

Important Dates in the Life of Jesus

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The 70 Weeks as the Lynchpin

The key to determining the important dates in the life of Jesus is the 70 Weeks prophecy. In Appendix A of volume II in our book *Jesus and His Teachings* we explore the entire prophecy in some detail. However, for our purposes here, we will simply calculate the dates involved in that prophecy.

The Decree for the Beginning of the 70 Weeks

By determining the date for the *going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem* (v. 25), we can calculate the beginning date for the 70 weeks. There are four official statements from three different Persian kings that pertain to the rebuilding of part or all of the city of Jerusalem. They are outlined below:

Cyrus (ca. 537 B.C.)—a decree to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4) under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2)

Darius I (ca. 519 B.C.)—a statement to confirm Cyrus' decree after Samaritan trouble (Ezra 6:1-12)

Artaxerxes I (458-457 B.C.)—a decree to allow the Jews to return in greater numbers and to appoint judges for both religious and political cases under the leadership of Ezra (Ezra 7:11-26)

Artaxerxes I (445-444 B.C.)—a statement giving permission to Nehemiah to return and supervise a rebuilding in confirmation of his earlier decree (Nehemiah 2:1-18)

It should be acknowledged that none of the decrees specifically mention the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. However, Ezra seems to have understood that it was implied in Artaxerxes' first decree, for Jerusalem was reestablished as the Jewish capital, and the Jewish nation was given a fair amount of autonomy, subject to ultimate Persian oversight of course, as a result of this decree. The testimony of Ezra 6:14 confirms this conclusion by referring to the three decrees of all three kings as one decree: *And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.* That means that not until the decree of Artaxerxes could the command to restore and build Jerusalem

be said to go forth. Since the second statement by Artaxerxes was a confirmation of his earlier decree, then we can safely infer that the command to restore and build Jerusalem was the first decree issued by Artaxerxes I.

The Date of Artaxerxes' First Decree

Note that Daniel 9:25 specifies that the beginning of the 70 Weeks prophecy is dated from *the going forth of the command*, and Ezra 7:6-8 states that it was Ezra who led the exhibition from Babylon to Jerusalem with Artaxerxes' decree in his possession (Ezra 7:11). Therefore, the going forth of this command from Babylon to Jerusalem is the beginning of this prophecy, and not necessarily the same date that the king issued the decree. According to Ezra 7:7-8, Ezra and company prepared to leave Babylon on the first day of the first month, actually left on the twelfth day of the first month (8:31), and arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month.

The questions to ask are two in number: (1) Does Ezra use the spring-to-spring year for Artaxerxes' seventh year or the fall-to-fall year to determine his seventh year?; and (2) Does Ezra use the religious calendar (spring-to-spring) or the civil calendar (fall-to-fall) to reckon the months of the year?

We know that the Persians counted the reigns of their kings on the basis of a spring-to-spring year. If that is the case for Artaxerxes I, then his seventh year ran from the spring of 458 to the spring of 457 B.C. If that was the seventh year in Ezra, then the first day of the first month could not have been in the spring, because it is totally unreasonable to believe that he would have been able to organize the journey on the very same day that Artaxerxes I issued his decree. So under the spring-to-spring system of his seventh year, the first day of the first month would have had to be the first of the civil year, which was in the fall of 458 B.C. Since it took about four months of travel before they reached Jerusalem, that would make their arrival in that city be in our January of 457 B.C. Therefore, the going forth of the decree would be in 457 B.C. (with the actual decree issued in late 458 B.C.).

On the other hand, if Ezra uses the fall-to-fall reckoning for Artaxerxes I's seventh year, that year would run from the fall of 458 to the fall of 457 B.C. Under that system, the first day of the first month must be in the spring of 457 B.C. because again it is totally unreasonable to believe that Ezra and company could have left on the very first day of Artaxerxes' decree. In that case, they would have arrived in Jerusalem in the summer of 457 B.C. Therefore, the going forth of the decree would also be in 457 B.C. (with the actual decree issued either in late 458 or very early 457 B.C.).

The aforementioned evidence demonstrates that under either the spring-to-spring or the fall-to-fall dating methods for Artaxerxes' seventh year, *the going forth* of his decree would have been in 457 B.C.

