



# "Christmas..."

## Was Jesus really born on December 25th?



**W**as Jesus (Yeshua) really born on December 25th, as Western Christian Tradition maintains, or does the careful study of Scripture allow us to infer a different time for His (first) advent here on earth? Two cases will be presented below: one case for a Tishri (Sukkot) birth, and the other for the traditional late December date.

### Background: "Courses" of Temple Service

As I hope to make clear, the crux of the arguments both for and against the late December dating of the birth of Yeshua depend upon the date assigned to the "course of Abijah" (i.e., Aviyah) and the precise time that Zechariah -- John the Baptist's father -- was in the Temple when he was visited by the angel Gabriel. But what is the "course of Aviyah" and why is it important?

King David (1 Chr. 28:11-13) divided the sons of Aaron into 24 "courses" or groups (1 Chr. 24:1-4) to create an orderly schedule by which the Temple of the Lord could be staffed for the year. Once these courses were established, lots were drawn to determine the sequence each group would serve in the Temple (1 Chr. 24: 7-19). Each of the 24 courses of priests would begin and end their service on the Sabbath for a tour of duty of one week (2 Chr. 23:8, 1 Chr. 9:25).

Recall that Jewish calendar begins in the spring (i.e., Nisan 1), so the first course of priests would serve for seven days and the following week the second course would serve. The third week would mark the festival of Passover when all priests would be present for service, so the schedule would be suspended until the following week when the third course of priests would serve. The weekly arrangement would then resume until the holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost) when the schedule was suspended again for the ninth week. By the tenth week the eighth course (of Aviyah) would be called for Temple service and the courses would continue without further interruption until the 24th course was completed (see table below). Note that after the 24th course served, the first half of the calendar would be complete and the schedule would then reset for the second half of the year. By means of this arrangement each group of priests would serve in the Temple twice per year (in addition to the three major festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot).



### The Priestly Courses:

Nisan (1st month; 30 days)		
course	name	week*
1	Yehoyariv (יהויריב)	1 / 52
2	Yedayah (ידעיה)	2
-	Passover (all priests)	3
3	Charim (חרם)	4
Iyyar (2nd month; 29 days)		
4	Seorim (שערים)	5
5	Malkiyah (מלכיה)	6
6	Miyamin (מימין)	7
7	Hakkotz (הקוצץ)	8
Sivan (3rd month; 30 days)		
-	Shavuot (all priests)	9
8	Aviyah (אביה)	10
9	Yeshua (ישוע)	11
10	Shekhanyahu (שכניהו)	12
Tammuz (4th month; 29 days)		
11	Elyashiv (אלישיב)	13
12	Yakim (יקים)	14
13	Chuppah (חפה)	15
14	Yeshevav (ישבאב)	16
Av (5th month; 30 days)		
15	Bilgah (בלגה)	17
16	Immer (אמר)	18
17	Chezir (חזיר)	19
18	Hapitzetz (הפצץ)	20
Elul (6th month; 29 days)		
19	Petachyah (פתחיה)	21
20	Yechezkel (יחזקאל)	22
21	Yachin (יכין)	23
22	Gamul (גמול)	24
23	Delayahu (דליהו)	25
24	Ma'azyahu (מעזיהו)	26

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Tishri (7th month; 30 days)		
course	name	week*
1	Yehoyariv (יהויריב)	27
2	Yedayah (ידעיה)	28
-	Sukkot (all priests)	29
3	Charim (חרם)	30
Cheshvan (8th month; 29 days)		
4	Seorim (שערים)	31
5	Malkiyah (מלכיה)	32
6	Miyamin (מימין)	33
7	Hakkotz (הקוצץ)	34
Kislev (9th month; 30 days*)		
8	Aviyah (אביה)	35
9	Yeshua (ישוע)	36
10	Shekhanyahu (שכניהו)	37
11	Elyashiv (אלישיב)	38
Tevet (10th month; 29 days)		
12	Yakim (יקים)	39
13	Chuppah (חפה)	40
14	Yeshevav (ישבאב)	41
15	Bilgah (בלגה)	42
Shevat (11th month; 30 days)		
16	Immer (אמר)	43
17	Chezir (חזיר)	44
18	Hapitzetz (הפצץ)	45
19	Petachyah (פתחיה)	46
Adar (12th month; 29 days)*		
20	Yechezkel (יחזקאל)	47
21	Yachin (יכין)	48
22	Gamul (גמול)	49
23	Delayahu (דליהו)	50
24	Ma'azyahu (מעזיהו)	51

