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## Pinpointing Key Dates in Jesus' Life: His Birth, the Start of His Ministry, and His Crucifixion

James A. Moseley  
*Liberty University*, [jmoseley6@liberty.edu](mailto:jmoseley6@liberty.edu)

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## **Pinpointing Key Dates in Jesus' Life: His Birth, the Start of His Ministry, and His Crucifixion**

### **Abstract**

The abundant chronological details embedded in Scripture, along with external time markers in other ancient histories and in astronomical events, persuasively support the view that Jesus was born in mid-June, 2 BC, not on December 25, 4 BC, and that His ministry endured not for three years, as so often claimed, but for 1,350 days or nearly four years, from His baptism on Sunday, 7 Elul, September 2, AD 29 to His ascension on Friday, 26 Iyar, May 13, AD 33.

### **Keywords**

Bible, Jesus, history, chronology, theology, apologetics

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### **Pinpointing Key Dates in Jesus' Life: His Birth, the Start of His Ministry, and His Crucifixion**

The abundant chronological details embedded in Scripture, along with external time markers in other ancient histories and in astronomical events, persuasively support the view that Jesus was born in mid-June 2 BC, not on December 25, 4 BC, and that His ministry endured not for three years, as so often claimed, but for 1,350 days, from His baptism on Sunday, 7 Elul, September 2, AD 29 to His ascension on Friday, 26 Iyar, May 13, AD 33.

#### **The Hebrew Year**

Understanding how the Hebrew year works is essential to deciphering biblical chronology. Some scholars teach that the Hebrew Year, being lunar, has thirty days per month and thus has 360 days in the year. Some call these “prophetic years,” but such a concept is imaginary. In fact, Hebrew years never contain 360 days. The Gregorian calendar is solar, based on measuring the earth’s rotation around the sun. It uses an intercalary (extra inserted) day to adjust the calendar dates to the precise timing of that rotation. This intercalary day is February 29, which is added every fourth or “leap” year. The Hebrew calendar is lunar with respect to months; that is, the months coincide with the phases of the moon, and is solar with respect to years; that is, the months coincide with the earth’s rotation around the sun. The Hebrew calendar uses both intercalary days and intercalary months to adjust the calendar to these metrics. The months of the Hebrew calendar are as follows:

<b>Hebrew Month</b>	<b>Days</b>	<b>Gregorian Months</b>	<b>Holy Days</b>
Nisan	30	March-April	Passover
Iyar	29	April-May	
Sivan	30	May-June	Pentecost
Tammuz	29	June-July	
Av	30	July-August	
Elul	29	August-September	
Tishri	30	September-October	Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Tabernacles
Cheshvan	29 or 30	October-November	
Kislev	29 or 30	November-December	Chanukah
Tevet	29	December-January	
Shevat	30	January-February	

Hebrew Month	Days	Gregorian Months	Holy Days
Adar I (“First Adar, the last or second to last month of every year).	30	February-March	Purim
Adar II (“Second Adar,” sometimes added to the end of 3 years in every cycle of 7 years).	29	March-April	

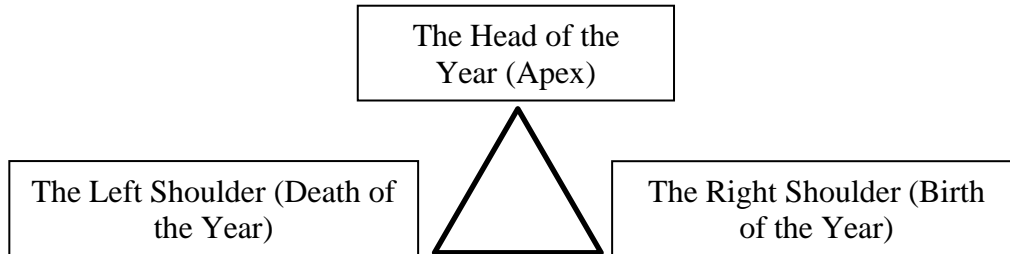
There are six different Hebrew years, which occur in regular rotation:

Year in Cycle	Days in Cheshvan	Days in Kislev	Days in First Adar	Days in Second Adar	Total Days in Year
1	29	29	30	0	353
2	29	30	30	0	354
3	30	30	30	0	355
4	29	29	30	29	383
5	29	30	30	29	384
6	30	30	30	29	385

The average length of the Hebrew year is 359 days. The average number of months in a Hebrew year is 12.5, and the average number of days in a Hebrew month is 29.52. This ancient and brilliant system synchronizes with our Gregorian calendar remarkably well. The two calendars are never precisely synchronous, but they catch up with each other over time and never end up hopelessly out of phase. Thus, Nisan is always in early Spring, and Tishri is always in early Autumn.

