

## Book Review

LEFGREN, JOHN C. *April Sixth*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980. xv + 67 pp. \$5.95.

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John C. Lefgren's *April Sixth* purports to be a scholarly work that attempts to show that both the birth and resurrection of Jesus fell on April sixth and that the Church was organized exactly 1830 years to the day after Jesus' birth. However, if one seeks a careful summary of the "latest evidence" (p. xv) promised in the "Foreword," he has come to the wrong place. The work literally abounds in unjustified assumptions, misinformation, and misunderstandings on a number of levels.

First of all, the general methodology is unscholarly. In his "Acknowledgments" (p. vii), Lefgren describes his general method of working: "The original inspiration for this book came in Finland one evening in the early spring of 1977 when I was reading the eighth chapter of Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon. Since that evening I have searched for the chronological harmony of April sixth." To even the most casual reader, the problems attending this method are blindingly obvious. To set out to prove a point rather than examine all the evidence before drawing a conclusion is to go at it backwards. When working on a scientific or historical problem—Lefgren seemingly labors on both fronts—one neither constructs the theory before the experiments nor prior to carefully sifting the sources. To do otherwise makes the case in advance and most often proves only the investigator's preconceived notions.

But apart from the faulty general methodological approach, there are specific historical and scientific problems that make *April Sixth* an unsatisfactory book: (1) dating Jesus' birth; (2) using erroneous astronomical methods and proof; (3) making faulty historical and calendrical links; (4) dating Jesus' death and resurrection; and (5) using New World chronometry to solve Old World calendrical problems.

## DATING JESUS' BIRTH

One of the most vexing problems for New Testament students is to establish the date of Jesus' birth. *April Sixth* rightly notes that the fundamental difficulty in arguing for a birth date that falls during April, 1 B.C., is the statement made by Josephus, the Jewish historian who was almost a contemporary with Jesus, that King Herod died after an eclipse of the moon and before the following Passover (most scholars point to the eclipse of 12–13 March, 4 B.C.). What is most astonishing is the fashion in which Josephus's information is simply dismissed as "writings that can be ambiguous and inconsistent" (p. 14). Quite to the contrary, recent decades have witnessed a stunning series of confirmations that Josephus is indeed a reliable historian. One has only to recall his description of the last days of Jewish resistance at Masada, the mountain fortress overlooking the Dead Sea, which finally fell to the Romans in A.D. 73.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Yigael Yadin, the archaeologist who oversaw the excavation of Masada between 1963 and 1965, astounded the scholarly world by showing that at every point at which the archaeologists' tools could check his record, Josephus had been perfectly accurate—even though he himself had not accompanied the Roman garrison during that siege. All of which goes to show that Josephus made painstaking efforts to be factual, whether he were an eyewitness or not.

Lefgren notes that a major problem in dating Jesus' birth is dating Herod's death. The widely accepted view that Josephus was referring to the eclipse of 12–13 March, 4 B.C., has been recently disputed by W. E. Filmer (p. 13 and note 7).<sup>2</sup> After noting the eclipses of 9–10 January and 29 December, 1 B.C., Filmer opts for a date for Herod's death between 9 January and Passover in 1 B.C., since this seems to fit best the evidence as he views it. At first glance, it appears that this is fundamental support for *April Sixth's* thesis that Jesus must have been born later than 6 or 5 B.C., the dates required if indeed Herod died in the early spring of 4 B.C. Interestingly, Lefgren departs from Filmer and by himself assigns Herod's death to the period between the eclipse of 29 December, 1 B.C., and Passover of A.D. 1 even though this eclipse was well past its zenith by the time the moon appeared above the presumably cloudless horizon of Jerusalem.

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<sup>1</sup>Josephus *Jewish War* VII. viii. 1–ix. 2 (##252–406).

<sup>2</sup>We should note that there were several lunar eclipses which not only could have been seen in Jerusalem—on a cloudless night, of course—but also would have fallen within the period which forms the focus of discussions on the date of Jesus' birth. The following are four of these lunar eclipse dates: (1) Night of 15–16 September, 5 B.C.; (2) Night of 12–13 March, 4 B.C.; (3) Night of 9–10 January, 1 B.C.; and (4) Early evening of 29 December, 1 B.C.

But even Filmer's observations have not held up under scrutiny. Lefgren cites in note seven an article by Professor Timothy D. Barnes<sup>3</sup> which proves beyond a doubt that the Passover which followed Herod's death was the Passover of 4 B.C. Let us review that evidence.

Josephus stated that Antony declared Herod to be the King of the Jews in Rome.<sup>4</sup> In another work, he said Herod reigned thirty-seven years before his death and ruled thirty-four years after the death of Antigonus I, who had ruled previously.<sup>5</sup> All Roman sources agree absolutely with Josephus's chronology and leave us with the following clearly outlined picture: Antony had gone east in 41 B.C.—after the Battle of Philippi in September, 42 B.C.—to raise money for the civil wars. All sources concur both that he spent the winter of 42–41 in Egypt with Cleopatra and that during the next year Parthian forces invaded Syria. The Parthians were led by Q. Labienus, son of Julius Caesar's general of that name, and Pacorus, son of King Orodes. During 40 B.C., Pacorus was warmly received in Jerusalem, Hyrcanus the High Priest was overthrown, and Herod escaped to Rome where he was proclaimed King of Judea. Three years later, Antony sent an army under C. Sosius to drive Labienus out of Judea and to establish Herod as King (Pacorus had been killed in 38 B.C.). Although he had been declared king while absent from Judea, Herod began his rule in residence in 37 B.C. and coins struck by Sosius establish this particular date. Consequently, Josephus's statement that Herod was made king thirty-seven years before his death places his demise in 4 B.C., observing that regnal years were anciently always reckoned inclusively (i.e., if a monarch lived but part of a year his rule was reckoned as if it had included the entire annual period).

It is absolutely impossible, then, that Josephus's reference can be taken in any other way, clearly ruling out the insistence in *April Sixth* that Herod must have died three or, more likely, four years later. Further, the Roman historical sources which support Josephus cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand as *April Sixth* does when it surprisingly claims that historians "are able to define within a tolerance of at least two years the timing of the fifteenth year" of Tiberius's reign (p. 19; mentioned in Luke 3:1). Let there be no mistake about it: There exists no "tolerance of at least two years" (implying, presumably, two years one way or the other and, thus, a slippage factor of four years). The time of death for Tiberius's predecessor,

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<sup>3</sup>See Timothy D. Barnes, "The Date of Herod's Death," *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 19 (April 1968): 204–9.

<sup>4</sup>Josephus *Jewish War* I. xiv. 3 (##284f.).

<sup>5</sup>Josephus *Antiquities* XVII. viii. 1 (#191).

Augustus, is known almost to the minute—the afternoon of 19 August, A.D. 14—and it is plainly established that Tiberius was proclaimed emperor four weeks later on September 17.<sup>6</sup>

Professor Barnes's telling observations take us one step further away from the position taken in *April Sixth*, noting that Jewish tradition assigns Herod's death to the seventh day of Chislev, the Jewish month that corresponds to portions of November and December of our calendar. In this connection, Barnes naturally noted the eclipse that occurred during the night of 15–16 September, 5 B.C. It has always been somewhat difficult to fit within a three-week period following the eclipse of 12–13 March, 4 B.C., all the events mentioned by Josephus that were connected with the closing of Herod's reign. But if, as Barnes suggests, Herod really died on 7 Chislev, 5 B.C. (that is, in early December), then the dating of Herod's death would fit not only Josephus's notation that Herod died between the eclipse and the following Passover but also the Jewish tradition which assigns the event to the month of Chislev. Consequently, although Lefgren must have been aware of this information, since he cites Barnes's article, he did not take it into account in his attempt to solve this key problem for dating Jesus' birth in terms of Old World chronology. Thus, Lefgren's solution in *April Sixth* is exposed as a house built upon sand.

#### ASTRONOMICAL PROBLEMS

Next, let us turn to the six particular problems of astronomical phenomena which form a major bulwark of the "scientific" proofs of *April Sixth*.

1. On pages 43–44, Lefgren maintains that two lunar calendars seem to have been in use in Jesus' day (more on this to follow). The "Galileans and Pharisees," who allegedly followed a sunrise-to-sunrise measurement of the day, would have started their lunar month "about twelve hours before the calendar commission of the Sanhedrin witnessed the crescent of the new moon" (p. 44). The chart on pages 38–39 graphically supports this notion. But this is madness. What evidence is there that any society ever began a lunar calendar month without the new moon's being sighted? Any calendrical system based on the phases of the moon has always relied on the first sighting. Moreover, observance of the sliver above the western horizon on the day expected can never be counted on as

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<sup>6</sup>Tacitus *Annals* I. 10–13.

assured. So how, one asks incredulously, could the “Galileans and Pharisees” know at *sunrise* of a given day that that day should be the first day of a new month when the calendar commission had to wait until sunset of that evening to verify whether the first sliver of the new moon was actually visible? If it were not visible, then they had to wait until the next evening to check again for the beginning of the new month.

