
Too Late for Christmas

by: Ronald L. Dart

If you're planning on celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25th., well I hate to be the one to tell you this but, you're about three months late. Yes, really. What's funny about it is that the whole story is right there in the biblical account of the birth of Jesus, right in your Bible, but nobody pays much mind to it. You can read it, for example in Luke 1 vs. 26. "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth. To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgins name was Mary. "

And what follows is the enunciation of the birth of Jesus, and you've probably heard it in a hundred little Christmas plays, that is, if you've lived long enough. But did you notice the expression in there? The "sixth month." Did you ever wonder about that? It was in the sixth month that the angel Gabriel came to Mary and announced the birth of Jesus. Well, sixth month of what? Well if it's the sixth month on your calendar, that would put the conception of Jesus in June and His birth in, well, nine months later, March. On the other hand, if it's the Hebrew calendar, well the sixth month in the Hebrew calendar would be September and that would place Jesus being born in June. So, what's with this December 25th business? How on earth did we get the birth of Jesus in December? Well as it happens, it isn't the sixth month of the Hebrew calendar. It isn't the sixth month of our calendar. It's the sixth month of something entirely different.

For example, let's start reading in Luke 1 vs. 5. "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." Now the Old Testament name for Abia is Abijah and he is talking about the course of Abijah, but most people who read the Bible, unless they've been pretty serious in reading the Old Testament won't have a clue what that's all about. The priesthood was divided into courses or divisions, shall we say, to parcel out the duties in the temple throughout the year, and some priests had the duty this week and some priests had the duty another week. They were divided into courses. All the courses served in the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles because, with all the work going on, they needed everybody. But beginning the week after the Feast of Tabernacles, the first course of the priesthood went to work and worked for seven days. Each of them worked for one week beginning on the Sabbath day.

Now the course of Abia was the eighth course and would have been on duty only twice a year. The times are inviolable. They are specified by law, so Zacharias and the rest of the course of Abijah would have been serving only during two weeks of the year; one in early December and

the other in mid-June. Luke starts this whole story with a firm calendar reference. The only possible divergence in it would be between one of two very closely defined times during the year, one in mid-June and the other in early December.

The account continues stating "they were both righteous before God, Zacharias and Elizabeth. They walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. They had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years" (Verses 6-7.) They are really old people and they are not thinking about babies at this time. "Now it came to pass that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course" (Vs. 8.), Luke is nailing down the fact that this is a certain time of year, early December or mid-June. "According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. The whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense. And there appeared to him when he was in there all by himself, an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And Zacharias, because he was supposed to be the only person in that place, when he laid eyes on the angel he was frightened to death. And the angel said, don't be afraid, your prayer is heard, and your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son and you shall call his name John" (Verses 9-13).

That's interesting. Is this an old man still praying for a child? You know what I suspect has happened here is that the prayer that Zacharias and Elizabeth had made years ago, had been heard, but that was not the time. This is the time.

He says, you will call his name John and this child is going to be the precursor of the Messiah, the one that you and I come to know as the famous John the Baptist. "Now you will have joy and gladness, the angel said. Many shall rejoice at his birth, for He is going to be great in the sight of the Lord, and he'll neither drink wine nor strong drink. He shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God" (Verses 14-16).

Then he makes this enigmatic statement, he said, "he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just. To make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Vs. 17). Now Zacharias seems to have understood this reference even though it's pretty obscure to us. It's a reference to Malachi, where God said He would "send Elijah the prophet before the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5). His job would be to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

Now there's no indication that John had any idea that there would be two comings of the Messiah. Most people were expecting the Messiah about this time due to Daniels prophecy, and of course due to the fact that they were under oppression and wanted relief from Rome and only a Messiah, the deliverer from God, could get them out of their situation, so there was a lot of Messianic fever at the time and now comes a prophecy of this man that says here comes your son who is going to prepare the way before the Messiah.

"Zacharias said to the angel, well, how am I going to know this, I am an old man and my wife is well stricken in years" (Luke 1:18). It's almost as though the angel says, what do you mean how are you going to know this? "I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God and I am sent to speak

to you and to show you these things. And behold, because you're not willing to believe my words, you're going to be dumb and not able to speak until the day they've been performed. So, they will be fulfilled he said in their season" (Verses 19-20.)

