

**The Death of Herod and Return to Israel: Recalculating the Date of Herod's Death: W. E. Filmer, David Beyer, & Jack Finegan from Josephus's *Antiquities* pre 1544, Matt 2:19; Clues to When the Holy Family Left Egypt for Israel, Luke 2:39–43**

### XVIII The Death of Herod and Return to Israel

**Matthew 2:19 - But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, (NASB)**

This verse is critical to isolating the timing of the Lord's physical birth. Based on Flavius Josephus's *The Antiquities of the Jews*, the year 4 B.C. has been generally accepted as the date of Herod's death thus causing some expositors to assume that the Lord's birth occurred as early as 5 or even 6 B.C.

The 4 B.C. date is cited by several current resources, *The NET Bible*, *The Scofield Study Bible*, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, and *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopaedia of the Bible*.

Extra-biblical sources include *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Duane Spencer's *Star of Bethlehem*, Robert Faid's "The Star of Bethlehem: What Was It?" E. W. Bullinger's *The Witness of the Stars*, and Joseph Seiss's *The Gospel in the Stars*. In fact, every source except Flavius Josephus, whose manuscripts beginning in the 1500s were corrupted by copyist error, reflects the 4 B.C. date.

The error that causes this confusion hinges around two salient facts: (1) the dating of a lunar eclipse and the Jewish Passover between which Herod died and (2) the death of his son Herod Philip who is alleged to have died in A.D. 34. It is this latter date that became the source of controversy and led to the erroneous choice of the former.

This controversy became critical to our resolving the Mystery of the Star. To avoid getting too bogged down in the details I only referenced the issue of identifying which lunar eclipse and Passover provided the best reference point for Herod's death. We chose the lunar eclipse of January 9/10, 1 B.C. and the Paschal moon of April 7/8, 1 B.C., a period of twelve and one-half weeks.

Herod's death most likely occurred in late February or early March of that year based on events that transpired following the lunar eclipse.

The confirmation of the 1 B.C. date is outlined by Jack Finegan in his 1998 revised edition of *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. The excerpt I am about to recite is technical but imperative to verify the claim that Herod died in 1 B.C., not 4 B.C.

Two dates are critical: (1) the death of Herod's son Philip, tetrarch of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, and Pnias, and (2) a date in the reign of Roman emperor Claudius Tiberius.

**In 1966 W. E. Filmer<sup>1</sup> raised a serious question about the 4 B.C. date and proposed a date of 1 B.C. instead, and in 1978 and 1996 Ernest L. Martin<sup>2</sup> advanced detailed arguments for the same date of 1 B.C. (p. 298)**

**Josephus tells us that an eclipse of the moon took place shortly before Herod died, and that the Jewish Passover came not long after his death. If the death of Herod was 1 B.C. the relevant eclipse of the moon was a total eclipse on the night of January 9/10, and the full paschal moon of Nisan 14 on April 8, twelve and a half weeks later. (p. 299)**

<sup>1</sup> "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966): 283–298.

<sup>2</sup> *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* (Pasadena: Foundation for Biblical Research, 1978); idem, "The Nativity and Herod's Death," *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan* 85–92; idem, *The Star That Astonished the World* (2d ed.; Portland: ASK Publications, 1996).

The matter of the reigns of Herod's three sons and successors is also relevant to the question of the date of Herod's death, and has usually been taken as the major reason for accepting 4 B.C. as the correct date, on which basis the three rulers are usually listed as Archelaus, 4 B.C.–A.D. 6 [over Judea, Idumea, and Samaria]; Antipas, 4 B.C.–A.D. 39 [over Galilee and Perea]; and Philip, 4 B.C.–A.D. 34 [over Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, and Panias]. (p. 300)

The currently known text of Josephus's *Antiquities* states that Philip died in the twentieth year of Tiberius (A.D. 33/34) after ruling for thirty -seven years. This points to Philip's accession at the death of Herod in 4 B.C. (4 years B.C. + 33 years A.D. = 37 years). But Filmer suspected that a figure had dropped out and that the text should probably read the twenty-second, rather than the twentieth, year of Tiberius (A.D. 35/36). Timothy D. Barnes<sup>3</sup> rejected this reading as "comparatively ill-attested," although he agreed with Filmer that it was a pivotal point of the debate.

In fact, however, already in the nineteenth century Florian Riess reported that the Franciscan monk Molkenbuhr claimed to have seen a 1517 Parisian copy of Josephus and an 1841 Venetian copy in each of which the text read "the twenty-second year of Tiberius." The antiquity of this reading has now been abundantly confirmed.

In 1995 David W. Beyer<sup>4</sup> reported to the Society for Biblical Literature his personal examination in the British Museum of forty-six editions of Josephus's *Antiquities* published before 1700 among which twenty-seven texts, all but three published before 1544, read "twenty-second year of Tiberius," while not a single edition published prior to 1544 read "twentieth year of Tiberius." Likewise in the Library of Congress five more editions read the "twenty-second year," while none prior to 1544 records the "twentieth year."

It was also found that the oldest versions of the text give variant lengths of reign for Philip of 32 and 36 years. But if we still allow for a full thirty-seven-year reign, then "the twenty-second year of Tiberius" (A.D. 35/36) points to 1 B.C. (1 year B.C. + 36 years A.D. = 37 years) as the year of death of Herod. This is therefore the date which is accepted in the present book. Accordingly, if the birth of Jesus was two years or less before the death of Herod in 1 B.C., the date of the birth was in 3 or 2 B.C. [actually June 17, 2 B.C.], so consistently attested by the most credible early church fathers.<sup>5</sup> (p. 301)

Therefore, in Matthew 2:19 the date of the occurrence of Herod's death can be confidently set in circa March of 1 B.C.