Date for the Messiah

Luke 3:1 (cf. vv. 21-22) tells us that Jesus was baptized in the fifteenth year of Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar's reign. Acts 10:38 says that Jesus was *anointed* at His baptism (cf. Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34). From secular history we know that Tiberius' fifteenth year was from the fall of A.D. 27 to the fall of A.D. 28. This means that Jesus appeared as the Messiah (meaning of the word *anointed*) at His baptism, which corresponds to 483 years after the beginning of the 70 Weeks prophecy, according to Daniel 9:25 ($483 - 457 = \text{A.D. } 27$, remembering to add one year because there was no zero year in moving from a B.C. to an A.D. date). Simple math tells us that this was in the fall of A.D. 27 because no one would likely have been baptized in the winter.

[We know that this date should not be counted on the basis of inclusive reckoning because to do so would be to place Jesus' baptism in A.D. 26 ($483 - 458 = \text{A.D. } 26$, again no zero year), which is within Tiberius' fourteenth year not fifteenth. As a result, none of the other dates based on 457 B.C. would be calculated on the basis of inclusive reckoning either.]

Date for the Crucifixion

According to Daniel 9:26 the Messiah would be crucified (*cut off* refers to a death penalty) at some point after the 69 weeks ($62 + 7$ of v. 25 = 69). From the gospels all scholars agree that Jesus' public ministry lasted for either three or three-and-a-half years. But which one?

In his gospel, the apostle John refers to three Passovers by name (John 2:13; 6:4; 13:1) and an unnamed *feast of the Jews* (John 15:1). The latter feast has been interpreted as any number of Jewish feasts by various Christian scholars throughout the centuries. We believe it is a reference to the Passover for two good reasons. First, John 6:4 calls Passover *a feast of the Jews*, which is the same phrase used in 5:1. Second, in John 4:35 Jesus stated that there were four months until the harvest, which was a reference to the grain harvest because of His reference to the *white* fields. In ancient Palestine grain was planted in the fall and harvested in the spring, in either our April or May. This would make Jesus' statement dated to either our December or January.

It is unlikely that this was either the Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah) or the Feast of Purim because these were celebrated throughout Judea, and they were not harvest festivals (note context of Jesus' reference to the soon-coming harvest). But John 5:1 says that Jesus went up to Jerusalem" at the time of this *feast of the Jews*. There were three Jewish feasts in which the Jews made a

pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate: (1) Passover; (2) Pentecost; and (3) Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14; Deuteronomy 16:16). It could not be the Feast of Tabernacles because it concerned the fruit harvest and was in the fall of the year (Leviticus 23:34-39). It was also not likely the Feast of Pentecost (or of Weeks) because Jesus referred to the upcoming harvest as four months away, and there were only fifty days between the end of Passover and this feast (Leviticus 23:15-16)—and Passover would come between December or January and the Feast of Pentecost). Therefore, we conclude that the feast referred to in John 5:1 is the Passover. This makes a total of four different Passovers mentioned by John in his gospel pertaining to Jesus' public ministry.

The four Passovers after A.D. 27 would be in the spring of A.D. 28, 29, 30, and 31. Therefore, knowing that Jesus died at Passover time (Matthew 26:2-27:50; Mark 14:1-15:37; Luke 22:1-23:46; John 13:1-19:30), that would make His crucifixion in the spring of A.D. 31.

Date for the End of the 70 Weeks

Three years after that would be A.D. 34, 490 years after *the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem* (Daniel 9:25).

Date for Jesus' Birth

Luke 3:23 says that Jesus was *beginning about thirty years (literal Greek)* when He was baptized and began His public ministry (3:21-22; 4:1-15). In some translations, like the NKJV, translators added *His ministry* or similar words because they interpreted His age to refer to the *beginning* of His public ministry rather than to His *beginning* to be about thirty years of age. We agree that it is a very unusual way to describe someone as beginning to be about a certain age. Therefore, we agree that words such as *His ministry* should be added in order to make proper sense of the verse. In any case, the use of the word for *about* means that Jesus was approximately thirty years old. In the Hebrew culture the age of 30 was when a man was sufficiently mature to assume authority, which would be the reason that Luke mentioned that Jesus was about 30 when He began His Messiahship.

We do know that Herod the Great died after Jesus was born but before Jesus and His parents returned from Egypt, where they had gone to escape Herod's attempt to kill Jesus (Matthew 2). Historians interpret first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' testimony about Herod's death as placing it in early 4 B.C. Since shepherds in ancient Judea did not take their sheep to wilderness pastures during the winter time (Luke 2:8-20), Jesus was not born in the winter. This would place Jesus' birth no later than the fall of 5 B.C.