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The course of Aviyah mentioned in Luke 1:5 places Zechariah's service in the Temple as beginning on the second Sabbath of the month of Sivan (week 10). His son John was then conceived sometime after this (Luke 1:23-4), probably after the third or fourth Sabbath of the month of Sivan (week 12). Adding 40 weeks to this (the normal time of human gestation) John would have been born sometime in the month of Nisan, perhaps around the time of Passover. Yeshua was conceived six months after John was conceived (Luke 1:24-27, 36), so adding six months (or 24 weeks) to end of Sivan implies the conception would have occurred near the time of Chanukah. Adding 40 weeks to this (the normal time of human gestation), Yeshua would have been born sometime in the month of Tishri, the season of Sukkot.



## Argument for a Tishri (Sukkot) Birth

There are several reasons to believe that Yeshua was born during the fall, in particular, during the festival of Sukkot (“Tabernacles”). Among the reasons cited are as follows:

1. Yeshua’s cousin, John the Baptist, was conceived in mid Sivan (May/June) and born 40 weeks later on Nisan 15, the Passover, *because*:
  - a. John’s father (Zechariah) was a Levite who was assigned to serve in the Temple during the course of “Aviyah,” the 8th course of the year (Luke 1:5, 1 Chr. 24:10).
  - b. Since the cycle of service began on the first Shabbat of Nisan but both Passover and Shavuot require all priestly courses to serve, the actual time the 8th course would serve would be during the 10th week of the year. This places Zechariah’s service in the Temple as beginning on the second Sabbath of the month of Sivan.
  - c. It is written that John was conceived shortly after this tour of duty (Luke 1:23-4). Therefore, John the Baptist was probably conceived shortly after the third Sabbath of the month of Sivan (i.e., late Sivan).
  - d. Therefore John the Baptist was born around Passover (Nisan 15). (Recall that Yeshua said that John the Baptist was a type of Elijah the prophet (Matt 17:10-13, cp. Luke 1:17). Even today it is customary for Jews to set out a special cup of wine during the Passover Seder meal in anticipation of the arrival of Elijah for the festival.)
2. Yeshua was conceived in late Kislev (Nov/Dec) and born 40 weeks later during Sukkot (“Tabernacles”), *because*:
  - a. Yeshua was conceived six months after John (Luke 1:24-27, 36). Note that the “sixth” month refers to Elizabeth’s pregnancy, *not* the month of Elul (cp. Luke 1:36).
  - b. Six months added to late Sivan is late Kislev, which is the time of the conception of Yeshua (note that the first day of the Jewish festival of Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated on the 25th day of Kislev, and Yeshua is called the Light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5, 12:46)).
  - c. From the 15th day of Nisan (John’s birthday), we add six months to arrive at the 15th day of the 7th month, Tishri - the first day of the festival of Sukkot.

If the day of his birth were the first day of Sukkot, the day of his circumcision would be the eighth day, Shemini Atzeret/Sinchat Torah, which, like the first day, is a day of sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:39). On this day the Jews complete their annual cycle of Torah readings and start again from *Bereshit* (Genesis). Simchat Torah is considered to be a time of “fulfillment” of the Torah. The circumcision of Yeshua at this time indicates how he had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17-18).



3. Circumstantial Evidences:

- a. John 1:14 states that the “Word became flesh and “dwelt” with us. The Greek word “dwelt” [*skeinao*] comes from the word *skeinos*, which the LXX (Septuagint) uses for the *mishkan* (tabernacle). The name given for the feast of Tabernacles itself is called *Herotei Skeinon* in the LXX.
- b. King Herod most likely would used the opportunity of the Festival of Sukkot (in Jerusalem) to perform the census (certainly not Chanukah, since he detested and feared the Hasmoneans).
- c. Shepherds would not be out with their sheep in the dead of winter in Israel. The angel who appeared to the shepherds said, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of *great joy* that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Since Sukkot was known as both a festival of joy and also as the “Festival of the Nations,” the angel was actually giving them a greeting for the Festival of Sukkot. This is the only festival where the nations are positively encouraged to participate (Zech. 14:16-19).
- d. After Yeshua returns and sets up His kingdom on earth, it is written that only one festival will be celebrated by the nations: *Sukkot* (Zechariah 14:16) Why is that? Could it be that this will be a worldwide birthday party for Yeshua? (all the other festivals would have been fulfilled - Passover, First Fruits, Pentecost, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, but the remembrance of His birth would remain as a celebration).
- e. The Catholic church (in 336 AD) declared December 25th (on the Julian calendar) to be Yeshua’s birthday in order to replace a pagan Roman holiday, Saturnalia. Ironically, December 25th was a celebration of the birthday of the sun god. The early church, in an attempt to get rid of the pagan holiday, declared December 25th to be the birthday of the Son of God.
- f. We know that Yeshua was 30 years old when He started His ministry (Luke 3:23), and, assuming (as many Bible scholars do) that He ministered for 3 1/2 years, we can count backwards from the crucifixion (during Passover in Nisan) 6 months to discover his birthday in Tishri.

