

How Long was the Ministry of Jesus?

Did Jesus' ministry last three and one-half years? Did Jesus begin his ministry in the fall of the year? Did Jesus' ministry begin in AD 27 during the reign of Tiberius Caesar?

Celebrating Jesus' birth in the winter season of the year is a commonly observed Christian tradition, even though there is no biblical evidence that Jesus was born in the winter, and certainly there is no historical evidence that the celebration of Jesus' birth was observed by the early 1st century church of God.

However, there is sufficient biblical evidence to determine the season and length of Jesus' ministry that began at Jerusalem, and by using the acceptable practice of "backdating" we can reasonably determine the season of Jesus' baptism, and the possible seasons that can be associated with his birth at Bethlehem.

Typically, the practice of backdating to certain events in Jesus' life requires an historical marker that can be correlated with Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry at Jerusalem.

However, the practice of backdating from the time of Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry is not without some dispute because there is a lack of consensus among expositors in determining the validity of the historical markers associated with the life of Jesus. Leaving us to carefully sift through the

biblical and historical evidence surrounding the baptism and ministry of Jesus, and to reasonably use this evidence to determine the season of Jesus' birth in the time of Herod the Great.

Now, according to Mark we see that Jesus' ministry is associated with his baptism and Mark tells us that: "in those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And going up from the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn, and the Spirit coming down as a dove upon Him. And there was a voice out of the heavens, You are My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have been delighting. And the Spirit at once drove Him out into the wilderness" (Mk. 1:9-12, LITV). [Author's emphasis throughout.]

So Mark tells us that after Jesus was baptized and received the holy spirit he was compelled to go into the Judean wilderness where he fasted for 40 days, being at some time tempted by Satan, and after this Jesus returned to the area of Galilee where he was again seen—at some time—by John the Baptist. Mark also states that Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God "after" the prophet John was put into prison, which indicates to us—by the additional evidence of Matthew, Luke and John—that Mark's account does not address a period of time that began after the 40 days in the wilderness and ended when the prophet

John was put into prison by Herod Antipas (the Tetrarch) (Mk. 1:13-15).

Something that is also evident in Luke's account who added that the prophet John received his mission to teach and baptize in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar who was the adopted son and eventual successor to Caesar Augustus (Octavian) who died in the summer of AD 14. Noting that the 15th regnal year of Tiberius is understandably the year Jesus began his ministry at Jerusalem, and from this regnal year and season we can reasonably backdate—assuming 30 years—to determine the season of Jesus' birth at Bethlehem (Lk. 3:1-4, 20).

Now, some biblical expositors conclude that Luke reckoned the 15th year of Tiberius from the beginning of his coregency with Caesar Augustus beginning at some time in AD 12, which by a general reckoning places the 15th regnal year of Tiberius in AD 26/27. With the understanding that this regnal dating is not without dispute, because it is possible to reason that Luke was using various methods to determine the 15th year of Tiberius. (Both AD 26 and AD 27 are commonly accepted as possible years for the beginning of Jesus' ministry.)

What then needs to be understood is that Luke would have expectedly chosen a verifiable event whose date would have had a universal public acceptance, one that would also set an historical precedent based on official recognition that could be associated—beyond dispute—with the time of Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry. Which leads us to say that the greater weight

of the historical evidence—when it is associated with Luke's presentation—gives us the confidence to conclude that Luke was using a dynastic/regnal reckoning for the rule of Tiberius.

Meaning that Luke used the years of Tiberius' sole reign to reckon the emperor's 15th year, which means that Luke correlated Jesus' baptism with the regnal year of AD 28/29, giving us not only an historical marker we can associate with Tiberius, but also an historical marker we can associate with Caesar Augustus. (Tiberius became emperor in August of AD 14 and was confirmed as such by the Senate in September of AD 14, even though he apparently did not assume the title of "Augustus.").

So, with this in mind, we see that Luke tells us that Jesus was not yet 30 years of age at the time of his baptism, and this baptism occurred just before Jesus went into the wilderness and before Jesus would have expectedly begun his ministry at age 30. Realizing, of course, that Luke does not tell us that Jesus began his ministry at age 30, only that he was baptized before he was 30 years of age, which means that Jesus' baptism may or may not fall in the same year or season as Jesus' ministry (Mt. 3:1-17; 4:1).

Having then implications for determining the season of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

Now, Luke tells us that in regard to the year of Jesus' birth there was a registration—an enrollment—being conducted by decree of Caesar Augustus, which is historically correlated with the Jubilee Year of Augustus. Being the 25th anniversary of his reign and the

750th anniversary of the founding of Rome, when the Roman Senate conferred the titles of “Prince of Peace” and “Father of his Country” upon Caesar Augustus.

