When was Jesus born?
One estimate suggests September, 3 B.C.

(Summarized from E. L. Martin, "The Star that Astonished the World," ASK Publications, Box 25000, Portland Or. 1991. From the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) website: http://www.ewtn.com/library/scriptur/chrdat.txt

(1) The date of the birth of Christ hinges on just one thing, the statement of Josephus (Antiquities 17.6-8) that Herod died shortly after an eclipse of the moon. Astronomers supply the dates for such eclipses around those years:

- None in 7 or 6 B.C.
- In 5 B.C., March 23, 29 days to Passover. Also in 5 B.C. Sept. 15, 7 months to Passover
- In 4 B.C. March 13, 29 days to Passover
- 3 and 2 B.C. no eclipses
- In 1 B.C. January 10, 12 1/2 weeks to Passover

(2) Josephus also tells what events happened between the Eclipse and the Passover (cf. Martin pp. 85-87).They would occupy probably about 12 weeks. Martin also, pp. 99-101 shows that the eclipse of Sept. 15,5 B.C. could not fit with known data, especially the fact that Herod was seriously ill in Jericho (over 800 feet below sea level) when the eclipse happened—but Jericho was a furnace of heat at that time, Sept. 15. Herod would not have stayed there when he could have had the much better climate of Jerusalem. But if the eclipse was in midwinter—Jan. 10, Herod would find Jericho comfortable.

(3) We know from an inscription from Paphlagonia in Asia Minor - cf. Lewis and Reinhold, Roman Civilization, Source Book II, pp. 34-35—that in 3 B.C. all the people took an oath of allegiance to Augustus. The same oath is also reported by the Armenian historian Moses of Khorene, and by the later historian Orosius.

(4) Augustus was to receive the great title of Pater Patriae on Feb. 5, 2 B.C. So the actual governor of Palestine, probably Varus, would have had to go to Rome for the festivities, and since sailing on the Mediterranean stopped about Nov. 1, and did not resume until Spring, he must have gone in the early fall of 3 B.C. But Quirinius was nearby, had just finished a successful war against the Homonadenses. So he was left as acting Governor. Luke does not use the noun governor, but the participle, "governing".

(5) There is an obscure decade in history, 6 B.C. to 4 A.D., as Classicists readily recognize. Yet this period is important, including the time when Tiberius was absent from political life at Rome, being at Capri. It is hard to fit the events of this period into place if we make the birth of Christ early as is commonly done. But if we put it in 3 B.C. the difficulties are over. For example, we know Augustus received his 15th acclamation for a major victory, won by one of his generals, around this time. If we pick 4 B.C. for the death of Herod, we cannot find a victory to warrant the acclamation, which came in 1 A.D. But if we put the birth of Christ in 3 B.C., then the war would be running at about the needed time, and finished in 1 A.D.

Objection: a) Josephus says Herod had a reign of 37 years after being proclaimed king by Romans, and had 34 yrs. after death of Antigonus, which came soon after Herod took Jerusalem. b) Further, his 3 successors, Archelaus, Antipas and Philip started to reign in 4 B.C. So Herod died in 4 B.C.

Reply: a) That calculation would make death of Herod actually in 3 B.C., not in 4 B.C.—scholars have to stretch the date to 4 B.C., since no eclipse of moon happened in 3 B.C. But, Herod took Jerusalem late in

36 B.C. (on Yom Kippur in a sabbatical year, so well remembered—and Josephus says Pompey had taken Jerusalem in 63 which was 27 yrs. to the day of Herod's capture of Jerusalem). Using the common accession year dating, we see Herod started his 34 years on Nisan 1 in 35 B.C., and those years would end on Nisan 1 B.C. So 34 years after 35 B.C. yields 1 B.C. for death of Herod after eclipse of Jan. 10) As to the 3 successors, Herod lost favor of Augustus in 4 B.C., on a false report, was no longer "Friend of Caesar", but "Subject". Antedating of reigns was common—reason here was to make the three seem to connect with the two "royal" sons, of Hasmonean descent, Alexander and Aristobulus, whom Herod executed on false reports from Antipater (do not confuse with Antipas).

The Star

In the evening of June 17, 2 B.C., there was a spectacular astronomical event in the western sky. Venus moved eastward seemingly going to collide with Jupiter. They appeared as one star, not two, dominating the twilight of the western sky in the direction of Palestine. This conjunction had not happened for centuries, would not happen again for more centuries.

Jupiter was considered the Father, Venus the Mother. Ten 19 days later, on August 31st. Venus came within .36 degrees of Mercury. On Sept. 11 came the New Moon, the Jewish New Year. This happened when Jupiter, the Kin planed was approaching Regulus, the King star.

Further, there were three conjunctions of Jupiter and Regulus within the constellation of Leo, the lion which was considered the head of the Zodiac. Now Gen. 49:10 had foretold there would always be a ruler from Judah, whom Jacob called the lion, until the time of the Messiah. Leo was dominated by the star Regulus, which astronomers called the King Star. The Magi, being astronomers and astrologers, would surely read these signs. (The three conjunctions with Regulus were Aug. 12, 3 B.C.; Feb. 17, 2 B.C., and May 8/9 2 B.C.).

Also, on Dec. 25 of 2 B.C., Jupiter stopped for 6 days over Bethlehem. This is a normal motion for Jupiter, it stops twice, and reverses its seeming movement due to “retrograde motion”.[1] This may have been the very time the Magi came with their gifts. This was also the time of the Hanukkah festival, during which it was customary for Jewish Fathers to give gifts to their children.

Martin thinks the birth of Jesus was in September 3 B.C., and the probable date of the Magi was Dec. 25, 2 B.C.

More than 600 planetariums here and in Europe have revised their Christmas star show to match this work of E. L. Martin.

1. Retrograde motion is in the direction opposite to the movement of something else. For example, when you accelerate past another vehicle on the highway, the other vehicle appears to be moving backwards as you speed by it, but in reality, the vehicle is still moving forward. Retrograde motion explains the “erratic” orbits of celestial bodies or planets as viewed from the planet Earth. For an example “retrograde motion, please click on the following link: http://www.lasalle.edu/~smithsc/Astronomy/retrograd.html