**Summary:** Since Zechariah served during the tenth week and Elizabeth conceived shortly thereafter, we can place the date of Yeshua’ birth during the festival of Sukkot.



## Argument for a late December Birth

The argument for assigning late December as the rightful date of the birth of Yeshua is based on the assumption that Zechariah was told that Elizabeth would conceive a child during the solemn holiday of Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”).

1. Yeshua’s cousin, John the Baptist, was conceived just after Yom Kippur (Tishri 10) and born 40 weeks later in Tammuz (June/July), *because*:
  - a. John’s father (Zechariah) was a Levite who was assigned to serve in the Temple during the course of “Aviyah,” the 8th course of the year. However, the 8th course would serve both on the 10th week of the year (see above) as well as on the 35th week:  $24$  (first complete cycle) +  $1$  (Sukkot) +  $10 = 35$ .
  - b. This places Zechariah’s service in the Temple as during the High Holiday of Yom Kippur, and this seems to agree with the description given about how Gabriel spoke to Zechariah in the narrative (Luke 1:8-23).
  - c. It is written that John was conceived shortly after this tour of duty (Luke 1:23-4), perhaps on 17 Tishri. Therefore, John the Baptist was probably conceived shortly after the Yom Kippur and would have been born on the 17th of Tammuz (June/July).
2. Yeshua was conceived in Nisan (Mar/Apr), near Passover, and born 40 weeks later during late December, *because*:
  - a. Yeshua was conceived six months after John the Baptist (Luke 1:24-27, 36). Adding 6 months to Tammuz 17 leads us to Nisan 17 (two days after Passover).
  - b. Since Yeshua was born six months after John, we add six months John’s birthday (the 17th of Tammuz) to arrive at the 17th Tevet (late December).
3. Circumstantial Evidences:
  - a. Church history since the time of the late first century has attested to a late December birth. Hippolytus, in the second century AD, argued that this was Christ’s birthday. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom (347-407) argued that December 25th was the correct date. Chrysostom taught that Zechariah received the message about John’s birth on the Day of Atonement and John the Baptist was born sometime in June or July, and the birth of Yeshua took place six months later, in late December (or early January). The suspicion that Christianity “appropriated” pagan culture to celebrate the birth of Christ arose during the so-called “Age of Enlightenment” (17th century) when the use of human reason and the scientific method were dogmatically declared to be the only way to truth.



- b. Early Jewish sources suggest that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside year-round. In the normal traffic of shepherds they move around and come near Bethlehem from November to March of the year. But then these were a special class of Levitical shepherds who kept the sacrificial lambs. They do not move around because they supply the lambs for daily sacrifice from whom people bought their approved lambs, which are blemishless. The fact that the Angels announced the arrival of the perfect sacrificial lamb to these shepherds indicates this.
- c. Alfred Edersheim, a Messianic Jew, wrote, “There is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date. The objections generally made rest on grounds which seem to me historically untenable.”

Edersheim claimed that an early Aramaic source document called “The Scroll of Fasts” (i.e., Megillat Ta’anit: מְגִילַת תְּעֻנִּית), which included additional commentary in medieval Hebrew (called *scholium*), may refer to the 9th of Tevet as the day of Yeshua’s birth (i.e., sometime during late December in our Gregorian calendars). Note that Jewish history regards the month of Tevet to be one of national tragedy, marking the beginning of the destruction of the Holy Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (in 587 BC). After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, the early sages might have associated the birth of Yeshua as yet another reason for mourning the loss of the Temple.

**Summary:** Since Zechariah served during Yom Kippur and Elizabeth conceived shortly thereafter, we can place the date of Yeshua’s birth during the month of Tevet, in late December.