Then Luke states that at the time of this registration: “Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed [enrolled] with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Lk. 2:4-7).

This generally marked the time when the shepherds came to bear witness of Jesus’ birth, and as they were in the fields at that season of the year it has been generally accepted that this would not have occurred in the harsher part of the winter season. And, also, Luke adds that after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary waited until after Jesus’ circumcision, and until after Mary’s days of purification, to present Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem (Mt. 2:11).

Then, “when they [Joseph and Mary] had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth (Lk. 2:39).

Bringing us then to the account of Jesus’ birth as recorded by Matthew.

In Matthew’s account he makes it known that Jesus was born when Herod I (called the

Great) ruled at Jerusalem, and Matthew also explains that at some time after Jesus was born there came “wise men” from the East and presented themselves before Herod to enquire about Jesus. This startling news of a potential usurper led Herod to enquire of the chief priests and the scribes regarding Jesus, while relying on the wise men to expose Jesus’ whereabouts somewhere in the land of Judea (Mt. 2:15-23).

Then Matthew tells us that when the wise men: “saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh” (Mt. 2:10-11).

Being a situation that leads us to consider that this event likely occurred after Joseph and Mary had returned to Nazareth with Jesus, and before the wise men departed they were: “warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod.... And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he was

mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men” (Mt. 2:12-16).

Thus, according to Matthew, we can conclude that Jesus was likely some months older when he was visited by the wise men from the East, which would explain why Herod chose to kill all the children from age two and younger, causing Joseph and Mary to flee into Egypt with Jesus, where they remained until after the death of Herod the Great (Mt. 2:13-15). (Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth when Archelaus ruled at Jerusalem.)

Summarily, then, we know from Luke and Matthew’s accounts that we can generally determine the date and season of Jesus’ birth by backdating from the year of Jesus’ baptism in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar—assuming 30 years—while knowing that Jesus would not have been born in the winter season of the year, which has implications for the season when Jesus began his ministry at Jerusalem (Lk. 3:23).

Which brings us to the written testimony of the Apostle John who presents to us in his narrative a series of events that mark the beginning of Jesus’ ministry that began with the call of his disciples, following his baptism and 40 days in the wilderness of Judea.

Now, according to the Apostle John we see that Jesus was baptized by the prophet John, and in the Apostle John’s record he tells us that both John the Baptist and Jesus were

witnesses to the holy spirit that came upon Jesus. Luke adds that after Jesus received the spirit of God he departed from the Jordan River and was “led by the Spirit into the wilderness,” where he stayed for at least 40 days and was at some time “tempted of the devil” (Lk. 4:1-2; Jn. 1:32). (Luke testifies that at some time after being tempted of the devil—expectedly some days after—Jesus returned to the region of Galilee and taught in the synagogues (Lk 4:14).)

Which is a scenario that gets our attention.

Because the Apostle John does not specifically account for the 40 days Jesus was in the wilderness of Judea.

Rather, John continues his narrative with the beginning of Jesus’ ministry that began with the call of his disciples, which began after Jesus returned to the region of Galilee and after the prophet John’s testimony to the Levites and Pharisees, noting importantly that the prophet John was not yet imprisoned by Herod Antipas (Jn. 3:22-24).

Thus, we find that the prophet John “bear record” to the Pharisees and Levites who challenged the validity of his baptism, and questioned John about whether he was the prophet Elijah or the Christ. The prophet John responded by telling them that he was a “voice crying in the wilderness” and not the Christ, and claimed that the Christ was already among them, which means that John’s testimony was given after Jesus had returned from the wilderness of Judea and just before Jesus began to call his disciples, some of whom were disciples of John the Baptist (Jn.

1:19-27). (The Pharisees and Levites apparently had no awareness of Jesus at this time, which gives us some evidence to conclude that at this time Jesus had not begun his ministry.)

Then the Apostle John carefully establishes the beginning of Jesus' ministry with the call of his disciples that began after the prophet John testified of what he witnessed at Jesus' baptism. So we read that on the "next day" when the prophet John saw Jesus he testified that Jesus was the lamb of God, and on that day when "John stood" with his disciples we see that John and Andrew and later Peter began to follow Jesus (Jn. 1:29-42).

Allowing us then to establish a general timeline for the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the season of his baptism because we know that after Jesus was baptized he spent at least 40 days in the wilderness, and after this we have the testimony of the prophet John to the Pharisees and Levites, followed by the call of his disciples, Peter, Andrew and John.