There is some confusion about which is the first month of the Hebrew calendar. There should be none, for God decreed that Nisan “shall be the first month of the year for you” (Exod 12:2, *ESV*). The confusion arises because the High Holy Days occur in the seventh month, Tishrei, and since the first of these holidays is called Rosh Hashana, which means “head of the year,” the assumption is that the head of the year is the beginning of the year. Rather, it is the apex of the year. The Hebrew idea envisions the year as something that is born, grows to its peak, and then declines and dies, to be reborn again in the following year. This is a familiar concept among the ancients, such as in the Greek myth of Persephone, the goddess of fertility whose annual descent to the underworld to join her husband Hades brought on the death of life on earth (Winter) and whose annual return to the earth’s surface renewed its life (Spring). The Hebrew concept thus represents the year as a head with two shoulders, a triangle. Assuming Hebrews

would read a timeline from “east to west” just as they read their language from right to left, the triangular year would look like the following:



### Pinpointing the Date of Jesus' Birth

The early Church authorities, including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Africanus, Hippolytus of Rome, Hippolytus of Thebes, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Paulus Orosius, consistently placed the birth of Jesus in 3–2 BC.<sup>1</sup> This was correct. The faulty thesis that Jesus was born in 4 BC arose with an erroneous dating of Herod the Great's death.

#### Dating Herod's Death

Jesus was born while Herod the Great was still alive (Matt 2:1). For years, scholars have held that Herod the Great died in 4 BC, based on the following argument: Herod Philip II became tetrarch of Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea, and Paneas in the year of Herod's death. Josephus states that Philip died in the twentieth year of Tiberius (AD 34) after ruling for thirty-seven years.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, AD 37 minus 34 years = 4 BC (if the calculation is inclusive, that is, it includes the beginning and ending years, or if the historian forgets that the BC-AD scheme, there is no Year 0). Thus, Philip became tetrarch in 4 BC, so Herod must have died in 4 BC. That is the prevailing argument. It is, however, wrong.

All copies of Josephus dated before AD 1544 say that Philip died in the twenty-second year of Tiberius (AD 36).<sup>3</sup> In sixteenth-century Europe, a new and valuable invention arose—the printing press. With it came another innovation—the printer's error. A printer's error after AD 1544 made the text of Josephus read “the twentieth year of Tiberius,” not “in the twenty-second year.” Since all the pre-AD 1544 manuscripts say, “the twenty-second year of Tiberius,” they are nearer to the source and thus more reliable. The year AD 36 (the twenty-second

<sup>1</sup> Finegan, *Handbook*, 291.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18:4:6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* and Andrew Steinmann, “When Did Herod the Great Reign?”

year) minus the 37 years of Herod's reign = 1 BC.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Philip's reign began in 1 BC, and Herod died in 1 BC.

Josephus also relates that Herod died after a lunar eclipse<sup>5</sup> and before Passover.<sup>6</sup> In what year did these phenomena occur? Only in 1 BC. A total lunar eclipse was visible in Jerusalem on the night of 9-10 January 1 BC.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 1 BC, Passover (14 Nisan) occurred on Wednesday, March 17.<sup>8</sup> So, Herod not only died in 1 BC; he died between January 10 and March 16 of 1 BC. And one can refine the date even better.

Josephus relates that Herod was agonizingly sick in his declining days. His physicians tried many remedies to cure him, including bathing in the mineral waters at Callirrhoe near the Dead Sea. When he realized he was dying, Herod summoned all the Jewish leaders and arrested them. He ordered them executed on his death so that there would be mourning in Israel, not celebration, upon the day of his passing. He knew how much his subjects hated him. Then he sent for and received permission from Caesar Augustus to execute his son, Antipater, who had poisoned Herod's brother, Pheroras. He carried out the execution and died five days later. After his death came his funeral (which was extravagant), seven days of mourning, a feast in his honor, and the assumption of Judaea's throne by Archelaus, his son. Then came Passover, which began on the evening of Wednesday, March 17, in 1 BC. One can reasonably estimate the time required for these events to transpire. For Herod to have made a trip to Callirrhoe, tried a cure, and acknowledged its failure must have taken at least a week. To have summoned all the Jewish leaders and to have placed them under arrest must have taken at least a week. To send to Rome for permission to execute Antipater and to receive the answer from the busy Augustus must have taken at least a month.<sup>9</sup> The execution of Antipater might have taken one day only. Five days later, Herod died. Then came Passover. All these events equal at least fifty days. Fifty days after the eclipse of January 10 is Monday, March 1, 1 BC. Herod thus died very close to this date.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Beyer, "Josephus Reexamined: Unraveling the Twenty-Second Year of Tiberius," 85.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17:6:4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:9:3.

<sup>7</sup> Nollet, "Astronomical and Historical Evidence for Dating the Nativity in 2 BC," 214.

<sup>8</sup> Bromberg, *Kalendis*.

<sup>9</sup> Casson, "Speed under Sail of Ancient Ships."