2. In Table 1 on pages 22–23, it is claimed the astronomical new moon occurred at 1:49 p.m. on Wednesday, 22 March, 1 B.C., and that about 28 hours later the thin lunar crescent was sighted in Jerusalem at sunset on Thursday, 23 March, thus beginning the lunar month of Nisan. But any sighting of the new crescent moon within twenty-four hours or so of the astronomical new moon is deemed so unusual by modern astronomers that such spectacles are counted among the earliest sightings ever recorded. It seems astonishing that Lefgren wants us to believe that this particular new moon was seen in near-record time.

3. In the two difficulties discussed above, it is clear that *April Sixth* assumes another thing that cannot and should not be assumed: that the sky was clear on the dates chosen (see also p. 58). Anyone acquainted with seasons in the Holy Land knows that winter and early spring constitute the rainy season of the year. Is it not too much to presume that those particular evening and night skies almost 2,000 years ago were clear just when *April Sixth* says that they were?

4. A big thing is made of distinguishing between stars and planets when discussing the appearance of the new star at Jesus’ birth (p. 17f.). But the ancients did not make that differentiation. The Greek word from which our word for planet is derived refers in the first instance to a wanderer, that is, a wandering star. As late as Copernicus, even the sun was called a planet since it, like the other planets, wandered in the heavens among the “fixed” stars.

5. Astronomical data does not prove that the triple conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter of 7 B.C. occurred “during October,” as is claimed (p. 17). A triple conjunction, a phenomenon in which two planets appear to pass very closely together three times because of our angle of sight from the moving earth, cannot possibly occur during a single month. The three conjunctions of 7 B.C., in fact, fell on 27 May, 1 October, and 5 December.

6. One always has to bear in mind that on such questions as the date of Jesus’ birth the evidence of astronomy will not and cannot be decisive. The fact that the question has been raised again in recent

months illustrates that there continues to be room for debate.<sup>7</sup> In the end, it is the evidence from history based on the testimony of eyewitnesses—when it is available—which alone can resolve such problems.

#### CALENDRIAL PROBLEMS

One major historical difficulty derives from another calendrical concern linked to the world of the New Testament. Beginning on page 14, *April Sixth* notes that there is a question about the identity of the governor. Roman sources say that person served as governor during A.D. 6–7, several years after Jesus' birth date by any computation. But the identity of the Roman-appointed governor is of secondary importance because it draws attention away from the primary issue: the taxation requirement to which Joseph and Mary were responding when they journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem. For other than Luke's notation, no confirmation can be found in contemporary Roman sources of a call for an enrollment of the people of Palestine. For a possible solution, we must turn to Tertullian, an early Christian writer who died about A.D. 225 and thus who wrote some two hundred years after the fact. With obvious reference to Luke's statement, Tertullian maintains that the census was "taken in Judea by Sentius Saturninus,"<sup>8</sup> governor in Syria during the years 9–6 B.C., a time period which does not match the theory of *April Sixth*. If indeed Tertullian had access to public documentation of the census, as he seems to have had, then Lefgren's position remains without any support.

#### JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

*April Sixth* concludes that Jesus died on 3 April, A.D. 33, and arose from the dead on Sunday, 5 April (pp. 42–47). In his discussion, Lefgren has noted there appears to be a question whether the Last Supper was indeed a Passover meal (as in the synoptic Gospels) or fell rather on the day before Passover (as in the Gospel of John). Through the years the solution to this difficulty has been approached in a number of ways. But *April Sixth* claims—unexpectedly and without any documentation—that the problem is to be resolved by noting that "Judeans and Sadducees" differed by one day in their

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<sup>7</sup>See John Mosley, "When Was That Christmas Star?" *Griffith Observer* 44 (December 1980): 2–9, who suggests that a series of remarkable conjunctions involving Jupiter, Mars, Venus, and the star Regulus between 12 August, 3 B.C., and 27 August, 2 B.C., may point to the astronomical phenomena seen by the Magi.

<sup>8</sup>*Against Marcion*, iv. 9; see discussion in J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 237f.

calendrical reckoning from “Galileans and Pharisees.” It is true that the ancient Israelite reckoning that the day’s beginning came at sunrise seems to have still been known among the Jews of Jesus’ day (this can be seen in the synoptic Gospels), as opposed to the more official view that the day began at sunset (as reflected in John). Lefgren either ignored this in his calculations or did not know about it. In any event, in *April Sixth* he has invented something out of thin air to explain a discrepancy which can be and should have been solved on other grounds. Naturally, the solution makes a good deal of difference as to which year one selects to fit his idea that Jesus was resurrected on the fifth (sixth?) of April. But the year of A.D. 33 is also suspect. Any calculation that the Passover of A.D. 33 fell on 3 April, a Friday, has to be based on a study published by J. K. Fotheringham in 1934. In a more recent study, R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein raise serious questions about Fotheringham’s work and all but show that the Passover of A.D. 33 fell on May second, a Saturday!<sup>9</sup> Thus, *April Sixth*’s reconstruction cannot be held inviolate, to say the least.

