

The Mysterious Magi - Sermon 4 - Dating Games - Dr. Randy White

Two Common Assumptions (that need to go away)

- **Common Assumption #1:** Jesus was not born on December 25, and the Magi arrived several years after His birth.
- **Common Assumption #2:** Christianity chose December 25 as Jesus' birth date by borrowing from pagan celebrations, commonly associated with Saturnalia or Sol Invictus.

Some Anchoring Historical Dates

- **August 19, AD 14** – Death of Caesar Augustus.
- **January 1, AD 15** – From Josephus we know Roman regnal years were commonly counted from January 1 following accession.
- **January 1–December 31, AD 29** – The fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar.
 - This is the year in which John the Baptist began his ministry and Jesus was baptized (Luke 3:1–3).
 - At this time, Jesus was **about thirty years of age** (Luke 3:23).

Some Assumptions About Jesus' Ministry

- *What if* we assume an **exact 3½-year ministry**, that is, **1,260 days (42 months)** from the Baptism of Jesus to His crucifixion?
 - Working backward from the Passover crucifixion places Jesus' baptism on **November 8, AD 29** (Gregorian projection).
 - Any significantly earlier baptism date creates increasing difficulty explaining the elapsed time between the baptism and the first miracle.
- We assume, consistent with Luke 3:23, that Jesus did not begin His public ministry until He was **thirty years old**.
- We assume the first miracle (Cana) occurred on or about **January 6 (Epiphany)**.
 - This date appears in very early Christian tradition.
 - A much later date strains John 2:12, which explicitly allows for “**not many days**” prior to the first Passover.

Where These Assumptions Lead

- A baptism on **November 8** would be immediately followed by **40 days in the wilderness**, bringing us to approximately **December 18**.
- The temptation narrative requires movement:
 - wilderness, temple, a very high mountain.
 - This sequence reasonably consumes several additional days, possibly up to a week, placing us roughly in the **December 18–25** window.
- In John 1:38, Jesus is addressed as *Rabbi*, a title indicating recognized adulthood and authority.
- If Jesus was **about thirty** at His baptism (Luke 3:23) and is already recognized as *Rabbi* shortly afterward, then His **thirtieth birthday must have occurred**.
- Allowing time for the wilderness experience and the earliest gathering of disciples, this birthday most naturally falls between **December 18 and December 31**.

Further Necessary Assumptions for Gospel Harmony

- Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great, as explicitly required by Matthew.
- Herod's death must have occurred **between the eighth and fortieth day of Jesus' life**.
 - This follows from Luke 2:39, which states that after fulfilling the Law, the family returned to Nazareth.
 - Luke leaves no narrative room for a prolonged stay in Egypt after this point.
- Therefore, the **flight to Egypt must have been brief**, occurring between:
 - the circumcision (day 8, Luke 2:21),
 - and the purification/presentation (day 40, Luke 2:22–38).
- No other arrangement allows Luke 2:39 to coexist honestly with Matthew 2:13–15 without assuming Luke silently omits years of exile.
- Herod's death likely occurred **around February 1, 1 BC**, based on Josephus.

What About the Magi?

- On **January 9** in the year of Herod's death, a lunar eclipse occurred.
 - On this day, Herod executed Matthias, who had prematurely celebrated Herod's death.
 - The premature celebration of Herod's death led by Matthias took place in early December, likely 2 BC.
 - Herod then traveled to Jericho, never returning to Jerusalem.
- While in Jericho, Herod gathered the chief priests and scribes in a rage and planned widespread executions.
- Matthew records that the Magi “**departed into their own country another way**” (Matthew 2:12).
- It is reasonable to ask whether Herod's rage and final actions were provoked by this betrayal.
- If so, the Magi must have arrived **shortly before January 9**, likely days earlier, not years later.

Why Does This Matter?

- For generations, many have accepted that December 25 is a pagan borrowing, the Magi arrived years later, and the infancy narratives are loosely harmonized at best.
- This narrative subtly but seriously undermines Christianity:
 - It accuses Christianity of syncretism with pagan religion.
 - It places Matthew 2:13–15 in tension with Luke 2:39.
 - It replaces the plain reading of Scripture with tradition-driven reconstructions.
- A careful, text-first examination shows that:
 - the Magi most naturally arrive shortly after Jesus' birth,
 - Luke and Matthew can be read straightforwardly together,
 - December 25 is not the historical liability it is often claimed to be,
 - and it places the arrival of the wise men much closer than the two-year mark given by most preachers today.

This does not demand certainty. It demands that the assumptions we have inherited be questioned as rigorously as the text itself.