

CHAPTER 4

CHRONOLOGY OF JESUS' LIFE

[*Harmony*, Essay 11, "Chronology of the Life of Christ"]

See W. R. Thompson, "Chronology of the NT," *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; and other encyclopedia articles. Precision is impossible, but a general outline is possible.

Date of Jesus' Birth

Census of Quirinius

Full name, Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. Mentioned in Luke 2:1-2:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

The KJV "Cyrenius" spelling is caused by the translation of the name from Latin into Greek into English.

Augustus was the Roman emperor 30 B.C. – A.D. 14. Under him various men served as governors of Syria:

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|-----------------------|----------|
| C. Sentius Saturninus | 9-6 B.C. |
| P. Quintilus Varus | 6-4 B.C. |
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| | |
| Quirinius | A.D. 6-7 |

Note that Quirinius was not in that official position during the probable time of Jesus' birth. Rather, he was a military leader in the region, the representative of Augustus in Pisidia in Asia Minor, 12 B.C. – 2 B.C. Luke 2:2 uses the participle ἡγεμονεύοντοζ *hegemoneuontos*, which

means “while he was governing.” That word would adequately describe Quirinius’ position as the chief military official in the region.

Sir William Ramsay, *Was Christ Born in Bethlehem?* (1898), has noted the existence of a damaged inscription in the Lateran Museum, which mentions an unnamed Roman who governed Syria twice, who, Ramsay suggests, could be Quirinius, thus allowing for his being governor at an earlier time and ordering the census mentioned by Luke.

There was a census which Quirinius as governor did order in A.D. 6-7, which is well known, and referred to in Acts 5:37 and in Josephus, *Ant.* 17:13:5 and 18:1:1. There is no extant direct evidence of an earlier census under him, except Luke 2:1-2.

However, an earlier census is quite possible. The custom was to hold such a census every 14 years. Census papers have been found for the years A.D. 90-258. There is also evidence of a census in A.D. 62, and some for A.D. 20. With the documented census of A.D. 6, we would expect one ca. 8 B.C.

Also note that Luke says that this was the “first” census, which would allow for the census of Acts 5:37 being the second census Quirinius ordered.

This point has been the subject of a major attack against the historicity of the Gospels, started by David F. Strauss in 1835 (cf. also George Wesley Buchanan in *BAR* 3:3 [Sept. 1977], 50-51). Strauss’s arguments are answered point by point in Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (1957, ET 1959), pp. 21-32.

Assuming the decree from Augustus for a census went out ca. 8 B.C., Jesus’ birth would be within a few years of that time.

The Star

The star announcing the birth of Christ is mentioned in Matt 2:2, 7, 9-10. If it was a miraculous phenomenon, then it does not indicate a particular date. If it was a natural phenomenon, then its date might be determined.

In favor of a miraculous phenomenon: the star seems to move, and guide the wise men to the house.

In favor of a natural phenomenon:

- The wise men had to be told to go to Bethlehem.
- “Magi” refers to astrologers.

Rule of Herod the Great

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great; also, the visit of the Magi was during his reign (Matt 2:1-19; cf. Luke 1:5, conception of John).

Josephus in several places dates Herod's rule, 40 B.C. – 4 B.C. Astronomical events associated with Herod's death place it in early April, 4 B.C.

Herod's command to kill the infants two year old and younger shows that Jesus probably was born at least a year or two before Herod's death in 4 B.C.; we do not know how much earlier before his death Herod gave this command.

Jesus' age during his ministry

Assume Jesus' ministry beginning ca. A.D. 27 (see below).

John 8:57, at the end of his ministry (ca. A.D. 30) Jesus was said to be not yet 50 years old. Thus he was born after 20 B.C.

“You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

Luke 3:23, at the beginning of his ministry, “about 30 years old.” Puts birth about 4 B.C. (remember, from 1 B.C. to A.D. 1 is only one year).

Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli,

Division of Abijah

See Luke 1:5.

The division of Abijah was one of 24 priestly divisions (1 Chr 24:7-18). It was the 8th division in the list (v. 10). Each division served a one-week session, two times a year.

Cf. Appendix 7 in Edersheim *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* 2:705.

