

# Theologians continue to debate Jesus' birth date

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cept of history in antiquity," Father Falcone said, "so we've got to shift judgment."

Maier pointed out that dating in ancient times was generally done in terms of the current ruler. Thus, Matthew records in his Gospel that "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king."

This information, however, actually helps to obscure the year of Christ's birth, Maier noted. Herod died in 4 B.C., he wrote, thus Jesus was born at least four years earlier than the traditionally accepted birth year.

Adding to the confusion, Maier noted, is Luke's report that at the time of Christ's birth, Quirinius was Syria's governor. But Quirinius did not become Syria's governor until 6 or 7 A.D., he said, thus the two accounts include details that contradict by at least a decade.

The people of the early Christian era were simply not concerned with accurately dating births, Father Falcone observed.

"In antiquity, the individual didn't count," Father Falcone said. "It was the life of the person that counted, not the birth."

Consequently, Father Falcone continued, that era's historians did not even record the Roman emperors' birth dates. The first biography or autobiography approaching the modern sense of a life history, he said, was St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

Christmas did not become a part of the liturgical calendar until the fourth century, Father Falcone said. Meanwhile, Christ's birth year was set in the sixth century by the monk Dionysius Exiguus, whose calculations were later shown to be off by several years, the priest noted.

Thus most scholars today recognize that Christ's birth year most likely occurred between 6 and 4 B.C. — with some scholars pushing the year to as early as 8 B.C.

As for the month and day, Dec. 25 and Jan. 6 were the dates early Chris-



tian communities most commonly accepted. Although several theories exist, Father Falcone noted that no one knows exactly why Dec. 25 was ultimately chosen.

The most widely accepted theory is that the feast was intended to serve as a counterpoint to the Roman celebration of the sun god on Dec. 25, Father Falcone said.

Emperor Aurelian had set the date of the sun god celebration to coincide with the winter solstice on Dec. 25 in the year 274. According to the theory, then, when Christians began to be con-

cerned about setting a date for Christ's birth, they substituted the celebration of Christ's birth for the Roman feast.

This concern with the date of Christ's birth was simply not on church minds prior to the third and fourth centuries, noted H.W. Van Der Vaart Smit in his 1963 book, *Born in Bethlehem: Christmas as it really was*.

"It is worthy of note that the earliest Church knew no feast of Jesus' birth," Vaart Smit wrote. "The death on the cross and the resurrection occupied the center of their interest, and since there was concern about other things in setting forth matters of faith and doctrine, there was no necessity for examining the reliability of the traditional birth date of Jesus."

The gospel writers were in fact part of this process of setting forth these matters of faith and doctrine, Father Falcone acknowledged.

"The point is that the Evangelists are telling the story as theologians," Father Falcone observed. "They are concerned primarily in the theological meaning of the story, and not historically dealing with the facts of the story."

Thus Matthew and Luke included different details to fit their purposes, Father Falcone noted.

Matthew was concerned with showing Jesus as a descendant of King David, the priest explained. The star — which Luke does not mention — is linked to the star of David. The Magi are drawn to Bethlehem because of the star, and bring with them the wisdom of the East. This helped convey the message that Jesus would be a great leader filled with wisdom, he said.

Meanwhile, Luke does not mention the Magi. His concern, Father Falcone said, was with "trying to show how the Gospel reaches out to the marginalized and the poor." Thus he has the shepherds come to see the newborn Jesus in the humble surroundings of a stable.

Matthew, on the other hand, leaves the shepherds out of his version. He has the Magi coming not to a stable, but to a house.

Maier observed that tradition and legend also helped to form the modern vision of Christmas. He noted, for example, that Magi were wise men, not kings, as tradition later made them out to be. Nor does Matthew's account say how many Magi there were, although,

again, tradition sets the number at three — most likely because they brought three gifts, he suggested.

Further, both accounts include details which cannot be supported historically, Father Raymond Brown reported in his 1977 book, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

Matthew's account of the massacre of the innocents, for example, is not corroborated by historical records of such an incident, Father Brown said. And Luke fails to mention such an event or the flight into Egypt that Matthew recorded. Indeed, Luke has the Holy Family simply returning to Nazareth after Jesus' circumcision and presentation in the temple.

Meanwhile in Luke's account, Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus ordered a worldwide census. Yet, Father Brown wrote, "In the reign of Augustus there was no single census covering the Empire."

One must be careful, however, about pointing out such discrepancies or variations, Father Brown asserted in his 1990 book, *Responses to 101 Questions about the Bible*.

While observing that, "There is no official church statement in force that the birth narratives are literally historical," Father Brown stated, "My favorite example of bad taste, bad pedagogy, and perhaps bad theology, is for someone in a church setting to proclaim, 'There were no Magi.'"

In addition to the fact that biblical scholarship cannot prove that there were no Magi, Father Brown argued, "such negative statements detract from the true import of the story."

Father Brown noted that although the two gospel accounts differ in some details, and both contain details which cannot be supported historically, they agree on several key elements.

Those elements include a conception without a human father; that the child was of the House of David; the birth took place in Bethlehem; and the family eventually settled in Nazareth.

"These are very important agreements, and I would argue that a case can be made for the historicity of such detail," Father Brown wrote. "Yet I also argue that too myopic a concern with historicity can blind people to the great value the stories have in themselves."

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