"Well the people waited for Zacharias. And they really marveled that he waited such a long time in the temple. And when he came out, he couldn't speak to people and they realized that he had seen a vision in there for he gestured to them and remained speechless. Well as soon as the days of his administration were accomplished, he departed and went to his own house. And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived and hid herself five months saying thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein, He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men (Verses 21-25.)

In those days for a woman not to have children was considered by other people a reproach from God. You know, to be blessed is to have lots of children and if you didn't have the children you weren't blessed. And Elizabeth was full of this thing, so excited by the whole thing, so uplifted by it that she hid herself away and went into seclusion for five months. "And in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David and the virgins name was Mary" (Verses 26-27.)

Now you see we've caught up with where we were before. The sixth month, when that angel came to Mary to announce that she was to become pregnant with the son of God, was the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Now when we realize that Elizabeth's pregnancy started either in December or June, then by going six months ahead in both cases, you kind of run a full circle on that, and in that case, there are only two months in which Jesus might have been conceived, late December or late June.

Now if you will do your math on that and run nine months ahead from both of them then you realize that there are only two possible months in which Jesus might have been born, September or March, and of course that leaves us a long way from December. The odds are and all the indications in the Bible are that September would be the month in which Jesus was born. Which means that if you're celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th, you're three months too late.

So here we sit in December with the whole Christian world celebrating the birth of Jesus three months late or three months early. How in the world did this happen?

You know there's no good reason why Luke included those references, the course of Abijah, and the sixth month and the fifth month and all those things unless it was to give a seasonal reference to the things that were happening. When we consider that there's no date specified in the Bible for the birth of Jesus. Nor are there any instructions to observe His birth. Nor any example in the Bible that it was observed. But you know, if the early church had been following the customs that we observe today you would surely find some reference to Christmas somewhere in the Bible, but you don't. You do find Paul mentioning that he is in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost. You do find Luke making reference to the fact that we had to get away from here early sailing because the fast, that is, the Day of Atonement, was already passed (Acts 27:9.)

There are repeated references in the book of Acts to these holy days, but nothing for either Christmas or Easter (Acts 2;1, 18:20-21, 20:16, 1 Cor. 16:8, 5:7-8, 11:23-25.)

Of course, everyone should know by now that Christmas is a fourth century invention and does not have any basis in the Bible at all. But the nativity of Jesus is real, it could be the most important event in the entire Bible. I know we Christians think the death of Christ and His resurrection is critical, but if He isn't born, if He doesn't come, then none of that ever takes place. You know what's funny about this is that in spite of Christmas the nativity of Jesus is just not very well understood. Let me see if I can explain to you what I mean by that.

In Luke's first chapter in verse 26 we read this. "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. The angel came in unto her and said, Hail, you who are highly favored, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. And when she saw this angel, she was very troubled at his saying and cast in her mind, what kind of a salutation this was." What do you mean the Lord is with me? What do you mean, I am blessed among women? "And the angel said, Don't be afraid. You've found favor with God and behold, you shall conceive in your womb and bring forth a son and shall call His name Jesus," which basically means savior. "He shall be great. He shall be called the son of the highest. And the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there shall be no end" (Verses 26-33.) Now it's hard to imagine what all this meant to Mary. I gather though, two or three things come to mind here. She seems to be a courageous woman, because while she is troubled by what the angel has said, she isn't at all as frightened, it seems to me as, Zacharias was, and plainly she understood the significance of what this angel said. He was to be the son of the highest. He was to have the throne of His father David. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever. All of this spelled one word for Mary, Messiah. Because in truth, these are the things that the Messiah was expected to do, and as I said earlier, messianic fever was rampant throughout Judea at this time. The people were expecting the Messiah and Mary suddenly finds herself honored with it.

There's one thing in this statement that most people, at that time, I don't think really understood was, what the Messiah was to do. Because it says, "of His Kingdom, there shall be no end" (Vs. 33.). Then Mary said to the angel, "how shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" She didn't anticipate the Messiah being literally the son of God. All the expectations were that He would be a descendant of David in the normal manner of course, and she did know that her husband, Joseph was in David's lineage as she was. "And the angel said to her, the Holy Spirit shall come upon you. The power of the highest shall overshadow you and therefore that holy thing that shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God" (Verses 34-35.)

"Behold, your cousin Elizabeth, she has conceived a son in her old age and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. With God, nothing shall be called impossible. And Mary apparently without much thought said, Behold, the handmaid of the Lord be it unto me according to your word. And the angel departed from her" (Verses 37-38.)