From our study we have established that the Lord was born on June 17, 2 B.C. and the Magi arrived in Bethlehem on December 25, 2 B.C. when the Lord was six-months and one-week old. Herod died circa March of 1 B.C. making the Lord about nine months old.

At Herod's death, his son Archelaus became the tetrarch of Judea. His personality and behavior patterns were not that much different from those of his father, a circumstance indicated by this excerpt from Merrill F. Unger:

<sup>3</sup> "The Date of Herod's Death," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1998): 204–209.

<sup>4</sup> "Josephus Reexamined: Unraveling the Twenty-second Year of Tiberius" (presentation to the Society for Biblical Literature, November 19, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: The Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 298–301.

After Herod's death, and previous to going to Rome to receive the government, Archelaus ordered his soldiers to attack the Jews, who were becoming very tumultuous, at the temple. The attack resulted in the death of about three thousand Jews. Archelaus returned to Judea, and, under pretense that he had countenanced the seditions against him, he deprived Joazar of the high priesthood, and gave that dignity to his brother Eleazar. He governed Judea with so much violence that in the tenth year of his reign he was dethroned, deprived of his property, and banished to Vienna, in Gaul. His cruelty was manifested toward Samaritans as well as Jews.

The parents of our Lord turned aside, from fear of him, on their way back from Egypt, and went to Nazareth, in Galilee, in the domain of his gentle brother Antipas (Matthew 2:22).<sup>6</sup>

This presents the need to again update some dates. If Herod died in 1 B.C., then his sons' reigns did not begin until then. Therefore, Archelaus's reign began in 1 B.C. and ended in A.D. 9. This next example emphasizes the ongoing problem in biblical chronology caused by the error in the Josephus manuscript:

Herod the Great was born c 73 B.C. and died in 4 B.C. His death occurred in the 37th year of his reign. *The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, published in England in 1836, states that Jesus was born in the 33rd year of Herod's reign. If this be true, Jesus was born in the year 8 B.C. and was thus four years old when Herod died. Assuming that He was two years old when He was taken to Egypt by His parents, we conclude that Joseph and his family spent two years in Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

Yeager's assumptions are seven years off the mark. The Lord was born in 2 B.C. and was nine months old when Herod died in 1 B.C. When He and His parents left Egypt requires a little analysis.

Verse 19 opens with the phrase, **Τελευτήσαντος δε τοῦ Ἡρώδου**, *Teleutēsantos de tou Hērōidou*: "And Herod having died."

The verse begins with the post positive conjunction *de* which can be translated *and* or *after*, followed by the proper noun which is translated "Herod."

The verb "having died" is the aorist active participle of **τελευτάω** (*teleutaō*) whose action precedes the action of the main verb.

The main verb is the appearance of Gabriel to Joseph in a dream, the present active indicative of **φαίνω** (*phainō*), translated *appeared*.

The King James and New American Standard Bibles translate this "When Herod died an angel of the Lord appeared" as if the events occurred simultaneously.

But the aorist active participle occurred before the angel appeared. Here it is a culminative aorist which views the event of Herod's death in its entirety and regards it from the viewpoint of its existing results: Herod is dead. The angel's appearance to Joseph happened at a time subsequent to the event. How long we do not know. All we do know so far is that the angel appeared in a dream to Joseph after Herod's death. However, we do know the timeframe.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 80.

<sup>7</sup> Randolph O. Yeager, *The Renaissance New Testament: Matthew 1-7* (Bowling Green, KY: Renaissance Press, 1976), 1:170.

The reign of Archelaus lasted until A.D. 9. Therefore, the period of time between Herod's death and the angel's command to return to Israel could have occurred *grammatically* at any time during this ten-year period. However, we are able to calculate from Luke 2 that this was obviously not the case.

**Luke 2:39** - When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city of Nazareth.

**v. 40** - The Child [ παιδίον, *paidion*: a young child ages 1–7; used eight times exclusively in Matthew 2 ] continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.<sup>8</sup>

**v. 41** - Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year [ κατ' ἔτος *kat' etos* ] at the Feast of the Passover.

**v. 42** - And when He became twelve, they went up according to the custom of the Feast;

**v. 43** - and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy [ παῖς, *pais*: age 7–14 ] Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem.

In Luke's account of the holy family's return to Nazareth, he refers to Jesus as a *paidion*, a young child between ages 1 and 7. The Lord is referred to in verse 43 as a *pais*, a boy between the ages of 7 and 14, specifically, age 12.<sup>9</sup>

In verse 41 we find the phrase κατ' ἔτος (*kat' etos*), translated "every year."

After the family's return to Nazareth, Joseph and Mary are said to have gone down to Jerusalem annually to observe the Passover at a time the Lord was a *paidion*, that is, between the years 1 B.C. and A.D. 6.

Isolating when during this time the return occurred requires us to proceed with our passage.

**Matthew 2:19** - After Herod died in March of 1 B.C., behold, an angel of the Lord, probably Gabriel, appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, and said, (CTL)

<sup>8</sup> *The Scofield Study Bible's* paragraph title for verses 39 and 40 is "Return to Nazareth: the silent years (after events of Mt. 2)."

<sup>9</sup> Albrecht Oepke, "παῖς," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 5:637.