<sup>10</sup> These estimations are well supported by considering the geography involved, that is, the time necessary to travel by land or sea between all the points mentioned in the sequence of events. However, even if these estimates are off, and if all these events happened in a longer or shorter period, the ancient sources still bracket the death of Herod between the date of the eclipse, January 10, and Passover, March 17, 1 BC.

### The Magi

The Bible says that Magi from the east saw the star (Matt 2:2). The Magi (from which we derive our word “magic”) were a caste among the Medes. The Medes were a people group from Western Persia, whose capital was Ecbatana (modern Hamadan, Iran). They are the Kurdish people of today. Herodotus wrote that the Medes were one of the six noble families who chose the Persian king. They were suppressed when Darius the Great took the throne.

The Medes, like the Chaldeans of Ur under Nebuchadnezzar, were known for their wisdom and love of science, which meant the study of natural phenomena, especially the stars. Herodotus reported their conspiracy to control the throne in the saga of Darius the Great's rise to power. Xenophon, who had first-hand experience at the Persian court, reported that they were responsible for educating the Persian Crown Prince. Philo, the Jew of Alexandria, praised their efforts to find truth through studying natural history. Matthew reported their wisdom and reverence in following the Star of Bethlehem and worshiping Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

As wise men in Persia, the Magi were almost certainly well acquainted with the book of Daniel. Daniel's tomb is still an object of pilgrimage in Iran today. Since Daniel was a Jew but also the second most powerful man in Nebuchadnezzar's government and the third most powerful man in Babylon in the Persian government of Cyrus the Great, the Magi would have known of and respected his inspired genius. Since Daniel's prophecies were astonishingly accurate during his lifetime, the Magi would have been curious about the fulfillment of his future prophecies, which focused on the Jews and the coming of Messiah the Prince (Dan 9).

Anyone familiar with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Persian history, and Daniel could easily calculate that the years 3 and 2 BC were in the sixty-fourth heptad (period of seven years) in Daniel's prophetic 70 heptads (490 years). Daniel 9 said that Messiah the Prince would be cut off and have nothing at the end of the sixty-ninth heptad. AD 33, the Year of the Cross, fell within the sixty-ninth heptad.

There were only thirty-four years from 2 BC to AD 33. Surely many scholars knew, when the Magi reached Jerusalem, that (1) the Messiah was either already born and would be more than 34 years old when He was cut off, or (2) that He was about to be born and would be 34 years or younger when He was cut off.

In Genesis 49:10-12, Jacob prophesied that “the scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes, and to him

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<sup>11</sup> Simon, “the magus” in Acts 8:9, is not really a Median magus. The Bible says he practiced Magic (μαγείων), not that he was a magus from the east like those in Matthew 2.

[shall be] the obedience of the people.”<sup>12</sup> The title Shiloh, שִׁלּוֹחַ, is of uncertain derivation but is commonly thought to refer to the Messiah, meaning “he whose it is.”<sup>13</sup> Whether or not that was what Jacob had in mind, it was undoubtedly a prevalent interpretation among Jewish scholars. Herod had taken the scepter from Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king (of Judah), in 37 BC, and he had murdered the last Hasmonean royal heir, Hyrcanus II, in 30 BC. By 2 BC, Herod was old and sick, and the Messiah had not yet come. The prophetic window was closing. If Messiah the Prince did not come now, the validity of all the Hebrew prophets would be in doubt.

### The Star of Bethlehem

The work of Frederick A. Larson<sup>14</sup> shows, using astronomy software,<sup>15</sup> that the Star of Bethlehem was a real celestial event and pinpoints Jesus’ advent. Reviewing his work inspired this author to conduct primary research on the subject, and this research retracing Larson’s steps produced results almost entirely aligned with his.<sup>16</sup> The Bible lists eight characteristics of the Bethlehem Star:

1. It was a sign of birth (Matt 2:2)
2. It was a sign of a king (Matt 2:2)
3. It was connected to the Jews (Matt 2:2)
4. It rose in the east (Matt 2:1–2)
5. It appeared at a specific time (Matt 2:7)
6. It endured over time (Matt 2:9–10)
7. It was ahead of the Magi as they traveled south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (Matt 2:9)
8. It stopped over Bethlehem (Matt 2:9)

A meteor, comet, or supernova could not fulfill all these conditions. Moreover, “in the years 3 and 2 BC, there were no comets and no novae.”<sup>17</sup> The ancients called planets “wandering stars” because they seemed to behave erratically. While other stars observed fixed trajectories, planets appeared to wander throughout the starry field, sometimes even going backward.

Today’s astronomers call this retrograde motion. It is analogous to a car, which is really going forward on the highway, appearing to go backward when

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<sup>12</sup> Translation by this author.

<sup>13</sup> Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1010a.

<sup>14</sup> Larson, *The Star of Bethlehem*.

<sup>15</sup> Starry Night.

<sup>16</sup> Moseley, *Bethlehem Star*.