## Tentative Conclusion

Of the two arguments given, I personally believe that exegesis prefers a Sukkot (i.e., “Tabernacles”) birth for the Messiah Yeshua rather than the traditional date of December 25 as generally observed by Christian tradition. One benefit of understanding the birth of Messiah during Sukkot is that his *miraculous conception* would have occurred during the time of Chanukah, and therefore we can celebrate the birth of Yeshua during the traditional date as the time of his conception, when the Light of the World began his great advent from heaven to earth to become our great Redeemer and Savior.

That said, it is apparent, however, that since we cannot definitively date the time of Zechariah’s service in the Temple, we cannot be dogmatic regarding the exact date of the birth of Yeshua the Messiah. And even if we *could* decide if Zechariah was visited by Gabriel during his first course of service (during the 10th week), we are faced with the textual *ambiguity* regarding the statement “after those days” (given in Luke 1:24). How much time is meant by this phrase? Is it a day? a week? a month?



In light of these uncertainties, it is perhaps advisable to take a humble attitude and confess our lack of knowledge regarding the date of Yeshua’s birth. The important thing, of course, is that our LORD was indeed born and ransomed us from the wages of our sins.

In other words, Scripture seems to be more focused on the life, death, and resurrection of the LORD Yeshua, rather than His birth. As the Apostle Paul wrote:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...” (1 Cor. 15:3-5)

Every day, then, may we celebrate the Life of our LORD and Savior, Yeshua the Messiah!



It is one thing to speculate on the anniversary of the birth date of Messiah, and quite another to submit to His rule in your heart at this present hour... We must be careful. “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, nor is he able to know them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Note that the “natural person” mentioned here is not carnal or bodily-focused (σαρκικός), but is soul-focused (ψυχικός), emphasizing the life of the intellect and rationality. The “soulish” person may find religion “interesting” but not as a matter of life and death. The Spirit of God must first awaken a person to reveal their need for a healing so radical that everything will be transformed, and a new “spiritual person” (πνευματικός) will be quickened to receive the truth of God. The Scripture says we are to ask in order to receive, but we do not know enough to truly ask until we accept the reality about our condition. When we ask according to God’s will, however, God sets in motion the miracle and the answer to our heart’s cry.

**Postscript:** Some people try to “blend” Christmas and Chanukah into “Christnukkah” or “Messiahmas,” but strictly speaking the birth of the Messiah and the Zionist holiday of Chanukah are two different things. Personally, I am inclined to think that Yeshua was conceived around Chanukah and born during Sukkot (in other words, I think that Zechariah heard from Gabriel during his *first* course of service at the Temple), though I am open to the possibility that Zechariah heard the angel during his *second* course of service, that is, during Yom Kippur). However, since Christmas occurs close to Chanukah, I consider it to be a valid time to remember *both* the Incarnation *and* birth of Yeshua the Messiah and to rejoice with others over the miracle of the love of God for us all. Among other things, that means that my family celebrates both Chanukah and Christmas! *Ai-ai-ai!*

Regarding these matters, I find the quote Augustine of Hippo to be helpful:

*In necessariis unitas (in essentials unity),  
In dubiis libertas (in doubtful things liberty),  
In omnibus autem caritas (but in all things love).*



## Closing Admonition: First things First...

The Scriptures may not allow us to infer with absolute certainty the exact date of the birth of Messiah, though of course the same can be said for the patriarchs, for Moses, and for all the great heroes of our faith. One thing we agree upon, however, is that Yeshua not only was physically born into this world, clothed in our flesh, to offer himself up for our sins as the Lamb of God (John 2:29; Matt. 12:40, 16:21) on *erev Pesach* (the day before Passover), but that he is alive right *now*, and we are therefore contemporaneous with his presence. Nevertheless our carnal pride tempts us to foolishly quibble about the date of his birth as if he were a common historical figure like Socrates or Shakespeare... Indeed there is always a danger whenever we talk about God, referring to God in the third person, making God to be an “object of knowledge” or attempting to analyze the Divine Presence.

Regarding the life of Messiah Scripture makes clear that Yeshua was crucified and died on Erev Pesach and that he was raised three days and nights later, on the holiday of First fruits. The Apostle Paul, the greatest Torah sage of the Second Temple period, who radically encountered the risen Yeshua, later taught us that what was of “first importance” was that Yeshua died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead for our justification according to the words of the Hebrew prophets, and that therefore what was most essential was to know him and the power of his resurrection (1 Cor. 2:2, 15:3-4; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5, etc.). We must be careful not to make an idol out of our convictions or become proud of heart. It is often a test of faith to use the good eye and to refuse to be offended when your brother or sister disagrees with you. May the Living God help us all walk before His Presence in peace.