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Was Jesus Born on Dec. 25?

Most people assume Jesus was born on Dec. 25. After all, that's the date celebrated throughout the world as the day of His birth. A careful analysis of Scripture, however, clearly indicates that Dec. 25 is an unlikely date for Christ's birth. Here are two primary reasons:

First, we know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at night at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:7-8). However, shepherds did not remain in the fields of Judea at night during December due to lack of forage and the bad weather. According to *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" (p. 309).

Similarly, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* says this passage argues "against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted" shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.

Second, Jesus' parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census (Luke 2:1-4). The Romans would have known better than to have taken such a census in the dead of winter, when temperatures often dropped below freezing and roads were in poor condition for traveling. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

So if Jesus Christ was not born on Dec. 25, does the Bible indicate when He was born? The biblical accounts point to the autumn of the year (in the northern hemisphere) as the most likely time of Jesus' birth, based on details of the conception and birth of John the Baptist.

Since Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived (Luke 1:24-36), we can determine the approximate time of year Jesus was born if we know when John was born. John's father, Zacharias, was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple during the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 in that year (*The Companion Bible*, 1974, Appendix 179, p. 200).

It was during this time of temple service that Zacharias learned that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child (Luke 1:8-13). After he completed his service and traveled home, Elizabeth conceived (verses 23-24). Assuming John's conception took place near the end of June, adding nine months brings us to the end of March as the most likely time for John's birth. Adding another six months (the difference in ages between John and Jesus) brings us to the end of September as the likely time of Jesus' birth.

Although it is difficult to determine the first time anyone celebrated Dec. 25 as Christmas, historians are in general agreement that it was sometime during the fourth century.

This is an amazingly late date. Christmas was not observed in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, until about 300 years after Christ's death. Its origins cannot be traced back to either the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians.