Letters to the Biblical Archaeology Review Editor debate dates of Herod’s death and Jesus’ birth

Both Luke and Matthew mention Jesus’ birth as occurring during Herod’s reign (Luke 1:5; Matthew 2:1). Josephus relates Herod’s death to a lunar eclipse. This is generally regarded as a reference to a lunar eclipse in 4 B.C. Therefore it is often said that Jesus was born in 4 B.C.

But physics professor John A. Cramer, in a letter to BAR, has pointed out that there was another lunar eclipse visible in Judea—in fact, two—in 1 B.C., which would place Herod’s death—and Jesus’ birth—at the turn of the era. Below, read letters published in the Q&C section of BAR debating the dates of Herod’s death, Jesus’ birth and to which lunar eclipse Josephus was referring.

When Was Jesus Born?
Q&C, BAR, July/August 2013
Let me add a footnote to Suzanne Singer’s report on the final journey of Herod the Great (Strata, BAR, March/April 2013): She gives the standard date of his death as 4 B.C. [Jesus’ birth is often dated to 4 B.C. based on the fact that both Luke and Matthew associate Jesus’ birth with Herod’s reign—Ed.] Readers may be interested to learn there is reason to reconsider the date of Herod’s death.

This date is based on Josephus’s remark in Antiquities 17.6.4 that there was a lunar eclipse shortly before Herod died. This is traditionally ascribed to the eclipse of March 13, 4 B.C.

Unfortunately, this eclipse was visible only very late that night in Judea and was additionally a minor and only partial eclipse.

There were no lunar eclipses visible in Judea thereafter until two occurred in the year 1 B.C. Of these two, the one on December 29, just two days before the change of eras, gets my vote since it was the one most likely to be seen and remembered. That then dates the death of Herod the Great into the first year of the current era, four years after the usual date.

Perhaps the much-maligned monk who calculated the change of era was not quite so far off as has been supposed.

John A. Cramer
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When Was Jesus Born? When Did Herod Die?
Q&C, BAR, January/February 2014
Professor John A. Cramer argues that Herod the Great most likely died shortly after the lunar eclipse of December 29, 1 B.C., rather than that of March 13, 4 B.C., which, as Cramer points out, is the eclipse traditionally associated with Josephus’s description in Jewish Antiquities 17.6.4 (Queries & Comments, “When Was Jesus Born?” BAR, July/August 2013) and which is used as a basis to reckon Jesus’ birth shortly before 4 B.C. Professor Cramer’s argument was made in the 19th century by scholars such as Édouard Caspari and Florian Riess.

There are three principal reasons why the 4 B.C. date has prevailed over 1 B.C. These reasons were
articulated by Emil Schürer in A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ, also published in the 19th century. First, Josephus informs us that Herod died shortly before a Passover (Antiquities 17.9.3, The Jewish War 2.1.3), making a lunar eclipse in March (the time of the 4 B.C. eclipse) much more likely than one in December.

Second, Josephus writes that Herod reigned for 37 years from the time of his appointment in 40 B.C. and 34 years from his conquest of Jerusalem in 37 B.C. (Antiquities 17.8.1, War 1.33.8). Using so-called inclusive counting, this, too, places Herod’s death in 4 B.C.

Third, we know that the reign over Samaria and Judea of Herod’s son and successor Archelaus began in 4 B.C., based on the fact that he was deposed by Caesar in A.U.C. (Anno Urbis Conditae [in the year the city was founded]) 759, or A.D. 6, in the tenth year of his reign (Dio Cassius, Roman History 55.27.6; Josephus, Antiquities 17.13.2). Counting backward his reign began in 4 B.C. In addition, from Herod the Great’s son and successor Herod Antipas, who ruled over Galilee until 39 B.C., who ordered the execution of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29) and who had a supporting role in Jesus’ trial (Luke 23:7–12), we have coins that make reference to the 43rd year of his rule, placing its beginning in 4 B.C. at the latest (see Morten Horning Jensen, “Antipas—The Herod Jesus Knew,” BAR, September/October 2012).

Thus, Schürer concluded that “Herod died at Jericho in B.C. 4, unwept by those of his own house, and hated by all the people.”

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John A. Cramer responds:

Trying to date the death of Herod the Great is attended by considerable uncertainty, and I do not mean to claim I know the right answer. Mr. Tempelman does a good job of pointing out arguments in favor of a 4 B.C. date following the arguments advanced long ago by Emil Schürer. The difficulty is that we have a fair amount of information, but it is equivocal.

