

“Course of Abijah”

This article is from the “Edifying the Body” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website (churchofgodbig sandy.com). It was posted for the weekend of Oct. 14, 2023.

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BIG SANDY, Texas—Many Bible students believe that the Son of God was born in the autumn of the year. Why do they come to that conclusion? The answer to that question has to do with the phrase “course of Abijah.”

Starting point

Let’s notice some aspects of the first chapter of the book of Luke.

- Luke 1:5—Zacharias, a priest, performed his duties during the course of Abijah.
- Luke 1:23-24—After Zacharias returned home from Jerusalem, his wife 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.
- Many historians believe that the course of Abijah mentioned in Luke 1:5 was the early course and not the second course.

Fred Coulter's research

In his book titled *Harmony of the Gospels*, author Fred Coulter provided some details about the course of Abijah.

On page 8, Mr. Coulter wrote: "Each course or shift was to work one full week, from noon Sabbath to noon Sabbath (Talmud, Sukkah)."

On page 9, Mr. Coulter added: "The Talmud reveals that the first course, or shift, began in the first week of the first month of the Hebrew Calendar. The second course worked the second week. This rotation continued on a week-by-week basis through the twenty-four courses. Each course had the basic responsibility twice a year to perform a one-week shift.

"In addition, all courses were required to work three extra weeks during the year. These three weeks were for the three holy day seasons: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Thus, all the priests shared equally in the priestly responsibilities for the entire year."

Early course

Based on Mr. Coulter's writings, we see that he agrees with the many historians who conclude that the course of Abijah mentioned in Luke 1:5 was the early course and not the second course.

On page 9, he continued: "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

On page 10, Mr. Coulter wrote: "John was born approximately between March 18-April 3 . . . Projecting forward nine months from Mary's probable conception, we arrive at the two-week period during which Christ was probably born. That two-week period was Elul 24-Tishri 8, or September 16-29."

An autumn birth seems correct when a Bible student considers that shepherds were watching over their flock by night (Luke 2:8).

Associated with a holy day?

Some people believe the birth occurred on the Feast of Trumpets, and other people believe that Christ was born at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The people who prefer the birth time to be at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles often like to correlate the eight days leading to Christ's circumcision to the time frame leading to the eighth day of the Feast.

Food for thought

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

- Luke 3:23—Christ was 30 years old when He started His ministry.
- Daniel 9:27—Many Bible students wonder if being cut off in the “middle of the week” meant that the ministry of Jesus Christ lasted for $3\frac{1}{2}$ years.
- In that scenario, a person can count backwards six months from His crucifixion (during the Passover in spring) to conclude the time of His birth was in the autumn.