<sup>17</sup> Finegan, *Handbook*, 319.



your car passes it at a greater speed. When the earth travels in its orbit faster than a planet traveling in its orbit alongside the earth, the other planet seems to fall behind or “go backward.” This is planetary retrograde motion.

In the seventeenth century, Johannes Kepler discovered the laws of planetary motion, which are still accepted today. Using them, we can calculate the former or future positions and appearances of celestial bodies with precision. With astronomy software, we can re-create the appearance of the sky from any place on Earth at any time, and we can animate or freeze that view.<sup>18</sup>

### Royalty in the Sky

Between September of 3 BC and May of 2 BC,<sup>19</sup> Jupiter, viewed from Babylon, the king of planets, made three conjunctions with Regulus, the star that the Romans called *rex* and the Persians called *sharu*, king. Jupiter approached Regulus and conjoined with it in the night sky, creating a bright light. This was unusual but not unique since Jupiter conjoins with Regulus about every twelve years. However, this time, after passing Regulus, Jupiter turned around (entered retrograde motion) and conjoined with Regulus again. Then, it turned around again (entered retrograde motion) and repeated the performance a third time. Three crossings of the king planet and the king star, with three brilliant flashes in the night sky, were startling and unique.

### The Lion of Judah in the Sky

All this activity occurred against the backdrop of the constellation Leo, the lion, the constellation in which Regulus sits.<sup>20</sup> Since Jacob called Judah a lion and said that the scepter would not pass from Judah until Messiah came (Gen 49:9-10), this celestial activity connected royalty (the king planet and the king star) with Judah, the lion. To the Magi, this must have looked very like the birth of a new and triple-crowned King of the Jews. Was Jesus triple-crowned? Yes. Like Melchizedek, Jesus was both king and priest (two crowns). However, unlike anyone else, He was Messiah the Prince, the Savior (the ultimate crown).

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<sup>18</sup> All that the following sections about the star describe may be viewed in animation in this video: James Allen Moseley, Bethlehem Star, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z-hZWAvpIE>.

<sup>19</sup> Starry Night.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

### Conception in the Sky

The conjunction of Jupiter and Venus was probably the Birth Star, the Star of Bethlehem. The conjunction was so close that without a modern telescope, the two planets would have looked like a single star. This event occurred on June 17, 2 BC.<sup>21</sup> Jupiter symbolizes a divine king and father, and Venus (Ishtar in Babylon) symbolizes female fertility, so the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus can suggest birth. The average time of human gestation is 277 days. Counting 277 days backward from the date of this conjunction yields September 13, 3 BC. This was the date of the first conjunction of Jupiter and Regulus and was probably the first phase of the Star of Bethlehem phenomena, marking Jesus' conception. The Sabbath, Saturday, September 13, 3 BC, is, therefore, the likely date of Jesus' conception, and this is a reasonable date not only because it fits the observed activity of the "star" but because it synchronizes well with all the other chronological markers in Matthew and Luke.

### Birth in the Sky

On Wednesday, June 17, 2 BC, after completing its triple conjunction with Regulus, Jupiter, the King Planet, continued through the heavens to another spectacular rendezvous, this time with Venus, the Mother Planet. They appeared to touch, and each contributed its full brightness to what seemed like the most brilliant "star" anyone had ever seen. The conjunction reached its apex as the two planets set in the west, right over Judaea from the perspective of the Babylonian Magi. This is probably the date of Jesus' birth, not only because it fits the celestial activity described in Matthew but because it also fits all the other time markers in Matthew and Luke.

### Pointing to Bethlehem

Later that year, in late November to early December 2 BC, Jupiter's position in the sky, when viewed from Jerusalem, was to the south, in the direction of Bethlehem. This was the appearance of the "star" that "led" the Magi to the City of David. This was six months after the brilliant conjunction of Jupiter and Venus which occurred on Jesus' birthday. The travel time from Babylon to Jerusalem was about four months (Ezra 7).<sup>22</sup> This allowed two months for the Magi to confer, decide the meaning of what they had seen, plan for their trip, possibly get political approval to pass from Parthian territory into enemy Roman

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The exiles took three months and twenty-seven days to make the return.

territory, and gather their precious gifts for the Messiah (which may have involved some fundraising).

### Stopping over the City of David

On December 2, 2 BC, Jupiter entered retrograde motion. It continued in this state till December 25 (by the Julian calendar, December 23 by our Gregorian calendar). During this time, Jupiter appeared to travel horizontally above Bethlehem when viewed from Jerusalem, while the other planets visible, Mercury and Venus, dipped toward the horizon as they traveled the night sky. Jupiter's horizontal stasis throughout December, right above Bethlehem when viewed from Jerusalem, made it appear to rest over Bethlehem. After December 25, Jupiter again appeared to behave like other planets, breaking out of its horizontal lock and dipping toward the horizon as it traversed the sky.

