

Course of Abijah

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BIG SANDY, Texas—The birth of Jesus Christ is significant to those individuals who believe that God had sent Him to be the Savior of the world. Jesus had to come into this world before He completed the other segments of the plan—teaching, suffering, dying and being raised from the dead.

Most of the people in my church association enjoy reviewing the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus Christ in the Autumn of the year. Do you know why that is true?

We believe that Jesus Christ was born in the autumn of the year. It is interesting that many historians agree with that conclusion, even though they have settled into the habit of celebrating the birth of Christ in the winter.

Luke's account

Let's notice some aspects of the first chapter of the book of Luke. Here is a quick summary of some key points.

- Luke 1:5—Zacharias, a priest, performed his duties during the course of Abijah.
- Luke 1:23-24—After Zacharias returned home from Jerusalem, Elizabeth conceived.
- Luke 1:26-28—In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary conceived.
- Luke 1:36—John was born approximately six months before Jesus.

As you can see, the course of Abijah serves as a starting point to the chain of events.

System of priests

Since modern Christians are not living under a system of physical temples, physical priests and physical sacrifices, it is easy to see why the phrase "course of Abijah" means nothing to most.

What does history reveal to us about the course of Abijah?

Notice 1 Chronicles 24.

- Verse 1—This chapter contained a listing of how the sons of Aaron were divided into work groups.

- Verses 7-19—Here is a list of the 24 priests mentioned at that time.
- Verse 10—Abijah was listed as the eighth priest in the order of 24.

A few more details

Here are a few more details about the course of Abijah.

- The Jewish calendar begins in the spring (Nisan), so the first course of priests (Jehoiarib) began at that time.
- After the 24th course was completed, the cycle of courses would repeat so that each group of priests would serve in the temple twice a year during their course.
- However, all the priests would serve in the temple during three major festivals (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles), which brought the total time of service to five times a year.

The Coulter theory

In his book titled, *Harmony of the Gospels*, author Fred Coulter gave a specific theory of Luke's time frame. Mr. Coulter and many other historians believe that the course of Abijah mentioned in Luke 1:5 was the early course and not the second course.

On page 9, Mr. Coulter wrote: "Zacharias worked the eighth course of Abijah, which was assigned the ninth and tenth weeks from the beginning of the year. The ninth week was from Iyar 27 through Sivan 5, which was June 3 through June 10. The tenth week was from Sivan 5 through Sivan 12, which was June 10 through June 17. This was during the week of Pentecost."

Autumn birth

Hence, they believe that John was conceived shortly after Pentecost and born around the next year's Passover. That scenario would mean that Christ was born in the autumn.

Some people believe the birth occurred on the Feast of Trumpets and other people believe that Christ was born on the Feast of Tabernacles. (For the record, while I believe that Jesus was born in the autumn, I don't have a strong opinion about on which day He was born in the autumn.)

For the record

Since I believe that Bible students should be well versed in varying opinions, I will quickly mention an alternate theory—for the sake of helping people to be aware.

Those people who believe that Zachariah's service in the temple was on the second rotation claim that he served in the temple near the time of the Day of Atonement.

In that calculation, they would use the timing to say that John was conceived in the autumn and born in the summer. That scenario would mean that Christ was born in the winter.

However, those who support such a theory have to deal with the statement that shepherds were watching over their flock by night (Luke 2:8) in the winter. While some historians claim this was plausible, a majority of historians refute their claim.

Food for thought

Here is a factor that has influenced many Bible students to accept an autumn birth.

- Christ was 30 years old when He started His ministry (Luke 3:23).
- Assuming (as many Bible students do) that He ministered for three and one-half years, we can count backwards six months from the crucifixion (during the Passover in Nisan) to discover the time of His birth in the Autumn (Tishri).