Josephus (*B.J.* 6:4:1, 5) and *Taan.* 29a, say that the temple was destroyed Aug. 5, A.D. 70, while the division Jehoiarib was on duty (the first division on the list). Counting back to 6

B.C. puts the division of Abijah on duty October 2-9. Thus, if Christ was born near 5 B.C., the months could have been June or December.

Note that this argument can be used to show the times of year, not the year itself.

For good articles on the 24 courses, with pictures and plates, see E. J. Vardaman and J. B. Adair, eds., *The Teacher's Yoke: Studies in Memory of Henry Trantham* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 1964); chapters include E. J. Vardaman, "Introduction to the Caesarean Inscription of the 24 Priestly Courses," pp. 42-45, and Michael Avi-Yonah, "The Caesarean Inscription of the 24 Priestly Courses," pp. 46-57. This inscription was discovered in 1962.

Conclusion for birth of Jesus

Ca. 7-6 B.C.

Beginning of Jesus' Ministry

Data for beginning of ministry

Luke 3:23, Jesus "about 30" at beginning of ministry. If Jesus was born ca. 7-6 B.C., 30 years later would be ca. A.D. 24-25. However, the term "about" in Luke shows the number to be approximate, and other data must be considered to have a more precise figure.

Luke 3:1, (beginning of John's ministry, about the same time as Jesus' ministry began) 15th year of Tiberius, while Pontius Pilate in office. Tiberius ruled A.D. 14-37. The Roman calculation shown on coins of his 15th year was August A.D. 28 - August A.D. 29. The Jewish calculation, starting in A.D. 11, when Tiberius was made coregent, comes to A.D. 26. Pontius Pilate was in office A.D. 26/27-37.

John 2:20, temple being built 46 years. This was Jesus' first Passover of his public ministry. The temple was started by Herod in the 18th year of his reign (Josephus, *Ant.* 15:11:1), in 20/19 B.C. This would indicate Jesus' first public Passover was in A.D. 27.

Conclusion for beginning of ministry

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|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Jesus' baptism | fall, A.D. 26 |
| Jesus' ministry beginning | spring, A.D. 27 |

Duration of Jesus' Ministry

Feasts in John's Gospel

A.D. 27 (spring), Passover (2:13, 23; 4:45)

(A.D. 28), "a feast of the Jews" (5:1). Could be Passover, leading to a three-year ministry; perhaps another feast, allowing a two-year ministry. Here we assume it is a Passover, or another feast still allowing a three-year ministry.

A.D. 29 (spring), Passover (6:4)

A.D. 29 (fall), Feast of Tabernacles (7:2, 8, 10, 14, 37)

A.D. 29 (winter), Feast of Dedication (10:22)

A.D. 30 (spring), Passover (11:55 and following)

Hints in Mark of a ministry of at least two years

Mark 2:23, harvest implies spring of the year

Mark 6:39, "green grass" implies spring of the year again

Mark 14:1, final Passover, in the spring

Conclusion for duration of ministry

2 or 3 years, probably 3 years

Date of Jesus' Death

Preliminary dates

If two-year ministry spring, A.D. 29

If three-year ministry spring, A.D. 30

Relation to the Jewish calendar

It is apparent that Jesus was crucified on Friday, and that he celebrated the Lord's Supper on Thursday evening. There is quite a bit of discussion on the relation of these days to the Jewish calendar, with some maintaining that John and the Synoptics differ. This question will be dealt with later in the notes. It seems best to assume that Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover meal, held the evening after the day Nisan 14, and that he was crucified on Friday, Nisan 15.

Since the Passover is related to the new moon, it is possible to calculate astronomically the years in which Friday would be Nisan 14 or 15 (Nisan 15 being preferred).

Results: A.D. 27, 29, 30, 33

A.D. 27 is too early, and A.D. 33 is too late. In A.D. 29 the Friday of Passover week would have been Nisan 14. In A.D. 30 the Friday would have been either Nisan 14 or Nisan 15. Since Nisan 15 is preferred, the year probably was A.D. 30.

Conclusion for death of Jesus

Spring, A.D. 30

Suggested Chronology for the Life of Jesus

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| 7-6 B.C. | Jesus' birth |
| A.D. 26 | Jesus' baptism |
| A.D. 27 | First Passover of Jesus' public ministry |
| A.D. 30 | Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection |