

# The chronological framework of the birth, ministry and death of Jesus

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When exactly was Jesus born? This also raises the question of when he died. There are different views on this. The answer is also linked to the question of when Herod, the “infanticide of Bethlehem” (cf. Mt 2:1ff.), died, especially since, as Mt 2:13ff. shows, Jesus was born some time before his death. Herod's death is generally dated to March 4 BC. However, the assumption that Herod died in 1 BC and that Jesus was born around 3/2 BC seems to have gained in popularity recently. Accordingly, Jesus' death is then not dated to 30 AD, but to 33 AD. It should be noted that the year 0 does not exist and that our current “Christian calendar” starts too late.

In the New Testament, individual dates are handed down to us in the context of Jesus' life and ministry (cf. e.g. Luke 3:1; John 2:20), in the sense of a “relative chronology”, i.e. they are indications of the time span between certain historical events. On the other hand, according to Luke 3:23, Jesus was “about 30 years old” when he “appeared” (after his baptism), i.e. when he began his public ministry.

How we classify these dates in the “absolute chronology” (according to our chronology) depends, among other things, on how we date the death of Herod. In the following explanations, the discussion will be placed on a broader basis, particularly on the basis of various statements by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (37/8 to approx. 100 AD) and individual statements by the early church fathers. As a matter of principle, references to secondary literature will be avoided. Such references can be found in the above-mentioned publications of mine.

## The appointment of Herod as “King of Judea”

Herod, the “infanticide of Bethlehem”, was the son of the Idumean (Edomite) Antipater. In Josephus we find the designation “Herod the Great” (Ant 18:130, 133, 136), which is to be understood in the sense of “Herod the Elder”. Among his ten “lawful wives” was the Hasmonean Mariamne (Miriam or Mary). The New Testament mentions his sons Archelaus (cf. Mt 2:22) and Antipas (cf. e.g. Mt 14:1ff.; Luke 23:7ff.) as well as his grandson Agrippa I (cf. Acts 12:1ff.) and his son Agrippa II (cf. Acts 25:13ff.).

According to Josephus, Herod was installed as king (of Judea) by Antony (and the Roman Senate) in the 184th Olympiad (44–40 BC) in Rome (Ant 14:387-389). In Ant 14:465 and Bell 1:343, Josephus mentions that Herod conquered Jerusalem three years after this appointment (cf. Ant 18:130, 136). According to Josephus, the Battle of Actium, in which Octavianus, the later Emperor Augustus, defeated Antony, took place in the 187th Olympiad, which began in 32 BC (Ant 15:109). In Ant 15:121, the seventh year of Herod's reign is mentioned in this context, although in Josephus this reign

begins with the conquest of Jerusalem three years after Herod's installation as king (cf. Ant 17:191; Bell 1:665). The Battle of Actium is dated on the basis of other sources to September 2, 31 BC. On the other hand, “the celebration” after the completion of the ten-year construction of Caesarea Sebaste (Samaria; cf. Josephus, Bell 1:403) “fell in the 29th year of Herod's reign and in the 192nd Olympiad” (Ant 16:136). The 192nd Olympiad begins in the year 12 BC. According to Josephus, the installation of Herod took place around 41/40 BC. (in the last year of the 184th Olympiad) and the conquest of Jerusalem around 38/37 BC. ➤

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## The date of Herod's death

According to Josephus, Herod died in his winter residence in Jericho (Ant 17:168ff.) shortly after a lunar eclipse (Ant 17:167: "and the moon failed/disappeared [darkened] that night").<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, according to Josephus, Herod died shortly after a Passover (Ant 17:213; Bell 2:10). Therefore, the lunar eclipse mentioned is largely understood to refer to the lunar eclipse in March 4 BC. Others argue that there was only a partial lunar eclipse in March 4 BC and that the lunar eclipse mentioned should be referred to 1 BC (December). Accordingly, the death of Herod is dated to 1 BC. In order to "justify" this assumption, it is assumed, at least in part, that Herod ruled together with his sons. However, such co-rulership during Herod's lifetime can be ruled out on the basis of what has been handed down. On the other hand, the Jew Philo of Alexandria (died around 50 AD), for example, sees the "failures" (eclipses) of the sun and moon in Prov 2:50<sup>3</sup> as an announcement of the death of kings and the destruction of cities. In this "context", it is likely that Josephus saw the lunar eclipse as a "precursor" of Herod's death, although it does not have to be assumed that it was a full lunar eclipse.

Josephus also mentions that Herod died 34 years after the beginning of his reign at the conquest of Jerusalem and 37 years after his installation as king (Ant 17:191; Bell 1:665).<sup>4</sup> Since Josephus dates the installation of Herod around 41/40

BC and the beginning of his reign around 38/37 BC, he accordingly assumes Herod's death around 5/4 BC.

On the other hand, Josephus (Bell 1:20) mentions that Quintilius Varus – as Roman legate<sup>5</sup> in Syria – was "in the country" (Judea, which was assigned to Syria) when there was a revolt after the death of Herod. Publius Quinctilius Varus was probably the Roman legate in the province of Syria from 7/6–5/4 BC. This relation also "confirms" that, according to Josephus, Herod died in 4 BC at the latest. It should be noted in this context that Quirinius is not referred to as a legate or "governor" of Syria in the Greek text of Luke 2:2. Rather, he was the commander-in-chief of the Roman emperor in the Middle East at the time and therefore the "superior" of the Roman legate in Syria.

Herod's death around 4 BC is also "confirmed" by the fact that Herod's three sons, who succeeded him after his death, apparently all ruled from 4 BC onwards. It was only after Herod's death (cf. Bell 1:665) that his will was read, according to which "Philip was to inherit Trachonitis and the neighboring lands, and Antipas was to become tetrarch [over Galilee and Perea], as we have already said, and Archelaus was made king [or ethnarch over Judea and Samaria]" (Bell 1:668; cf. Ant 17:168ff.317-319). According to Josephus, Herod's son Philip – who "was moderate and unstressed in the manner of his rule" – died in the 20th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius (i.e. around 32/33 AD),<sup>6</sup> after he had been

"tetrarch of Trachonitis and Gaulonitis and also of the nation of the Batanaeans for 37 years" (Ant 18:106).

According to Josephus, Archelaus was discharged in the 10th year of his reign (Ant 18:342; cf. Josephus, Vit 5). This was in the year 6 AD. In Ant 18:26 Josephus reports that Quirinius appointed Ananus (Annas) as high priest after the dismissal of Archelaus and mentions that this took place "in the 37th year of the victory of the emperor [Octavianus/Augustus] over Antonius at Actium [September 2, 31 BC]". Numismatic evidence (coins), on the other hand, shows that Antipas ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD.<sup>7</sup> Josephus dates the deposition of Antipas in the second year of the reign of the emperor Gaius (37–41 AD; Ant 18:238ff.), which is consistent with the numismatic findings.

## The date of Jesus' birth

According to Josephus, Herod fell out of favor with Emperor Augustus in 8 BC, and in the following year his subjects were to swear an oath of allegiance to the emperor (Ant 16:290). It is very likely that the "census" or entry in the tax lists mentioned in Luke 2:1f. was carried out around this time. This is also supported by the testimony of the jurist and church father Tertullian (ca. 200 AD), for whom it is certain "that under Augustus the census was carried out in Judea by Gaius Sentius Saturninus [who was the predecessor of the aforementioned Publius

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Luke 23:45: "while the sun failed/disappeared [was darkened]".

<sup>3</sup> Philo, Prov 2:50: "For in the divine nature of the sun and the moon, failures [eclipses] follow. Their announcements are the death of kings or the destruction of cities. Pindar also spoke of a failure [a darkening] that had happened, which was caused by what had been said before."

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, Bell 1:665 (= Ant 17:191): "So Herod died, having survived the murder of his son for five days, having reigned 34 years as king since he had Antigonus slain, and 37 years since he had been declared king by the Romans." Cf. also Josephus, Ant 14:387-389; 16:136; 17:191.

<sup>5</sup> The exact title is *legatus Augusti pro praetore*, i.e. "Envoy of Augustus with propraetorian command authority".

<sup>6</sup> The 16th year of reign of Tiberius falls, as Syrian coin finds show, in any case according to the Syrian calendar on 28/29 AD. The 15th year of reign of Tiberius mentioned in Luke 3:1 thus falls on 27/28 AD.