Since Bethlehem is only five miles south of Jerusalem, the Magi did not need a star to show them how to get there. However, seeing the star confirm their goal caused them to rejoice "exceedingly with great joy" (Matt 2:10). They presented gifts to Jesus, who was then about six months old and, according to Matthew, was living in a house, not a stable (Matt 2:11). This makes sense, because Luke says the angel told the shepherds to look for a βρέφος (*bréphos*, newborn) wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16). Later, Matthew says the Magi found a παιδίον (*paidíon*, little child, usually under seven years old in Greek culture, Matt 2:11). Thus, December 25, our Christmas, was probably the date of the Adoration of the Magi and of the first giving of gifts to celebrate Christ's advent, the first Christmas. But it was not Jesus' birthday.

### The Star

In summary, the star was not a single star but a series of celestial events that would appear to be a single star from a terrestrial point of view. First, Jupiter conjoined with Regulus on Saturday/Sunday September 13–14, 3 BC and passed back over Regulus twice on Thursday, February 19, 2 BC and on Saturday, May 9, 2 BC. Right after this kingly pageant finished in May, on Wednesday, June 17, 2 BC, Jupiter and Venus conjoined, creating the brightest "star" anyone alive had ever seen. The star reached maximum brightness as it set in the west over Jerusalem. Then, just when the Magi arrived in Judaea, Jupiter appeared to the south of Jerusalem on November-December 2, BC, in the direction of Bethlehem. Jupiter entered retrograde motion and appeared to stop over Bethlehem from December 2–25, 2 BC. Matthew's account of the Star of Bethlehem accurately describes the actual celestial events that accompanied Jesus' advent.

### Jesus' Birth

Since Herod died in 1 BC, there is no reason to dispute the early Church's assertion that Jesus was born in 2 BC and that Herod tried to kill him by slaughtering the innocents of Bethlehem in late 2 BC or early 1 BC. The date of Jesus' birth that best fits with all chronological markers in the gospels is Wednesday, June 17, 2 BC.

### Pinpointing the Start of Jesus' Ministry

Jesus' ministry began after that of John the Baptist. John began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1). Tiberius' first year as emperor ran from Monday, September 17, AD 14, Julian<sup>23</sup> (September 15, Gregorian, 5 Tishrei, Hebrew) to Tuesday, September 17, AD 15, Julian (September 15, Gregorian, 16 Tishrei, Hebrew). Therefore, Tiberius' fifteenth year as emperor ran from Thursday, September 16, AD 28, Julian (September 14, Gregorian, 8 Tishrei, Hebrew), to Friday, September 16, AD 29, Julian (September 14, Gregorian, 19 Elul, Hebrew).<sup>24</sup> For John the Baptist to begin his ministry in Tiberius' fifteenth year, therefore, he would have had to begin it no later than September 14, AD 29, Gregorian, or 19 Elul, Hebrew, twelve days before 1 Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, of AD 29 (Hebrew 3790).

The Gospel of John helps us bracket the dates of Jesus' ministry. It mentions that Jesus' ministry included three Passover feasts: (1) John 2:23, (2) John 6:4, and (3) John 11:55. The last Passover of Jesus' adult ministry was in AD 33, the Year of the Cross. The first Passover of Jesus' adult ministry came after His baptism in AD 29. Thus, Jesus' ministry spanned five calendar years (AD 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33), encompassing four Passovers (in AD 30, 31, 32, and 33).

The Gospel of John gives a specific sequence of dates following Jesus' return from His sojourn in the wilderness. On the first day after the Pharisees questioned John the Baptist about his identity (John 1:19), Jesus walked by the place where John was baptizing, and John proclaimed Jesus the Lamb of God (John 1:29). The next day, this occurred again (John 1:35), and John the son of Zebedee and Andrew the brother of Simon Peter went to stay with Jesus. The fact that they asked where Jesus was staying is a clue. During the Feast of

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<sup>23</sup> Robin Seager, *Tiberius*, xvii. The emperor Augustus died on August 19, AD 14. In his Handbook, Finegan records this as the date of Tiberius' accession; however, Seager notes that Tiberius accepted the principate on September 17. It is probably correct to say that Tiberius became the *de facto princeps* on August 19 and the *de jure princeps* on September 17. This is herewith noted to solve an apparent discrepancy, but whichever date Luke had in mind changes neither the reliability of his gospel nor the results calculated in this essay.

<sup>24</sup> Kalendis.

Tabernacles, everyone who had come to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days would be staying for a week in makeshift tents (tabernacles), commemorating Israel's sojourn in the wilderness after the Exodus. Naturally, they would assume that Jesus had been staying somewhere with someone, but assuredly not at a fixed, predictable address.

