



Too Late for Christmas

by Ronald L. Dart

If you're planning on celebrating the birth of Christ this week... well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you're about *three months late*. Yeah, really. And 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, verse 26.

Luke 1

KJ2000

²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

²⁷ To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And what follows is the annunciation 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. Real familiar. 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, well, 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 and 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, verse 5.

Luke 1

KJ2000

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zachariah, of the course of Abia: and 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 [1 **Chronicles 24**]. 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 Abijah 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. So Luke starts this whole story with a *firm* calendar reference. The only possible divergence in it would be between one of two fairly closely defined times during the year: one in mid-June, the other in early December. The account continues stating:

Luke 1

AKJV

⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

⁷ And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

They are really old people and they are not thinking about babies at this time.

Luke 1

AKJV

⁸ And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course,

Luke is *nailing down* the fact that this is a certain time of year: early December or mid-June.

Luke 1

AKJV

⁹ According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

¹¹ And there appeared to him 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.

Luke 1

AKJV

¹³ But the angel said to him, Fear not, Zacharias: for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

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 wasn't 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.

Luke 1

KJ2000

¹⁴ And you shall have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

¹⁵ For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink;

and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

¹⁶ And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God.

And then he makes this enigmatic statement. He said:

Luke 1

AKJV

¹⁷ And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, 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.

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:

Malachi 4

AKJV

⁵ Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD[.]

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 Daniel's 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."

Luke 1

AKJV

¹⁸ And Zacharias said to the angel, Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years.

It's almost as though the angel says, "What do you mean, 'How are you going to know this?'"

Luke 1

AKJV

¹⁹ And the angel answering said to him, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak to you, and to show you these glad tidings.

²⁰ And, behold, you shall be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because you believe not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

Luke 1

AKJV

²¹ And the people waited for Zacharias, and marveled that he tarried so long in the temple.

²² And when he came out, he could not speak to them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned to them, and remained speechless.

²³ And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

²⁴ And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

²⁵ Thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

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 so full of this thing—so excited by the whole thing, so uplifted by it—she hid herself away and went into seclusion for five months.

Luke 1

AKJV

²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

²⁷ To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

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'll do your math on that—running 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 is 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 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 [Acts 20:16]. 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.

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 really...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. And, 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:

Luke 1

AKJV

²⁶ And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,

27 To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

28 And the angel came in to her, and said, Hail, you that are highly favored, the Lord is with you: blessed are you among women.

29 And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

What do you mean, “the Lord is with me?” What do you mean, “I am blessed among women?”

Luke 1

AKJV

30 And the angel said to her, Fear not, Mary: for you have found favor with God.

31 And, behold, you shall conceive in your womb, and bring forth a son, and shall call his name JESUS [which basically means “savior”].

32 He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give to him the throne of his father David:

33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Now, it's hard to imagine what all this meant to Mary. I gather, though, that 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, everyone at this time...messianic fever was *rampant* throughout Judea at this time. 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—what the Messiah was to do. Because it says, “of his kingdom there shall be no end.” Well, Mary said to the angel:

Luke 1

AKJV

34 [...] How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

She did not 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.

Luke 1

AKJV

35 And the angel answered and said to her, The Holy Ghost shall come on you, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God.

Luke 1

AKJV

36 And, behold, your cousin Elisabeth, she has also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

37 For with God nothing shall be impossible.

³⁸ And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to your word. And the angel departed from her.

Nine months passed, and it takes us to Luke, the second chapter.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that 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.

Luke 2

AKJV

² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

We don't know very much about this taxing. Apparently there was some widespread 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:

Luke 2

AKJV

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And this, of course, forms the basis for all the crèche scenes you'll 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. Because 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've 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. Well, I can imagine there was a lot of back-slapping and rejoicing and happiness among the angels. And I can see some of them getting together and saying, “Look, we’re 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 is this event?”, 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. 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.”

Luke 2

AKJV

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Now, everybody knows they wouldn’t have been overnighing 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 and “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; nothing is happening— 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*.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

No, no, it’s not just to the Jews; not just to the Hebrews. It’s to everybody.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹¹ For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Now, I’ve got to assume this message meant something to these shepherds. A savior? What’s that? Well, 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.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹² And this shall be a sign to you; You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Not in a palace, not with a crown, not in velvet, not in silks—in a manger.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

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.

Luke 2

AKJV

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

So when these shepherds came barging into the stable, what did they find? They found Mary, they found Joseph, and they found a baby. And 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 who 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.

Now, 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:

John 1

AKJV

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² The same was in the beginning with God.

³ All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

⁴ In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Now, this statement, it “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:

John 1

YLT

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of an only begotten of a father, full of grace and truth.

What John says is that, in the process of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and begetting Jesus in her womb, the Word actually became flesh. And 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 suggests that 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 that expression of John, "the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* 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, "No, 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 *couldn't* die." John, in his epistle, chapter 4, verse 1, says this:

1 John 4

AKJV

¹ Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

² Hereby know you the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:

³ And every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God[....]

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 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*.

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