

## Handout 1

April 04, 2018

In our new book, *The Final Days of Jesus: The Most Important Week of the Most Important Person Who Ever Lived*, we assume but do not argue for a precise date of Jesus's crucifixion. Virtually all scholars believe, for various reasons, that Jesus was crucified in the spring of either A.D. 30 or A.D. 33, with the majority opting for the former. (The evidence from astronomy narrows the possibilities to A.D. 27, 30, 33, or 34). However, we want to set forth our case for the date of Friday, April 3, A.D. 33 as the exact day that Christ died for our sins.

To be clear, the Bible does not explicitly specify the precise date of Jesus's crucifixion and it is not an essential salvation truth. But that does not make it unknowable or unimportant. Because Christianity is a historical religion and the events of Christ's life did take place in human history alongside other known events, it is helpful to locate Jesus's death—as precisely as the available evidence allows—within the larger context of human history.

Among the Gospel writers, no one makes this point more strongly than Luke, the Gentile physician turned historian and inspired chronicler of early Christianity.

### **The Year John the Baptist's Ministry Began**

Luke implies that John the Baptist began his public ministry shortly before Jesus did, and he gives us a historical reference point for when the Baptist's ministry began: "*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. . .*" (Luke 3:1).

We know from Roman historians that Tiberius succeeded Augustus as emperor and was confirmed by the Roman Senate on August 19, A.D. 14. He ruled until A.D. 37. "The fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" sounds like a straightforward date, but there are some ambiguities, beginning with when one starts the calculation. Most likely, Tiberius's reign was counted either from the day he took office in A.D. 14 or from January 1 of the following year, A.D. 15. The earliest possible date at which Tiberius's "fifteenth year" began is August 19, A.D. 28, and the latest possible date at which his "fifteenth year" ended is December 31, A.D. 29. So *John the Baptist's ministry began anywhere from mid-A.D. 28 until sometime in A.D. 29.*

## **The Year Jesus's Ministry Began**

If Jesus, as the Gospels seem to indicate, began his ministry not long after John, then based on the calculations above, the earliest date for Jesus's baptism would be in late A.D. 28 at the very earliest. However, it is more probable to place it sometime in the first half of the year A.D. 29, because a few months probably elapsed between the beginning of John's ministry and that of Jesus (and the year A.D. 30 is the latest possible date). So *Jesus's ministry must have begun between the end of A.D. 28 at the earliest and A.D. 30 at the latest.*

This coheres with Luke's mention that "Jesus, when he began his ministry, was *about thirty years of age*" (Luke 3:23). If he was born in 6 or 5 B.C., as is most likely, Jesus would have been *approximately thirty-two to thirty-four years old* in late A.D. 28 until A.D. 30, which falls well within the range of him being "about thirty years of age."

## **The Length of Jesus's Ministry**

Now we need to know how long Jesus's public ministry lasted, because if it went on for two or more years, this would seem to rule out spring of A.D. 30 as a possible date for the crucifixion.

John's Gospel mentions that Jesus attended at least three Passovers (possibly four), which took place once a year in the spring:

- There was a Passover in Jerusalem at the start of his public ministry (John 2:13, 23).
- There was a Passover in Galilee midway through his public ministry (John 6:4).
- There was a final Passover in Jerusalem at the end of his public ministry, that is, the time of his crucifixion (John 11:55; 12:1).
- And Jesus may have attended one more Passover not recorded in John but perhaps in one or several of the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

## The Length of Jesus's Ministry

Even if there were only three Passovers, this would still make a date of A.D. 30 all but impossible for the date of the crucifixion. As noted above, the earliest likely date for the beginning of Jesus's ministry from Luke 3:1 is late A.D. 28. So the first of these Passovers (at the beginning of Jesus' ministry; John 2:13) would fall on Nisan 15 in A.D. 29 (because Nisan is in March/April, near the beginning of a year). The second would fall in A.D. 30 at the earliest, and the third would fall in 31 at the earliest. This means that if Jesus's ministry coincided with at least three Passovers, and if the first Passover was in A.D. 29, he could not have been crucified in A.D. 30.

But if John the Baptist began his ministry in A.D. 29, then Jesus probably began his ministry in late A.D. 29 or early A.D. 30. Then the Passovers in John would occur on the following dates:

Nisan 15	A.D. 30	John 2:13
Nisan 15	A.D. 31	either the unnamed feast in John 5:1 or else a Passover that John does not mention (but that may be implied in the Synoptics)
Nisan 15	A.D. 32	John 6:4
Nisan 15	A.D. 33	John 11:55, the Passover at which Jesus was crucified

## Jesus Was Crucified on the Day of Preparation for the Passover

John also mentions that Jesus was crucified on "the day of Preparation" (John 19:31), that is, the Friday before the Sabbath of Passover week (Mark 15:42). The night before, on Thursday evening, Jesus ate a Passover meal with the Twelve (Mark 14:12), his "Last Supper."

In the Pharisaic-rabbinic calendar commonly used in Jesus's day, Passover always falls on the fifteenth day of Nisan (Exodus 12:6), which

## Jesus Was Crucified on the Day of Preparation for the Passover

begins Thursday after sundown and ends Friday at sundown. In the year A.D. 33, the most likely year of Jesus's crucifixion, Nisan 15 fell on April 3, yielding April 3, A.D. 33, as the most likely date for the crucifixion. In *The Final Days of Jesus*, we therefore constructed the following chart to show the dates for Jesus's final week in A.D. 33:

April 2	Nissan 14	Thursday (Wednesday nightfall to Thursday nightfall)	Day of Passover preparation	Last Supper
April 3	Nissan 15	Friday (Thursday nightfall to Friday nightfall)	Passover; Feast of Unleavened Bread, begins	Crucifixion
April 4	Nissan 16	Saturday (Friday nightfall to Saturday nightfall)	Sabbath	
April 5	Nissan 17	Sunday (Saturday nightfall to Sunday nightfall)	First day of the week	Resurrection

### Conclusion

The above calculations may appear complicated, but in a nutshell the argument runs like this:

## Conclusion

HISTORICAL INFORMATION	YEAR
Beginning of Tiberius's reign	A.D. 14
<i>Fifteenth year of Tiberius's reign:</i> Beginning of John the Baptist's ministry	A.D. 28
<i>A few months later:</i> Beginning of Jesus's ministry	A.D. 29
Minimum three-year duration of Jesus' ministry: Most likely date of Jesus's crucifixion	A.D. 33 (April 3)

While this is in our judgment the most likely scenario, it should be acknowledged that many believe Jesus was crucified in the year A.D. 30, not 33. However, if the beginning of Tiberius's reign is placed in the year A.D. 14, it is virtually impossible to accommodate fifteen years of Tiberius's reign and three years of Jesus' ministry between A.D. 14 and 30. For this reason, some have postulated a co-regency (joint rule) of Tiberius and Augustus during the last few years of Augustus's reign. However, there is no reliable ancient historical evidence for such co-regency.

We conclude that Jesus was most likely crucified on April 3, A.D. 33. While other dates are possible, believers can take great assurance from the fact that the most important historical events in Jesus's life, such as the crucifixion, are firmly anchored in human history. As we celebrate Easter, and as we walk with Jesus every day of the year, we can therefore be confident that our faith is based not only on subjective personal assurance but on reliable historical data, which makes ours an eminently reasonable faith.

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