The next day (John 1:43), Jesus proposed to return to Galilee, which would be expected if this day were after the last day of Tabernacles (*Isru Chag Sukkot*). This fixes the day Jesus decided to return to Galilee and attend the Cana wedding: Thursday, October 18, AD 29 (24 Tishrei, Hebrew). This also fixes the date for the wedding of Cana, which was on the third day after Jesus proposed to return to Galilee (John 2:1): Sunday, October 21, AD 29 (27 Tishrei, Hebrew). Jesus proposed to leave Judaea on Thursday; it took Him till Sunday to arrive (because the Sabbath on October 20 would have broken His journey), and then the wedding occurred on Sunday.

All these dates fit together like a puzzle very precisely. Jesus was baptized around Sunday, September 2, AD 29. On the day John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, John, Andrew, Peter, Nathanael, and Philip were all at hand. This would have been unusual for them at any other time of year because they all lived in Galilee. But it would be understandable if they were all in Jerusalem for some significant event. One event that would bring them all to Jerusalem together would be Passover, as when Jesus was twelve years old (Luke 2:42). But the believing Jews also gathered in Jerusalem for the High Holy Days, Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). In AD 29, this would fit well with John's call to "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2).

In AD 29, the Jewish New Year fell on September 24. The Day of Atonement fell on October 4. The Jordan River, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, is below sea level, and the weather there is warm year-round so that Jesus could have been baptized comfortably in the Fall. "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too" (Luke 3:21, *ESV*).

John's gospel describes Jesus' baptism and the dove descending on Jesus (John 1:32). After His baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days (Matt 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-2). This sojourn started around Monday, September 3, AD 29. Before Jesus returned from the wilderness, the priests and Levites went to John the Baptist to question his identity. They would have been rather busy in Jerusalem before Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the Feast of Tabernacles, which ended on Sunday, October 14. They might easily have made the day's trip to the Jordan on Monday, October 15, AD 29.

After Jesus' time in the wilderness, He again appeared to John the Baptist around Tuesday, October 16, AD 29. John then proclaimed Jesus the Lamb of God. The next day, Wednesday, October 17, Jesus again passed by the place

where John was baptizing, and John again hailed Him as the Lamb of God. John, the son of Zebedee and Andrew, who were disciples of the Baptist, left John and began following Jesus (John 1:35–37). On Thursday, October 18, *Isru Chag Sukkot*, the farewell day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus naturally decided to return to Galilee (John 1:43). At this time, Jesus was thirty-one years old (Luke 3:23). On Sunday, October 21, Jesus attended the wedding at Cana and performed His first miracle (John 2:1).

### An End to Sacrifice and Offering

For forty years prior to the fall of the Second Temple, the priests of Israel found the sacrifice of Yom Kippur (the day of national atonement) unacceptable to God.<sup>25</sup> What happened forty years before AD 70 in Israel? In August of AD 29, John the Baptist began his mission. On Sunday, September 2, AD 29, John baptized Jesus, publicly recognizing Him as Messiah. On Thursday, October 4, AD 29, Yom Kippur, the first of forty unacceptable sacrifices were presented in the Temple. This was the thirty-second day of Jesus' forty-day fast in the wilderness. After the Feast of Tabernacles, the priests and Levites traveled to Bethany on the Jordan to question John the Baptist. Perhaps the disturbing rejection of the sacrifice on Yom Kippur motivated them to enquire. On Tuesday, October 16, AD 29, Jesus returned from His sojourn in the wilderness, reached the banks of the Jordan River, and John the Baptist proclaimed Him the Lamb of God. Every sacrifice for the next thirty-nine years would prove unacceptable. The national sins of Israel, according to the Jewish priests themselves, were unforgiven. Yet the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, walked among them from AD 29 to AD 33. The curses of Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26, and the prophecy of Daniel 9 fell on Jerusalem and the Temple, destroying both, in AD 70.

### Pinpointing the Date of Jesus' Crucifixion

Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator who presided over Jesus' trial and Crucifixion, governed from AD 26 to 36. Therefore, the latest possible year of Jesus' Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension is AD 36, Pontius Pilate's last year in office. In AD 36, the Emperor Tiberius recalled Pilate to Rome to account for his harsh treatment of the Jews. While it is conceivable that all the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection might have happened in AD 36, the year in the tenure of Pontius Pilate that best fits the biblical account is AD 33.

The Gospel of John mentions three Passover Feasts that happened during

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<sup>25</sup> Babylonian Talmud, "Yoma 39b."

