'Twas the Year Before the Millennium
By John A. Tvedtnes

With the New Year celebration behind us, we are five years past the beginning of a new millennium. Or are we? Our calendar system is based on the supposed birth of Christ some 2005 years ago. But the Bible is unclear about the year in which Jesus was born.

The first hint comes from Matthew 2:1, where we read that Christ was born in the time of "Herod the king." That this refers to Herod the Great and not to one of his sons of the same name, is clear from the fact that neither Herod Antipas nor Herod Philip were kings, but tetrarchs only. It is true that Herod had named another of his sons, Herod Archelaus, as king, but Matthew 2:22 makes it clear that this Archelaus was son of the Herod who had ordered the slaughter of the children at Bethlehem.

Luke 1:5 notes that the birth of John the Baptist had been announced "in the days of Herod, the King of Judaea." John was second cousin to Jesus and was evidently born six months before him (Luke 1:30-36). So Luke agrees with Matthew in placing the birth of Christ in the time of King Herod. The problem is that scholars consider that Herod died earlier than Christian tradition has placed the birth of Christ. This is based on the fact that the first-century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus recorded that Herod had died after an eclipse of the moon (Antiquities of the Jews 17.6.4). [1]

Famed German astronomer Johann Kepler (1571-1630) calculated that there would have been a partial lunar eclipse (40%) visible in Palestine during the night of 13-14 March 4 B.C., a month before Passover, which fell on 14 April that year. [2] This would mean that Jesus could not have been born later than that time.

The second-century Christian writer Clement of Alexandria wrote that Christ was born in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of Caesar Augustus. Since Augustus became emperor in 31 B.C., this would indicate a date of 4 B.C. Since Herod had ordered the destruction of the children of Bethlehem from two years and under, according to the information given him by the wise men concerning the time when the new star appeared (Matthew 2:7, 16), one assumes that Jesus was born no later than 6 B.C.

Unfortunately, Luke muddies the waters when he places Jesus’ birth at the time of the taxation under “Cyrenius, governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1-2). When Herod the Great died, his son Archelaus became king of Judaea, Samaria, and Idumaea; Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Perea; and Herod Philip became tetrarch of Ituraea, Trachonitis, and the area known today as the Hulah Valley and the Golan Heights. Archelaus fell into disfavor with the Jews, then the Romans. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus banished him in A.D. 6 and made Judaea a Roman prefecture, with Coponius as the first prefect.

Coponius and Quirinius, governor of Syria (the Cyrenius of Luke’s account) went to Judaea for the express purpose of taxing the people (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 18.1.1, 18.2.2). Since Joseph and Mary lived in Galilee, they were under the rulership of Herod Antipas, not Coponius. Because the prefect of Judaea had no authority over Antipas’s territory, scholars have doubted that Joseph could have gone to Bethlehem for taxation purposes. And if he did go at the time specified by Luke, it would have been A.D. 6. This was ten years after the death of Herod the Great.

The fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius wrote that Christ was born in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus Caesar (Ecclesiastical History 1.5.2). Counting from 31 B.C., this would bring us to A.D. 11, which is too late by all accounts. Some have suggested that he was counting Augustus’s reign from the death of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, in 44 B.C., which would give us 3 B.C. for the birth of Christ.

The matter is further complicated by Eusebius’s declaration that Christ entered his thirtieth year at the time of his baptism, being the fifteen year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Ecclesiastical History 1.10.1-2). Since Tiberius became emperor in A.D. 14, this would place Christ’s baptism in the year A.D. 29 and his birth in the year 1 B.C.

Eusebius derived his information from Luke 3:1-2, 23, where we read that John the Baptist began preaching “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod [Antipas] being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother [Herod] Philip tetrarch ... Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests.”
Another complication comes from John 2:20, where we read that the Jerusalem temple had already been forty-six years in the building. Since Herod had begun the structure in his eighteenth year (21 B.C.), the suggestion is that Jesus was teaching as early as A.D. 25 or 26. This would agree with an earlier birth date between 7 and 4 B.C. To this, we must add that all four gospels agree that Jesus was crucified during the prefecture of Pontius Pilate — a fact in which both Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews 18.3.3) and the Roman historian Tacitus (Annals of Imperial Rome 15.44) agree. Pilate governed from A.D. 26 to A.D. 36.

There was a time when Latter-day Saints, based on an all-too-literal reading of D&C 20:1, would have argued that Christ was born in 1 B.C. But when it became clear that we don’t really know, from the available evidence, precisely when he was born, things changed. When the LDS Church began publishing its own edition of the King James Bible in 1979, all dates were omitted from the time of Christ’s life from the “Chronology” chart in the Bible Dictionary included at the end of that edition. The dates in the left-hand column end abruptly immediately before the birth of Christ and resume only after his crucifixion.

So what year is it really and when did the twenty-first century really begin? No one can be certain, so take your pick.

[1] Josephus provides further evidence for this date, which is much too complex to discuss here.
[2] There were other partial lunar eclipses in the years 4 B.C. (2), 2 B.C. (2), 1 B.C. (1), A.D. 1 (1), A.D. 2 (2). There were two total eclipses in 1 B.C. The only eclipse close to the time of Passover was in 4 B.C.