Nine months passed, and it takes us to Luke the second chapter. "It came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed." I bet you've

heard that several times read in the Christmas season. Actually, this was some kind of census that Caesar Augustus was taken. "The taxing was first made when Syrenius was governor of Syria. Everyone went to be taxed everyone to his own city" (Verses 2-3.) We don't know very much about this taxing. Apparently, there was some wide spread period of time in which one could actually get this done. Otherwise, there would have been an enormous disruption of the whole economy of the whole region. If everyone had to quit work at once and charge back to his own town. Rather I gather that they went back at a time when it was convenient. Well for Joseph the most convenient time possible would be the Feast of Tabernacles, or possibly Passover if he went down to observe those festivals. Well, everyone went to be taxed to his own city. "And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, into the city of David, which is called Bethlehem. Because he was of the house and lineage of David. He went there to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife who was great with child. And so, it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the Inn" (Verses 4-7.) And this of course forms the basis for all the crèche (Nativity) scenes that you will see around in different places through this season of the year. With Mary, and Joseph and a little baby in a manger and sheep around and cattle around, and maybe shepherds standing there with shepherd's crooks in their hands worshipping the little baby Jesus.

Now Bethlehem is six or seven miles from Jerusalem and since this was almost certainly at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, this would account for the incredibly crowded conditions in Jerusalem. Jerusalem at this time was invaded by a million campers, probably a million and a half, maybe two million by some estimates. So, finding accommodation would be very difficult, and who wants to be under a tent when a child is being born? The census alone would really not account for the kind of crowd that would crowd out Bethlehem, as well as Jerusalem.

Well the baby is born. It is laid in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, on straw. It's a beautiful thought and a beautiful scene. Now, I thought about that a little bit and I realized that at this time, you read in different places that there is rejoicing in heaven, for example, over one sinner that repents (Luke 15:10.) But can you imagine the kind of rejoicing that was going on in heaven among the angels at the time when the son of God was born? I mean this is the pivotal event in all of creation. This is what the whole thing is all about. This is what we are driving at. This is the savior of all things. I can imagine there was a lot of back slapping and rejoicing and happiness among the angels. I can see some of them getting together and saying, look, we are going to burst if we don't tell somebody about this. So, they get permission to go and announce the birth on earth to somebody, but to whom? Well, God didn't allow them to go to the King. He didn't bother telling him at all. He found out about it second hand from the wise men that came from the East, asking where this event is, and he said "What?" It wasn't to the high priest. In fact, they didn't announce it to anyone in the religious or political establishment in Jerusalem at all.

Do you know what they did? They actually looked to the bottom rung of the social order of the time, sheep herders. They said, let's go tell these sheep herders, who are camped out in the field tonight. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Vs. 8.) Now everybody knows they would not have been overnighting in

the field in December, it's too cold. This was September and their houses were probably full of pilgrims anyhow and they were just as happy to be in the field.

You know of all the people in this story, these are the guys I envy. Oh yeah. They were out there sitting around the campfire telling stories. Talking about God. Maybe looking forward to the Messiah because these were religious men. I know they were religious men because they understood the message of the angel. If they had not been religious, if they had not been people who went to synagogue and heard the scriptures read, the things that the angels told them wouldn't have meant much of anything. They might, that evening, have been talking about the expected Messiah. Do you think He will come? Or do you think He won't? And all of a sudden out of nowhere, one minute it's dark and nothing is happening and all of a sudden there's this man standing in front of them. And a brilliance, a light shining around about them out of the heavens that made them all squint and cover their eyes. The whole experience happening as it did just in an instant must have scared them half to death.

"And the angel said, Hey, don't be afraid. I am bringing you the best news possible. I am bringing good tidings of great joy and it's to all people (Vs. 10.) No, no, it's not just to the Jews, not just to the Hebrews. It's to everybody. "For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Vs. 11.) Now I've got to assume this message meant something to these Shepherds, a savior, what's that? They were under Roman domination and they would have understood immediately about a savior of the house of David, born in the city of David. Well this is Messianic, and He is Christ, or He is the Messiah, the Lord. "This shall be a sign to you. You shall find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (Vs. 12.) Not in a palace, not with a crown, not in velvet, not in silks, in a manger.