Luke 2:1-2 tells us that Jesus was born at the time of a decree by Caesar Augustus during the time Quirinius was governor of Syria for a register or census. Unfortunately, there is no record of a

census being taken when Quirinius (alternate name is Cyrenius) was governor of Syria until A.D. 6, which all acknowledge is far too late for Jesus' birth. Many modern critics charge Luke with making an error here, but that is unlikely since elsewhere he has shown himself to be a good historian. There is some evidence to suggest that Quirinius may have been the co-governor of Syria as early as 6 B.C. when a census may have been taken that year. If so, that would place the birth of Jesus as early as the spring of 6 B.C. and no later than the fall of 5 B.C. (with the idea that the implementation of the census may have been delayed), with the exception of the winter in very late 6 B.C. and early 5 B.C.). It may be noted that according to the oriental custom, a person's birth year was considered the first year of his life, so that for example, when a person reached his 29th year he was considered to be 30 years old. Given that fact, and the fact that since Jesus was *about 30 years of age* (Luke 3:23) when He was baptized and anointed (Messiah means *anointed*), it is more likely that Jesus was born in 5 B.C. than in 6 B.C. Admittedly, the calculation of Jesus' birth in 5 B.C. is based on some unproven assumptions, so we cannot be dogmatic.

Although it is pure speculation, we would suggest that a likely date for Jesus' birth may have been on the Day of Pentecost in 5 B.C. It would seem to be just like God for Jesus to have been born on a specific feast day just as He was sacrificed (Passover) and rose (Firstfruits) on specific feast days. Rabbinical tradition identifies Pentecost as the day that the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel from Mt. Sinai. See chapter 21 of volume I of our book *Jesus and His Teachings* for an explanation of the mathematical possibility of that tradition being true. If so, then just as the Lord came down from heaven to meet with literal Israel in order to personally give them the Ten Commandments, Jesus may have come down from heaven and been born to literal and spiritual Israel to personally become the Savior of the world. This is consistent with an early Christian tradition that dates Jesus' birth in the spring of the year.

Other Dates in Jesus' Life

The dates of Jesus' baptism and death also gives us the ability to date some of the major events of His ministry. The gospel of John is the only one that mentions repeated Passovers and makes one reference to the Feast of Tabernacles. The other gospels only mention the Passover related to His crucifixion (Matthew 26:2-50; Mark 14:1-15:37; Luke 22:1-23:46; John 13:1-19:30). In addition, Luke mentions the Passover when Jesus was twelve years old, which was before His public ministry. Unfortunately, this means that for most events recorded in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we cannot date them with any reasonable certainty except for those events that correspond to those mentioned in John's gospel. Of course, scholars attempt to work out a harmony of the gospels in which an effort is made to harmonize the different gospel accounts and to thus date them in relationship to each other. John's gospel is long on Jesus' theological addresses and relatively short on biographical events. Below is an outline of what we know about the events in Jesus' life, mostly from the gospel of John:

Spring of A.D. 8—Jesus went to the Jerusalem Temple at the age of 12 (Luke 2:41-42). According to the oriental custom He would have been what we call 11 years old. Assuming He was born in 5 B.C., this event would have occurred in the spring of A.D. 8.

Fall of A.D. 27—He began His ministry in Galilee (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:9-15; Luke 3:21-4:15; John 1:35-2:1-11; John 2:1-12; cf. 1:29-51)—He performed His first miracle when He turned the water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana.

Spring of A.D. 28 (first Passover)—Judean ministry (John 2:13-4:2)—He cleansed the Temple (2:14-22) and spoke with Nicodemus (3:1-21).

Winter of A.D. 28-29 (4:35)—He was in Samaria where He talked with the woman at Jacob's well (4:5-26).

Winter of A.D. 28-29 (4:27, 43)—Galilean ministry (John 4:43-54)—He healed a nobleman's son (4:46-54).

Spring of A.D. 29 (second Passover)—Judean ministry (John 5:1-47)—He healed a man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1-15) and had a conversation with certain Jewish leaders (5:16-47).

Spring of A.D. 29 (third Passover, 6:4; cf. 6:24, 59)-Fall of A.D. 30 (7:2)—Galilean ministry (John 6:1-7:9)—He fed the 5,000 (6:1-14), walked on the sea (6:15-21), and spoke with Galilean followers (6:22-59) at Capernaum, with His disciples (6:60-71), and with His own brothers (7:1-9).

Fall of A.D. 30 (Tabernacles, 7:2)-Spring of A.D. 31 (fourth Passover, 13:1)—This includes events in the remainder of Jesus' ministry, which was in Judea (John 7:10-20:31).

Spring of A.D. 31 (after His resurrection, John 20:1ff)—He returned to Galilee (John 21:1-25) and showed Himself to His disciples after His resurrection.