The key information comes, of course, from Josephus who brackets the death by “a fast” and the Passover. He says that on the night of the fast there was a lunar eclipse—the only eclipse mentioned in the entire corpus of his work. Correlation of Josephus with the Talmud and Mishnah indicate the fast was probably Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur occurs on the tenth day of the seventh month (mid-September to mid-October) and Passover on the 15th day of the first month (March or April) of the religious calendar. Josephus does not indicate when within that time interval the death occurred.

Only four lunar eclipses occurred in the likely time frame: September 15, 5 B.C., March 12–13, 4 B.C., January 10, 1 B.C. and December 29, 1 B.C. The first eclipse fits Yom Kippur, almost too early, but possible. It was a total eclipse that became noticeable several hours after sundown, but it is widely regarded as too early to fit other information on the date. The favorite 4 B.C. eclipse seems too far from Yom Kippur and much too close to Passover. This was a partial eclipse that commenced after midnight. It hardly seems a candidate for being remembered and noted by Josephus. The 1 B.C. dates require either that the fast was not Yom Kippur or that the calendar was rejiggered for some reason. The January 10 eclipse was total but commenced shortly before midnight on a winter night. Lastly, in the December 29 eclipse the moon rose at 53 percent eclipse and its most visible aspect was over by 6 p.m. It is the most likely of the four to have been noted and commented on.

None of the four candidates fits perfectly to all the requirements. I like the earliest and the latest of
them as the most likely. The most often preferred candidate, the 4 B.C. eclipse, is, in my view, far and away the least likely one.

A Different Fast
Q&C, BAR, May/June 2014
John Cramer responds to Mr. Tempelman’s letter to the editor (“Queries and Comments,” BAR, January/February 2014) that Herod’s death occurred between a “fast” and Passover. Mr. Cramer acknowledges that the fast of Yom Kippur fits the eclipse but doesn’t fit the time frame of occurring near Passover. There is, however, another fast that occurs exactly one month before Passover: the Fast of Esther! The day before Purim is a fast day commemorating Queen Esther’s command for all Jews to fast before she approached the king. Purim fell on March 12–13, 4 B.C. So there was an eclipse and a fast on March 12–13, 4 B.C., one month before Passover, which would fit Josephus’s statement bracketing Herod’s death by a fast and Passover.

Suzanne Nadaf
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John A. Cramer responds:
This suggestion seems plausible and, if I recall correctly, someone has already raised it. The consensus, if such exists, seems, however, to be that the fast really should be the fast of Yom Kippur, but resolving that issue requires expertise to which I make no claim. Too many possibilities and too little hard information probably leave the precise date forever open.

When Did Herod Die? And When Was Jesus Born?
Q&C, BAR, September/October 2014
Regarding the date of the death of Herod the Great, the question of which lunar eclipse and which Jewish fast the historian Josephus was referring to must be considered in light of other data that Josephus reported. Professor John Cramer’s suggestion that an eclipse in 1 B.C.E. would place Herod’s death in that year, rather than the generally accepted 4 B.C.E., cannot be reconciled with other historical facts recorded by Josephus.

As is well known, Herod’s son Archelaus succeeded him as the ruler of Judea, as reported by Josephus (Antiquities 8:459). Josephus also recorded that Archelaus reigned over Judea and Samaria for ten years, and that in his tenth year, due to complaints against him from both Jews and Samaritans, he was deposed by Caesar Augustus and banished to Vienna (Antiquities 8:531). Quirinius, the legate or governor of Syria, was assigned by the emperor to travel to Jerusalem and liquidate the estate of Archelaus, as well as to conduct a registration of persons and property in Archelaus’s former realm. This occurred immediately after Archelaus was deposed and was specifically dated by Josephus to the 37th year after Caesar’s victory over Mark Anthony at Actium (Antiquities 9:23). The Battle of Actium is a well-known event in Roman history that took place in the Ionian Sea off the shore of Greece on September 2 of the year 31 B.C.E. Counting 37 years forward from 31 B.C.E. yields a date of 6 C.E. for the tenth year of Archelaus, at which time he was deposed and Quirinus came to Judea. And counting back ten years from that event yields a date of 4 B.C.E. for the year in which Herod died. (The beginning and ending years are both included in this count, since regnal years for both Augustus and the Herodians were so figured.)

These reports, and the chronology derived from them, provide compelling evidence for the generally accepted date of Herod’s death in the spring of 4 B.C.E., shortly after the lunar eclipse of March 13, regardless of the fact that eclipses also occurred in other years.
There’s More Evidence from Josephus
Q&C, BAR, January/February 2015
In the letter to the editor in BAR, September/October 2014, Jeffrey Chadwick gives the argument for the death of Herod in 4 B.C. [used for determining the date of Jesus’ birth]. For over a century, this has been part of the standard reasoning for the 4 B.C. of Jesus’ birth. However, it does not come to grips with all of the data from Josephus. Elsewhere I have written about this. [An excerpt by Professor Steinmann can be read below.—Ed.]

One cannot simply and positively assert that a few short statements by Josephus about the lengths of reigns of his sons can be used to prove that Herod died in 4 B.C. Instead, one needs critically to sift through all of the evidence embedded in Josephus’s discussion as well as evidence external to Josephus to make a case for the year of Herod’s death.

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Originally Herod had named his son Antipater to be his heir and had groomed Antipater to take over upon his death. However, a little over two years before Herod’s death Antipater had his uncle, Herod’s younger brother Pheroras murdered. Pheroras had been tetrarch of Galilee under Herod. Antipater’s plot was discovered, and Archelaus was named Herod’s successor in place of Antipater. Seven months passed before Antipater, who was in Rome, was informed that he had been charged with murder. Late in the next year he would be placed on trial before Varus, governor of Syria. Eventually Herod received permission from Rome to execute Antipater. During his last year Herod wrote a will disinheriting Archelaus and granting the kingdom to Antipas. In a later will, however, he once again left the kingdom to Archelaus. Following his death his kingdom would eventually be split into three parts among Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip.

Josephus is careful to note that during his last year Herod was forbidden by Augustus from naming his sons as his successors. However, in several passages Josephus also notes that Herod bestowed royalty and its honors on his sons. At Antipater’s trial Josephus quotes Herod as testifying that he had yielded up royal authority to Antipater. He also quotes Antipater claiming that he was already a king because Herod had made him a king.

When Archelaus replaced Antipater as Herod’s heir apparent some two years before Herod’s death, Antipater may have been given the same prerogatives as Archelaus had previously enjoyed. After Herod’s death Archelaus went to Rome to have his authority confirmed by Augustus. His enemies charged him with seemingly contradictory indictments: that Archelaus had already exercised royal authority for some time and that Herod did not appoint Archelaus as his heir until he was demented and
dying. These are not as contradictory as they seem, however. Herod initially named Archelaus his heir, and at this point Archelaus may have assumed royal authority under his father. Then Herod revoked his will, naming Antipas his heir. Ultimately, when he was ill and dying, Herod once again named Archelaus his heir. Thus, Archelaus may not have legally been king until after Herod’s death in early 1 B.C., but may have chosen to reckon his reign from a little over two years earlier in late 4 B.C. when he first replaced Antipater as Herod’s heir.

Since Antipas would eventually rule Galilee, it is entirely possible that under Herod he already had been given jurisdiction over Galilee in the wake of Pheroras’ death. This may explain why Herod briefly named Antipas as his heir in the year before his death. Since Antipas may have assumed the jurisdiction over Galilee upon Pheroras’ death sometime in 4 B.C., like Archelaus, he also may have reckoned his reign from that time, even though he was not officially named tetrarch of Galilee by the Romans until after Herod’s death.

Philip also appears to have exercised a measure of royal authority before Herod’s death in 1 B.C. Philip refounded the cities of Julias and Caesarea Philippi (Paneas). Julias was apparently named after Augustus’ daughter, who was arrested for adultery and treason in 2 B.C. Apparently Julias was refounded before that date. As for Caesarea Philippi, the date of its refounding was used to date an era, and the first year of the era was 3 B.C. Apparently Philip chose to antedate his reign to 4 B.C., which apparently was the time when Herod first entrusted him with supervision of Gaulanitis.

Additional support for Philip having been officially appointed tetrarch after the death of his father in 1 B.C. may be found in numismatics. A number of coins issued by Philip during his reign are known. The earliest bear the date “year 5,” which would correspond to A.D. 1. This fits well with Philip serving as administrator under his father from 4–1 B.C. He counted those as the first four years of his reign, but since he was not officially recognized by Rome as an independent client ruler, he had no authority to issue coins during those years. However, he was in position to issue coinage soon after being named tetrarch sometime in 1 B.C., and the first coins appear the next year, A.D. 1, antedating his reign to 4 B.C. While the numismatic evidence is not conclusive proof of Herod’s death in 1 B.C., it is highly suggestive.

Given the explicit statements of Josephus about the authority and honor Herod had granted his sons during the last years of his life, we can understand why all three of his successors decided to antedate their reigns to the time when they were granted a measure of royal authority while their father was still alive. Although they were not officially recognized by Rome as ethnarch or tetrarchs until after Herod’s death, they nevertheless appear to have reckoned their reigns from about 4 B.C.