"And all of a sudden there was with the angel a huge multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men" (Verses 13-14.) And that's why I envy the shepherds. I have heard some great choirs in my time, but I would surely have loved to have heard this one sing that song on that night. "It came to pass that when the angels left them, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem, let's go right now and let's see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they came with haste and they found" something (Verses 15-16.). What did they find?

Then these shepherds came barging into the stable, what did they find? They found Mary, they found Joseph, and they found a baby. Now this is the great marvel of this whole thing. Jesus did not drop down out of the sky full grown. He didn't suddenly appear from nowhere one day as a 30-year-old man and begin His ministry. He was not some kind of physical manifestation of a spirit being materialized. Jesus was flesh. He was helpless. He was totally dependent on His mother and Joseph. If they had gone off and left Him, He would have died. He had to be nursed at His mother's breast, and He had to be changed when He dirtied himself. I hope that doesn't offend you. Because the fact is, that's the point of this whole story.

What has happened here? Well John, in his Gospel, doesn't go through the particular descriptions that Luke does, he doesn't need to because the book of Luke by that time was out. But John tells us what happened. In his first chapter in verse 1, he says "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with

God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life and the life were the light of men (John 1:1-4.) "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God." Now this statement, "He was with God and was God" is a little foreign normally to our way of thinking because we tend to think that things are either one thing or the other. But in this case, the "Word" was God and also with God at the same time.

But then in verse 14 of his first chapter, John says this. "And the Word was made flesh, and tabernacle among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." Now John says that in the process of the Holy Spirit coming up on Mary and begetting Jesus in her womb, the Word actually became flesh. What's interesting is that it became flesh at the time of conception, for from that time forward that was the Word of God that Mary carried in her womb. What's fascinating is that some authorities suggest that at that moment, that is the moment of conception, was the moment of incarnation and that moment of incarnation took place in late December. But the birth of Jesus didn't take place for a long time after that. And in fact, it probably took place right about the time of the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles. And the expression of John, "the Word became flesh and tabernacle among us" ties it symbolically to the Feast of Tabernacles as well. So, you can see what I mean when I say if you're observing the birth of Jesus on December 25th. You're running about three months late.

It's funny that before the first century was out there were people who were already saying that Jesus had not come in the flesh. No, no, Jesus was a spirit. He was not really flesh. He didn't really die, because since He was God He could not die. John, in his Epistle, 1 John 4 verse 1 says this, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God. Hereby you know the spirit of God, every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. Every spirit that doesn't confess this is not of God" (Verses 1-3.) So, John right off the bat slams down his hand and says, No. Jesus came in the flesh, anyone who denies that is the spirit of anti-Christ. Why is this so important?

Well, the tragedy of Christmas is that the message of the coming of God in the flesh to tabernacle with men is totally lost in all the pagan trappings and commercialism of the season. What does it mean to have a rescuer (savior, deliverer) who knows exactly what it is like to be human? Who knows what it is like to suffer pain and humiliation, to suffer abandonment and even death. Because unless we can understand, I mean really understand the nativity of Jesus, we cannot grasp the reality of His death or of His resurrection. Maybe we ought to rethink this whole Christmas thing. Maybe we really do need to get the birth of Jesus, the birth of our Savior away from and out of all the trappings of Christmas. Maybe we ought to move it back to where it really took place in the autumn when Jesus became flesh to suffer and to die. And without a resurrection He would have been lost forever. And if He had been lost, so would we.

No, we don't want to lose sight of the birth of Jesus. It is more important to us I think than many of us realize. We weren't born to lose, we were Born to Win.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings

of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you already know that the priesthood was divided into courses, or is Mr. Dart's teaching the first time you have heard of it?
2. Do you agree that there is a lot that one will miss in the New Testament if one doesn't study the Old Testament?
3. Why do you believe that the Bible never states exactly when Christ was born?
4. Why does most of Christianity ignore the Holy Days that are mentioned in the Bible?
5. What is so appealing about Christmas especially when it is not in the Bible?
6. Why is it that many don't believe that Jesus was born on December 25th, but yet they still observe Christmas?
7. Why do you think God decided to announce the Messiah's birth to shepherds?
8. What are your thoughts about the fact that Jesus was born like every other human being instead of being created full grown?
9. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's idea that Jesus was probably born during the Feast of Tabernacles?
10. If Christmas is all about the birth of Jesus, then why do non-Christians keep it?