Jesus' ministry, as follows: John 2:13 records the first Passover, when Jesus first cleansed the Temple, which was on Friday, March 29 (9 Nisan), AD 30; John 6:3-4 records the second Passover Feast, before which Jesus went up on a mountainside with His disciples and fed the 5,000. This Passover was on Monday, April 24, AD 31. No gospel records the Passover in AD 32. Perhaps nothing noteworthy happened in the Passover of that year. But Passover came and went, whether any gospel mentioned it or not. Jesus' Passion occurred on the final Passover (Matt 26:2, Mark 14:1, Luke 22:1, John 11:55, 12:1, 13:1, 18:28, 39). This Passover was on Friday (Matt 27:62, 15:42, Luke 23:54, John 19:31), which was April 1 in AD 33, the Year of the Cross. The last Passover had to be in AD 33 because Passover fell on the following days during the years of Jesus' ministry. The only year that fits is AD 33.<sup>26</sup>

#### Passover Dates During Jesus' Ministry

Year AD	Passover
29	Saturday, April 14
30	Wednesday, April 3
31	Monday, March 24
32	Monday, April 12
33	Friday, April 1

The events of Jesus' ministry fit into the time frame from His baptism on Sunday, 7 Elul, September 2, AD 29, through His ascension on Friday, 26 Iyar, May 13, AD 33, a total of 1,350 days or forty-five calendar months, not three years. Lacking such tools as *Kalendis* and Microsoft Excel, Eusebius was nevertheless close when he wrote that "the whole time of our Savior's ministry is shown to have been not quite four full years."<sup>27</sup> Finegan also presents a life of Jesus that spanned the years AD 29–33, including four Passovers (although he is wrong about specific dates within those years, which can be verified by using *Kalendis*).<sup>28</sup>

#### Why Jesus' Passover was on Thursday

In ancient times, Jews who were residents of Jerusalem observed a single Passover on the evening of 14 Nisan, as the Law of Moses required. However, Jews living outside of Jerusalem or visiting Jerusalem observed two Passover meals in succession. The reason for this double-Passover tradition was that

<sup>26</sup> *Kalendis*.

<sup>27</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, 1:10:4.

<sup>28</sup> Finegan, *Handbook*, 367.

ancient Jews did not have modern calendars or clocks. Since the Hebrew year is complex, including months with twenty-nine or thirty days and intercalary (extra) months in certain years,<sup>29</sup> fixing the exact date of the Passover or the date of any pilgrimage holiday (Exod 23:14–17, Deut 16:5–6), was the responsibility of the priests in Jerusalem. They reached their decision by observing “the appearance of the new moon and the state of the crops [and] . . . the authorities announced their decision to the outlying districts by means of fire signals and messengers.”<sup>30</sup> Such messages, however, did not always reach cities outside of Judaea in time to observe the holiday. Moreover, Jewish communities “took it upon themselves to inflict punishment” on anyone who violated the second-day holy day. “Excommunication, even beating, was frequently the lot of such a transgressor.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Jewish communities outside the land of Israel adopted the practice of observing an extra day of the pilgrimage holidays to ensure that they made no error.<sup>32</sup> This led to Jews in Diaspora (living outside Judaea) holding two Passovers, a practice some Jews have continued until the present day.<sup>33</sup>

Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover supper a day before Jerusalem residents did because they were from Galilee, and they wished to avoid the error that might occur if their calendars were unaligned with the official one in Jerusalem. Thus, the Last Supper occurred on Thursday, and Jesus died on Friday, the same day when the Jews of Jerusalem were killing their Passover lambs, between 2-3 p.m. on 14 Nisan or April 1, AD 33. Christ became the ultimate Passover Lamb.

### **Chronology of the Day of the Cross**

Roman timekeeping is like ours. From midnight to 60 minutes thereafter is zero hour. From 60 minutes after midnight to 119 minutes after midnight is the first hour of the day, and so on. In our timekeeping, an hour is always 60 minutes long, no matter what the season of the year may be. By contrast, traditional Jewish timekeeping took the hours between sunrise and sunset and divided them into twelve equal units and called them hours. As the days grew longer or shorter over the course of the year, there were always twelve hours of daylight, by Jewish reckoning, but the length of the hours increased or decreased proportionally to the overall length of the day. This is known as “*halachic*” timekeeping according to *halacha* or Jewish rabbinical tradition. So, summer “hours” were longer than winter “hours” because they were subsets of a longer day.

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<sup>29</sup> See “The Hebrew Year” above.

<sup>30</sup> “Festivals,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

<sup>31</sup> “Holy Days,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

<sup>32</sup> “Festivals,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*.

<sup>33</sup> Appell, “Why Do Some Jews Have One Seder and Others Have Two Seders?”



On the Day of the Cross, April 1, AD 33, in Jerusalem, the sun rose at 5:20 a.m. and set at 6:02 p.m.<sup>34</sup> The daylight hours, therefore, consisted of 760 minutes, so every “hour,” by Jewish reckoning, was 58.71 minutes long on that day. The table below shows the relationship of the Jewish hours to the Roman hours on the Day of the Cross (with a slight rounding error).