#### OLD AND NEW WORLD CALENDARS

*April Sixth* treats three pivotal assumptions as if they were established facts. Unfortunately for the reader, the book gives no hint that the following are mere hypotheses:

1. It is possible to measure accurately, in terms of both Old World chronology and modern calendars, the length of Jesus’ life by using Book of Mormon chronometry.
2. The Mayan calendar—and, thus, the Nephite calendar—was based upon Egyptian calendrical measurements.
3. Following the sign of Jesus’ birth, Nephites reckoned time from the very day of that sign.

While these presuppositions concern calendrical matters linked primarily with the Book of Mormon and the New World, Lefgren uses them inextricably to reach his solutions of Old World chronological difficulties.

Using Book of Mormon chronology to measure the length of Jesus’ life, especially in terms of Old World calendar systems, must fail simply because we do not know what calendrical arrangements were employed by the Nephites. There exists some evidence that the people of Zarahemla and possibly the Jaredites used a lunar calendar.

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<sup>9</sup>Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1942).

This observation is based on the notation of “nine moons” as the length of time during which a certain Coriantumr, lone survivor of the Jaredite people, lived with Zarahemla’s people (Omni 1:21). But whether the Nephites themselves employed a lunar or solar calendar at the time of Jesus’ birth is a question for which the Book of Mormon provides no clear answer. It is begging the question for *April Sixth* to maintain that the Nephites followed the “Egyptian civil calendar” after departing Jerusalem (pp. 49–51). There are too many puzzles which remain unresolved: (1) We do not know that Lehi followed this system in preference to the religious calendar of the Kingdom of Judah which in his day included the festivals enjoined by the law of Moses. (2) We do not know whether the Nephites used a lunar or solar calendar. (3) It remains undemonstrated that the “Egyptian civil calendar” became the basis for later Mesoamerican time calculations. (4) There is no proven link between the Nephite system of reckoning of time—whatever it may have been—and that used by Indian civilizations which flourished later. The calculation of the number of days in Nephite reckoning between the date of Jesus’ birth and the date of the sign of Jesus’ death (12,049 days [p. 52]) is based not only upon unproven assumptions related to all of these problems but also upon highly questionable data—which has been generated by considering the dates of Jesus’ birth and resurrection from Old World sources.

In this connection, there remains one further point to be made regarding Book of Mormon calendars. *April Sixth* stiffly maintains that at the sign of Jesus’ birth “the normal reckoning of time was interrupted . . . and the Nephites began a new reckoning, marking the meridian of time and the beginning of a new age” (p. 32). What it does not say is that the prevailing calendar was not altered until nine years after the appearance of the sign (3 Nephi 2:5–8). Further, there is no evidence that the beginning of the year itself was altered so that each subsequent year began on the anniversary of the sign. It seems just as possible, if not more probable, that the Nephites made the year in which the sign appeared simply the first year of their new calendrical system rather than moved the start of the year to the anniversary of the sign’s appearance. The legal, religious, and cultural difficulties caused by such a dramatic shifting of dates would have brought chaos to the Nephite society.

We cannot leave off without making one final comment. The major supporting pillar throughout *April Sixth* remains the statement found in D&C 20:1. Without exception this scripture is interpreted as a clear reference that the formal organization of the Church took place precisely 1830 years after the birth of Jesus. But, is that the only

possible way to understand this passage? Is it not just as likely that the phrase “one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh” constitutes a passing acknowledgment by the Lord of the date on which, according to our current calendrical system, the Church was being organized? Why should it mean more than that? No less a commentator than Elder Bruce R. McConkie has noted, “We do not believe it is possible with the present state of knowledge—including that which is known both in and out of the Church—to state with finality when the natal day of the Lord Jesus actually occurred”<sup>10</sup> Because it cannot be proven that the passage in D&C 20 is anything more than a notation of the date of that very special and solemn organizational meeting of the Church, the entire enterprise of *April Sixth* remains at very best largely unscholarly, misleading, and clothed in doubt.

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<sup>10</sup>Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary*, Book I (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), p. 349; see also Hyrum M. Smith, *The Doctrine and Covenants Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, Jr., the Prophet, with an Introduction and Historical and Exegetical Notes* (Liverpool, England: George F. Richards, 1919), p. 138.