

# Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

**#76 • Season 3 • Episode 15**

*12/24/2025*

# A Belated Birthday?



# Our Hosts

**Janet Cheyne McMahon** is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

**Rob McMahon** is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

**Deanna Cheyne**, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

**James Cheyne**, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.  
Inset: Pip

# A Belated Birthday?

## #76 - Season 3; Episode 15

12/24/2025

Host: Jim.

| Jim explores some theories about the actual birth date of Jesus, and how December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen.

[Music]

**JIM:** It started with that Santa Claus thing. You know what I mean. Then they said December 25<sup>th</sup> probably wasn't Jesus' real birthday after all, and that no one really knows when his birthday was. Well, okay, but 45 years ago, I discovered something that I thought just might solve that puzzle. And it starts right there in Luke's account of the Nativity, something I had read right over without ever noticing. Not the "decree went out from Caesar Augustus" part. It's the page before. And Luke is giving specific details about a man named Zechariah. And I started asking questions. Why was Zechariah in the temple? What is this priestly order of Abijah? Why is Luke time stamping things? 5 months of solitude for Elizabeth. The 6<sup>th</sup> month, a visit from Mary, who stays for 3 months. And Luke attaches the story to Augustus Caesar, Quirinius, a census, and Tiberius Caesar. I wondered: Is Luke leaving us a breadcrumb trail of clues we should follow to the true date of Jesus' birth? This sounds a bit like Dan Brown stuff, but at that time, I hadn't heard of "The Da Vinci Code," and I also hadn't heard of the Internet. So off to the library I went.

There I sit at a long table, working through stacks of books, notepad at the ready. Here's the thing though. If you ever think you're about to discover something no one else has discovered, know this: more likely than not, many people got there before you did. Turns out, there's a cottage industry for figuring out the date of Jesus' birth, all using the same clues from Luke, plus some other fascinating material.

So get your notepads ready, and here's one example.

Luke sets the scene. Zechariah is a priest, serving in the temple, when the angel Gabriel appears and announces to him that Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, will bear a child, whom Zechariah will name John. Zechariah and Elizabeth are quite old, so Zechariah asks how this is possible. This offends Gabriel, so much so that he strikes Zechariah mute as punishment for his doubt. This is Luke chapter 1.

Six months later, Gabriel appears and announces to Mary that she will bear a child, whom she will name Jesus. Mary is a virgin, so Mary asks how this is possible. But this does not offend Gabriel, who simply explains how this will happen, and then leaves. Mary then visits Elizabeth to share this news, and at Mary's greeting the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Mary recites her Magnificat, stays with Elizabeth for 3 months, and then returns to Nazareth. We're still in chapter 1.

Zechariah and Elizabeth do have a child, and when Zechariah writes, as the angel instructed, that his name will be John, his tongue is freed, and he prophesies about his son, who we

will come to know as John the Baptist. That concludes the lengthy chapter 1.

So let's collect up all the relevant details, and head to chapter 2, where we meet Caesar Augustus and Quirinius, and the census that causes Mary and Joseph, for reasons that elude me, to return to Joseph's ancestral home in Bethlehem. There, Mary delivers Jesus. There are lots of angels, some shepherds, a drummer boy, and you know the rest.

So what can we figure out so far? During the time of Augustus, John and Jesus are conceived, John first, then Jesus 6 months later. If we were to know exactly when John was conceived, we could start from there, add 6 months, and then add a normal gestation period, and we should arrive at the correct season for Jesus' birth. If we're lucky, we might get the correct date as well.

First, let's chase down the year John was born. That takes us to the book of Numbers, where we learn that rabbis and priests began their ministries at the age of 30. The Gospels address both John and Jesus as rabbis, and Luke confirms the 30-year mark for Jesus. Luke also places the start of John's ministry in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Now that's a date we do know. Tiberius' reign began on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 14 AD, so his 15<sup>th</sup> year would have run from mid-September, 28, to mid-September, 29. Subtracting 30 years puts John's birth in the year 3 or 2 BC.

Can we narrow it down even more? Well, Luke had identified Zechariah as a priest in the order of Abijah. That takes us to the book of 1 Chronicles, where we find a list of the priestly orders and also the turn each order would take serving in the temple. Jehoiarib's order served first. We'll meet them again in a moment. Abijah's order, including Zechariah, served eighth. Stay with me. We're getting close. Each priestly order served in the temple for one week. That meant each group would give normal service twice a year.

We are now one vital piece of information away from knowing exactly when Zechariah was serving, and with it when John was conceived, and therefore when Jesus was born. All we need is one record somewhere, one scrap of papyrus with an actual date on it. Remember, our target is 3 to 2 BC.

It turns out we do have one, and it records one of the most horrific dates in all of Jewish history. In the year 70 AD, to put down a Jewish revolt, Roman forces laid siege to Jerusalem. On August 30<sup>th</sup> of that year, Roman soldiers entered and desecrated the Holy of Holies and destroyed the temple, leaving, as someone once said, "not one stone on top of another." This ended Judaism's temple service and altered Judaism forever.

Talmudic records, as well as the Jewish historian Josephus, record that event carefully. Both sources identify the priestly order on service at that time, and we met them a moment ago. It was the division of Jehoiarib. With that starting point, people with a lot of spreadsheets, a lot of calendars, and a lot of time on their hands began working back in time, week by week, adjusting for holy days and festivals and leap years, and discovered when exactly Zechariah would have been serving in the temple. And you want to thank me now because I will, mercifully, cut through the weeds of all that work and announce two possible dates for John's conception. One is January 26<sup>th</sup>, 3 BC. The other is July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 3 BC. With that, we've got two possible dates for Jesus' birth.

Now, it would be very rude of me at this point to say, "Please join us next week for part two of our quest of the historical birthday of Jesus."

[Music]

Sorry, I just needed a coffee break there.

If John was conceived on January 26<sup>th</sup>, 3 BC, then Jesus would have been born on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2 BC. And if John was conceived on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 3 BC, Jesus would have been born on September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2 BC. Those are the dates the calculations give us.

That second set of dates for John and Jesus hold a secret not immediately apparent, a revelation, as it were. Checking those dates against known Jewish holy days reveals three startling coincidences. 1. John the Baptist would have been born on Passover, and that's the expected time of Elijah's return to herald the coming Messiah. 2. Jesus, the light of the world, would have been conceived on the first day of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. And 3. Jesus's birthday, the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us, would have fallen on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrates the dwelling of God with God's people. And isn't it John's gospel that identifies Jesus as the pre-existent Word made flesh to dwell with us? And doesn't John use a Greek word for "dwell" that also means "to tabernacle with"?

Things line up so well with such theological meaning that this is a very attractive result. Almost seductively so. We could stop right here and announce our "Eureka!" moment, but here are the problems I see with this approach and with these conclusions.

First, the Bible does not make a point of placing Jesus' birth on any theologically significant date. And pulling bits and pieces together to get a desired result is not how the Bible works. Fitting pieces together to get a picture we like, however attractive that picture might be, is not at all the same as solving a puzzle correctly. And Luke's language is too vague for this kind of calculation, anyway. Gabriel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will conceive, but he doesn't say when it will happen. He does say it happens "after those days." Well, how long is that? When Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, he places that event at some unspecified time in the future. Jesus' birth happens during Herod the Great's reign. Most evidence puts Herod's death in 4 BC, too soon for our conclusions. For all our calculations and cleverness, we are no closer to discovering Jesus' actual birth date than when we started.

But for me, the more interesting question is this. We might not know when Jesus was actually born, but how did we end up celebrating it on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December? And this part has solid evidence.

First, the winter solstice for Rome was December 25<sup>th</sup>, and there were two festivals at that time of year, one in honor of Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture, and one in honor of Sol Invictus, Roman god of the sun. These festivals involved activities that fit well with Christmas traditions - banquets, festivities, exchanging of gifts - plus, the winter solstice signaled the return of light to the world, an obvious choice for celebrating the appearance of Jesus, the light of the world. So the first formal celebration of Christ's birth was on December 25<sup>th</sup> in the year 336 AD, under Constantine, who was eager to unify his empire.

But that wasn't the first time Christians had set their sights on that date. In the year 204, something in the calendar caught the eye of a theologian named Hippolytus. Hippolytus noticed that if you placed Jesus' conception on the spring equinox, March 25<sup>th</sup>, his birthday would then fall on the winter solstice, December 25<sup>th</sup>. Hippolytus liked this idea, since it fit well with what many ancients believed, that important cosmological events could signal

important human events. There is the spring equinox, so there is the conception of Jesus. There is the winter solstice, so there is Jesus' birth. He chose these dates for their theological tidiness, not because he thought they were historically accurate.

To conclude then, here's a bit of trivia. Scholars these days date events as CE or BCE, that is, in the Common Era or Before the Common Era. I've been using the more familiar BC and AD, just so I could share the following. This system of using BC and AD for years was invented in the year 525 AD by Dionysius Exiguus in response to a request by Pope John I to come up with a new system for determining the dates for Easter. The old system was a mess, and could put Easter at the wrong phase of the moon, or even at one point it put Easter Sunday on a Saturday. Dionysius did as requested and produced reliable tables for Easter 96 years into the future. But Dionysius made a mistake, not discovered until the Renaissance, and we are left with it still. Accounting for his mistake, we now have to say that Christ was born 4 to 6 years before Christ.

So is Jesus the reason for the season? Sure. And did we choose the winter solstice season for a reason? That too. And December 25<sup>th</sup> works well, since we have that day off anyway.

Personally, I like thinking of Jesus' nativity coinciding with the Festival of Lights and the Festival of Tabernacles. These ideas make for good meditation, but bad dogma.

*[Music]*

Jan and Rob have been absent from these podcasts for a few weeks. It has to do with vacation schedules and holiday schedules and visits from family and such. But they'll return soon - soon enough that we can still call them hosts and not have to welcome them as guests.

For my part, I would like to thank you for joining me here again for this brief look at another bit of history around the Christmas season. I look forward to you joining us here again.

Until next time.