**Hours on the Day of the Cross (24-Hour Format)<sup>35</sup>**

<b>April 1, AD 33</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>	<b>Roman Cardinal Hour</b>	<b>Roman Ordinal Hour</b>	<b>Jewish Ordinal Hour</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Midnight	23:26	0:24	0:00	0		
Jesus tried before dawn	0:25	1:23	1:00	1 <sup>st</sup>		
	1:24	2:22	2:00	2 <sup>nd</sup>		
	2:23	3:21	3:00	3 <sup>rd</sup>		
	3:22	4:20	4:00	4 <sup>th</sup>		
4:21	5:19	5:00	5 <sup>th</sup>			
Sunrise: Pilate tells the Jews, “Behold Your King.”	5:20	6:18	6:00	6 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	John 19:14: about the sixth (Roman) hour
	6:19	7:17	7:00	7 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	
Jesus hangs on the Cross	7:18	8:16	8:00	8 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Mark 15:25: in the third (Jewish) hour
	8:17	9:15	9:00	9 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	
	9:16	10:14	10:00	10 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	
Darkness comes over the whole land.	10:15	11:13	11:00	11 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	Matt 27:45, Luke 23:44: from the sixth–ninth (Jewish) hour.
	11:14	12:12	12:00	12 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	
	12:13	13:11	13:00	13 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	
Jesus dies in darkness. Then, the darkness recedes.	13:12	14:10	14:00	14 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	

<sup>34</sup> Kalendis.

<sup>35</sup> The shaded areas indicate hours of darkness.

<b>April 1, AD 33</b>	<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>	<b>Roman Cardinal Hour</b>	<b>Roman Ordinal Hour</b>	<b>Jewish Ordinal Hour</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Jesus hangs on the Cross, dead	14:11	15:09	15:00	15 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	
	15:10	16:08	16:00	16 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	
Jesus is buried before sundown.	16:09	17:07	17:00	17 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>	Matt 27:57–60, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54, John 19:38–42
Night – Jesus’s body is in the tomb	17:08	18:06	18:00	18 <sup>th</sup>		
	18:07	19:05	19:00	19 <sup>th</sup>		
	19:06	20:04	20:00	20 <sup>th</sup>		
	20:05	21:03	21:00	21 <sup>st</sup>		
	21:04	22:02	22:00	22 <sup>nd</sup>		
	22:03	23:01	23:00	23 <sup>rd</sup>		
	23:02	0:00	0:00	24 <sup>th</sup>		

Understanding the references to time in the gospel on this day requires understanding which method of timekeeping each gospel author used. John used the Roman method. The others used the Jewish method. We should avoid “reading history backward.” Ancient peoples, including the Jews and the Romans, were remarkably efficient at keeping time, but obviously, they did not have our modern computers and atomic clocks. So, when this essay notes that the sun rose at 5:20 a.m. on April 1, AD 33, in Jerusalem, a contemporary Roman or Jew would likely have noted the time as “half past the fifth hour” or “half past the last hour,” respectively. When John says that Pontius Pilate presented Jesus to the Jewish mob and said, “Behold your king,” (John 19:14) at “about the sixth hour,” John meant about 6 a.m. We can feel sure John was using the Roman method of timekeeping because if John were using the Jewish method, the sixth hour would mean around 11 a.m., which fails to fit with the rest of the narrative of the Day of the Cross. When Mark says the Romans crucified Jesus in the third hour (using the Jewish method of timekeeping), we can calculate today that the third hour was from 7:18 a.m. to 8:16 a.m. And when Matthew and Luke say that the sky grew dark from the sixth to the ninth (Jewish) hours, we can calculate today that this could be anytime between 10:15 a.m. (the beginning of the sixth hour) until 2:10 p.m. (the end of the ninth hour); but the gospel writers probably thought of this as simply meaning from mid-morning until mid-afternoon.

### **Time in the Tomb**

The Bible says Jesus spent three days in the tomb. As with partial and whole years, the chronological conventions of the Jews are such that any part of a whole day counts as a whole day unit. Jesus died around 2 p.m. on Friday, April 1, AD 33. By Jewish reckoning, Friday ended (and the Sabbath began) at sundown on April 1, around 6 p.m. Friday was part of a one-day unit. From sundown on April 1 to sundown on Saturday, April 2 was a whole one-day-unit. The third day began at sundown on Saturday, April 2, and ended at sundown on Resurrection Sunday, April 3, AD 33, when Jesus broke bread with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the third whole-day unit.

In the Jewish mind, part of one day, the whole of a second day, and part of a third day equal three days. By analogy, if one has a bucket of water that is half full, a bucket of water that is full, and a bucket of water that is one-fifth full, the number of buckets containing water is three, although they are not three full buckets of water. Jesus emerged from the tomb before sunrise on Sunday, April 3 (Matt 28:1, Mark 16:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1). The Bible does not specify the exact hour of His Resurrection, but it was sometime between sundown on Saturday and sunrise, or 5:20 a.m. on Sunday, which was thus within the third day-unit by Jewish reckoning.

### **Conclusion**

The best evidence persuasively suggests that contrary to what many authorities assert, Jesus was born in mid-June 2 BC, not on December 25, 4 BC, and that His ministry lasted not for three years but for 1,350 days, or 45 months, from AD 29 to 33.

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