<sup>7</sup> See [https://data1.geo.univie.ac.at/projects/muenzeundmacht/coins/co-in8\\_9B.html](https://data1.geo.univie.ac.at/projects/muenzeundmacht/coins/co-in8_9B.html) (accessed on 06/01/2025).

Quintilius Varus as Roman legate in Syria in 7 BC]", for which Tertullian researched the Roman state archives (Adv Marc 4:19). Why should Tertullian have invented such a name, which does not appear in Luke's account, if he had no historical basis for it? This would have made him untrustworthy to his opponents.

### The beginning of Jesus' public ministry

According to Luke 3:22, Jesus was "about 30 years old" at the beginning of his public ministry.<sup>8</sup> Jesus' public ministry began, as John 2:20 shows in context, around 46 years after the start of the construction of the temple. According to Josephus (Ant 15:380), the construction of the Herodian temple began "when the 18th year of Herod's reign was completed" (since the conquest of Jerusalem around 38/37 BC), and therefore around 19 BC.<sup>9</sup> According to Josephus (Ant 15:354), the emperor (Augustus) came to Syria "when 17 years of his [Herod's] reign had already passed". According to Dio Cassius, Augustus arrived in Syria, among other places, in the spring of 20 BC. This also confirms that the 18th year of Herod's kingship was 20/19 BC. Accordingly, Herod began building the temple in 19 AD (after completing his 18th year of reign).<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that there was no year 0, i.e. there was only one year between 1 BC and 1 AD. This means that the events reported in the context of John 2:20 took place before the Passover of 28 AD (cf. John 2:13, 23).

John mentions three Passover feasts in his Gospel (cf. John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 11:55). It can be assumed that Jesus' last meal before his death (cf. John 12:1; 13:1) is the same Passover feast mentioned in John 11:55. If John mentions all the Passover feasts in the Gospel since the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, there are around two years between the "first sign" – the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana – and his death.

According to Luke 3:1ff, John the Baptist began to proclaim God's word and baptize in the desert (opposite Jericho) in the 15th year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius. At least according to the Syrian calendar (which Luke likely assumes), this 15th year of reign fell on 27/28 AD. The church father Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 AD) writes that "some claim that the baptism [of Jesus] took place in the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius on the day of his death. Some claim that the baptism [of Jesus] took place in the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius on the 15th day of the month Tybi [= 'the first month of sprouting' in Egypt; i.e. around November 1, 27 AD or shortly before], others that it took place on the 11th day of the same month" (Strom 1.21.146). Thus, we can conclude that John began baptizing at the Jordan River east of Jericho in AD 27 and that Jesus was baptized in the fall of the same year, while the events reported in John 2 fall around March 28 AD.

### Year and date of Jesus' death and resurrection

Jesus very probably died on April 7, 30 AD, for which we also have a testimony from Clement of Alexandria (Strom 1.21.145f.). If Jesus was born in the year 7 BC (i.e. strictly speaking in the year 6 BC, as there is no year 0) and if he died in the year 30 AD, as is to be assumed, then he was (just) 36 years old when he died on the cross (if he had died in 33 AD, he would have been around 39 years old).

According to the New Testament Gospels (and also according to the Babylonian Talmud), Jesus died on the cross on a Friday ("preparation day" or "evening/day before the Sabbath"), and in the period in question, the 14th of Nisan (Abib; cf. e.g. Ex 13:4) fell on Friday, April 7 in AD 30 and on Friday, April 3 in AD 33 according to the official Jewish calendar. It is widely accepted in scholarship that, during the period in question for the death of Jesus, the 14th of Nisan did not otherwise fall on a Friday.

By the way, the 14 years mentioned in Gal 2:1 align well with the dating of Jesus' death in AD 30, but hardly with a dating in AD 33. Paul is obviously referring in Gal 2:1ff. to the visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 11:27-30 before his first missionary journey around the year 47 AD. If we include the apostle's three years in Arabia



<sup>8</sup> According to Num 4:3, "all who enter the service to do the work of the tent of meeting" were to be between 30 and 50 years old. According to the "rule for the whole community", which was found in Cave 1 of Qumran, a man was allowed to "ascend to all the leading offices" at the age of 30 (1QSa 1:13; cf. also e.g. CD 14:7, 9; 1QM 6:14). Between the ages of 11 and 20, he was to be "instructed in the book of instruction and in all the precepts of the covenant" (1QSa 1:7). He was then allowed to marry at the age of 20 at the earliest, and at the age of 25 he was given "a seat and a voice in the congregation" (1QSa 1:10-12).