Then we read that on the following day Jesus departs for Galilee and calls Philip and Nathanael (Jn. 1:43-51).

Next, we learn that Jesus arrives in Cana where he performs a miracle at a local wedding—turning the water into wine—at the request of his mother, Mary. For we read that: "on the third day a marriage took place in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. And Jesus and His disciples also were invited to the marriage" (Jn. 2:1-2).

(This "third day" may be marked from the day Jesus departed into Galilee.)

Therefore, given the starting point from the testimony of John the Baptist, and the call of Peter, Andrew and John, we can reasonably conclude—if the 40 days are included at this time—that from the time of Jesus' baptism to the time of Jesus' arrival in Cana we can account for a period of about 45 days, and after the wedding in Cana Jesus: "went down to Capernaum, He and His mother and His brothers and His disciples. And He remained there not many days. And the Passover of the Jews was near. And Jesus went up to Jerusalem" (Jn. 2:12-13). (Jesus was not yet 30 years of age when he was baptized by the prophet John.)

This allows us to draw a reasonable conclusion that if Jesus spent less than a week in Capernaum before going to the Passover in Jerusalem, and Jesus' baptism occurred about 40 days prior to John's testimony to the Pharisees and Levites, then the call of Jesus' disciples decidedly took place in the spring of the year some days before the Passover. And when we compare the historical markers of Jesus' life as presented to us by Luke, we see that on one occasion when Jesus and his parents went to Jerusalem to keep the Passover it was after Jesus had turned 12 years of age, and according to Luke we see that Jesus was not yet 30 years of age when he was baptized by John the Baptist, which allows to say that Jesus likely turned 30 years of age somewhere between his baptism and the Passover (Lk. 2:41-42; 3:23).

Placing the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the spring of the year before the Passover, and after Jesus was baptized by the prophet John in the 15th regnal year of Tiberius Caesar.

Thus, we can say that the only Passover that occurred in the 15th regnal year of Tiberius was the one that took place in the spring of AD 29, which means that Jesus began his ministry in the spring of AD 29 just before the Passover.

But there is something else to consider.

That even by a conservative estimation if we account for the days when Jesus called his disciples, and the days of his journeys to Cana and Capernaum and Jerusalem, while allowing for his baptism and the 40 days in the wilderness, we would have to conclude that Jesus' baptism would have taken place in the late winter of AD 28/29. Something that is possible, but not likely, given the historical context that tells us that John was also baptizing others at the time before Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist.

Consequently, it is reasonable to say that John was more likely baptizing in the fall of the previous year before Jesus was 30 years of age, which would allow sufficient time for Jesus to be baptized and spend 40 days in the wilderness before returning to Galilee. Allowing us to say that John was baptizing in the fall of the 15th year of Tiberius, which was AD 28, and Jesus came to see John and call his disciples in the following spring when he began his ministry shortly before the Passover of AD 29.

Given this scenario we can conclude by backdating that Jesus was born either in the fall of 3 BCE or spring of 2 BCE, noting that there is limited information to determine with absolute certainty the exact year of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Nonetheless, the weight of biblical and historical evidence tells us that Jesus was born in the spring of 2 BCE, and Herod the Great would have died in late winter of 1 BCE before the Passover of that year, when Joseph and Mary began to journey from Egypt back to Nazareth. Leaving us to reasonably conclude that Jesus turned 30 years of age just before he began his ministry with the Passover at Jerusalem in AD 29.

Leaving us then to determine the length of Jesus' ministry that began at Jerusalem in the spring of AD 29, noting that according to the Apostle John there were three Passovers that occurred in the time of Jesus' ministry, beginning with the Passover that fell in the year AD 29 (Jn. 2:13). Then the second Passover occurred while Jesus was in Galilee, for the Apostle John wrote that: "After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh" (Jn. 6:1-4). (This Passover would bring us to the end of the first year of Jesus' ministry, marking also the beginning of his second year teaching throughout Galilee. There is no biblical evidence that Jesus kept this Passover at Jerusalem.)

Finally, we come to the third and final Passover that Jesus observed with his disciples, and this Passover was observed at Jerusalem, just before Jesus' crucifixion and death at the hands of the Roman government at Jerusalem (Jn. 12:1).

For John wrote that: "before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (Jn. 13:1).

Bringing us then to this conclusion.

That according to the narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and the Apostle John, Jesus began his ministry in the spring before Passover, which is reasonably within the 15th year of Tiberius' reign over the Roman Empire. Then by reckoning according to the number of Passovers mentioned in John's account, we can reasonably conclude that Jesus' ministry lasted a little more than two years from the spring of AD 29 to the spring of AD 31. 