

## Biblical Coins and Dating Issues

One issue that has stood in the way of re-dating Herod's death has been the coin dates of his sons. At first these seem to all confirm that Herod died in 4 B.C. Coins were dated as follows: the year of a ruler's reign was placed on the face of the coin, e.g., year 7. By ascertaining the year the ruler died and subtracting the highest available coin date it should be possible to find the starting date of his reign. For the three sons who succeeded Herod this has worked out to 4 B.C. There are, however, two problems. First, rulers used legal fiction to claim years not really theirs. The best case of this comes from Herod himself. He was proclaimed King of the Jews by the Roman Senate, and three years later he conquered Jerusalem to make that kingship a reality. The first coins he struck said: year 3; he claimed years on the throne in Jerusalem that were not in fact his. Reasons can be found why Herod's three sons who followed him might claim more years than they really ruled. One reason is a co-regency of some kind. There is some support for this in Josephus. Another reason is that the actual royal Hasmonean dynasty princes died several years before Herod's death. Claiming fictional years back to the royal sons would mean there was no intervening rulers who deserved the throne. An additional reason might be to claim years first designated for Herod's son Antipater to be king in Herod's will. After Herod discovered that Antipater was plotting against him, Herod's will was changed and Antipater was executed. Now the discovery of an old, original reading in the earliest manuscripts of Josephus gives new evidence that Herod Phillip began his reign in 1 B.C., and not 4 B.C. The discovery of a coin with a date that pushes another son's rule even earlier than 4 B.C. casts still more doubt on the reliability of coin dating in general, and on 4 B.C. as Herod's death year in particular.

Some statements from the early Christian witnesses about the year of Christ's birth...

Irenaeus of Lyons, writing c. 180... "Our Lord was born about the 41<sup>st</sup> year of the reign of Augustus." This translates to 3/2 B.C.

Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 194. Clement dated the death of the Emperor Commodus 194 years, one month, and thirteen days after the birth of Christ. Commodus was assassinated on the last day of the year 192. Clement thus gives not only a year, but a day for Jesus' birth: November 18, 3 B.C.

Tertullian, writing c. 198... "In the 41<sup>st</sup> year of the empire of Augustus, when he has been reigning for 28 years after the death of Cleopatra, the Christ is born."

Julius Africanus (dates c. 170-c. 240) said Jesus' birth happened in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad. That translates to 3/2 B.C.

Hippolytus of Rome (dates c. 170-236) placed Jesus' birth in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the 194<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, or 3/2 B.C.

Origen (dates c. 185-c. 253) said in a surviving written sermon that Jesus was born in the 41<sup>st</sup> year of the reign of Augustus—3/2 B.C.

Eusebius, one of the first actual church historians, wrote in 325 A.D. that Jesus was born in the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of Augustus. This at first seems to conflict with what Origen, Irenaeus, and Tertullian said (the 41<sup>st</sup> year of Augustus.) But on closer examination, Eusebius is working with an earlier starting point for Augustus' reign. Such confusions can sometimes be explained by different calendars in use simultaneously. Eusebius' statement means Jesus was born in 3/2 B.C.

Epiphanius (c. 315-403)...Like Eusebius, Epiphanius places the birth of Jesus in the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of the reign of Augustus. He also give the names of the consuls in Rome: Octavian for the 13<sup>th</sup> time and Silvanus. These men were the consuls in 2 B.C.

Hippolytus of Thebes gives two references from the reign of Augustus. They seem to be in conflict. One places Jesus' birth in 3/2 B.C. The other places it in 1 B.C. Either way, we are past the 7-5 B.C. time window for Jesus' birth still held by many.

Orosius in *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* wrote that Jesus was born in the 752<sup>nd</sup> year after the founding of the city of Rome. This is the year 2 B.C. Orosius was another of the first actual church historians. He was associated with Augustine and Jerome.