<sup>9</sup> Ant 17:191 and Bell 1:665 show that Josephus reckons this "reign as king since the killing of Antigonos and the conquest of Jerusalem around 37 BC.

<sup>10</sup> Dio Cassius, Hist 54.7.4-6 (at the time of the consuls Marcus Apuleius and Publius Silius).

(Gal 1:18) in the 14 years mentioned in Gal 2:1, which is supported by the formulation of the Greek text in the passage, then this means that Paul came to faith in Jesus Christ around 33 AD. This was hardly the same year in which Jesus died, but rather a few years later.

Jesus was resurrected 50 days (seven weeks)<sup>11</sup> before Pentecost ("Feast of Weeks") and therefore on the day on which the first fruits of the barley harvest were offered to God in the temple. For the Pharisees this is the 16th Nisan<sup>12</sup> and for the Sadducees the first regular Sabbath after the 15th Nisan. As Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday, the Feast of Firstfruits also fell on the 16th Nisan for the Sadducees that year. Jesus therefore died on 14 Nisan and rose from the dead on 16 Nisan.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the early church tradition also supports the idea that Jesus died on 14 Nisan. Furthermore, the tradition in Asia Minor of the 2nd century AD – which held that the Christian Passover was celebrated on the 14th of Nisan – referred to the Apostle John, who worked for an extended period in Ephesus and its surroundings before his death. Irenaeus, a "principal disciple" of the apostle John, emphasizes, for example, with reference to John, that Jesus ate the Passover lamb and suffered the day after (Ad haer 2.22.3). According to this, the apostle John also regarded Jesus' last meal as a Passover meal and dated it to the (eve of) the 14th Nisan.

## Summary and concluding remarks

The probable date of Jesus' birth in 7 BC is discussed in more detail in the publications mentioned above. The death of Herod, the "child murderer of Bethlehem", falls on March 4 BC. The pieces of information provided by Josephus in this regard are congruent and convincing. They are confirmed by archaeological finds.

As far as Jesus' death is concerned, it took place on the 14th of Nisan (Abib), and on the evening before, which also belongs to the 14th of Nisan according to the Jewish festival calendar, he took the Last Supper with his disciples. It can therefore be assumed that Jesus died on April 7, 30 AD.

Jesus was resurrected on 16 Nisan and therefore on the day on which the first fruits of the barley harvest were offered. Paul not only emphasizes that Jesus was resurrected "on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4), but also refers to this resurrection as the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20). 50 days later, believers in Jesus received the Holy Spirit as the "firstfruits" (of the resurrection) (Rom 8:23; cf. Rom 8:10f.). ■

"Accordingly, Jesus is believed to have died on April 7, 30 AD."



## RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

- Jacob Thiessen  
**Die jüdische Mischna und das jüdische Neue Testament. Parallelen und Unterschiede.** Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, ca. July 2025 (in Editorial).
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- Jacob Thiessen  
**Historisch-theologische Einführung in das Neue Testament, Ansbach.** Logos Editions, 2025, 2 Bde. (in Vorbereitung).
- Jacob Thiessen  
**Auf Jesu Spuren im Heiligen Land. Ein historischer und theologischer Reisebegleiter, Ansbach.** Logos Editions, 5th edition 2025.

<sup>11</sup> The first and last day are included in this calculation. Jesus' resurrection was on a Sunday, and the Pentecost that followed, on which the Holy Spirit was poured out, was also on a Sunday. These are the presumed "50 days". The word for "Pentecost" in Greek is "fiftieth", with "day" to be added.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. e.g. Josephus, Ant 3:250; mMen 10:1-3 (Mishnah). According to mPes 7:10 (Mishnah), the bones, sinews and the rest of the Passover lamb are burned on the 16th of Nisan. "If the 16th falls on a Sabbath, they are burned on the 17th, because they do not displace either the Sabbath or the holiday."

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also John 19:31: "The Jews therefore begged Pilate that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath, because it was the preparation day – for the day of that Sabbath was great – that their legs might be broken and they might be taken away." The Sabbath after Jesus' death is described as "great" because a meeting was held on the 15th of Nisan (at the beginning of the "Feast of Unleavened Bread").