to have our own birthdays and anniversaries correctly acknowledged. It’s about having a credible testimony. Many people think of Christianity as being based on myths and legends. And Christmas, with all its legendary character, has become a distraction that distorts and diverts people from the original

factual story.

But there is a reality to the Messianic faith. It is based on real historical events so that our salvation and our eternal hope can be much more than mere wishful thinking.

Yeshua's birth during *Sukkot* helps us to understand God's power and control over the world

The Hebrew word *moed*, translated as feast, literally means “an appointed time.” So it has a sense of someone with authority determining when an event will take place. It's like having an appointment with a doctor. You don't show up whenever you want to, it's when the doctor says you should be there. Such is the nature of the feasts. God set fixed times of the year when specific feasts were to be observed.

Should it be any different when it comes to determining when His great redemptive plan for humanity would be carried out? And wouldn't it make sense that God, who is the Master of creative authority, would cause these things to coincide with the feasts that symbolize them? We know that to be true with the Passover and the sacrificial death of Messiah. And the same is true for *Sukkot* and the birth of Messiah.

God's guiding hand is evident throughout the process of Yeshua's birth. 1 Chronicles 6:48 tells us: “The Levites were appointed for all the service of the tabernacle of the house of God.” The manner in which they were appointed is worthy of note. Lots were cast to determine the order of priestly service. The Hebrew word for lot is *goral*, which were small pebbles (the word comes into English as gravel). And they were cast in some manner to make decisions that were free from human bias. So for example the High Priest on Yom Kippur would cast lots to select the sacrificial goat and the scapegoat.

The same method applied to the selection of priestly duties. You can easily see how some weeks of the year would be preferred over others. You have better and worse times to travel to Jerusalem because of weather. If you served right before or right after all the priests had to be there anyway for the three pilgrimage feasts, you had one less time that you needed to make the journey. So by using lots, it took away the potential for manipulation that is common in social arrangements like this.

This, then, provided the means for God to craft His ultimate plan that went far beyond a simple ordering of priests for service. He revealed His will for the order of the priests and His will for the life of one priest in particular—Zacharias so that the Messiah could be born at the perfectly appointed time. And that was at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles.

***Sukkot* is filled with symbolic imagery of God dwelling with humanity.**

- He dwelled with man and woman in innocence in the Garden of Eden.
- He dwelled temporarily with the Israelites in the wilderness.
- And we have the promise of dwelling with Him in an everlasting manner in Paradise.

But that is only because He came to this earth to dwell among us and to die as an atonement for our sins, thus paying the price for our heavenly promise. So He made it happen as a *moed*—the appointed time. Scripture tells us:

“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law.” (Gal. 4:4)

The message of *Sukkot* is not just a symbolic depiction of our great hope for eternity, it is

also a declaration that God is always in control. With confidence we can conclude that if God could exercise His power long ago by bringing about His plan in the midst of the complex matters of that day, He will complete His work in our world and in our lives today.