

Jot & Tittle

A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God

April 2010

The Duration of Jesus' Public Ministry

by Dana L. Goodnough

Jesus' public ministry was brief. The period of time between His baptism and His crucifixion covered at most about three and a half years. Yet within that relatively short period of time Jesus set in motion a movement that would last for centuries and, in fact, touch all eternity. The four Gospels give few details about the precise duration of Jesus' ministry. Nevertheless, students of God's Word can arrive at some reasonable conclusions about the length of time Jesus actively taught, served, and performed miracles. The clues in the Gospels, while minimal, provide a framework for accepting the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as historically reliable.

Chronological Clues in the Gospels

The primary clues in the four Gospels that provide insight into the duration of Jesus' public ministry revolve around notices about the Jewish feasts. The three Synoptic Gospels make reference to only one Passover Feast during Jesus' ministry, the Passover associated with His crucifixion (Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:1; Luke 22:1).

The Gospel of John refers to three distinct Passover feasts during the public ministry of Jesus (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55), including the final Passover associated with Jesus' crucifixion. In addition to

these references to the Passover, the Gospel of John refers to the fall Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2), the winter Feast of Dedication (John 10:22), and an unnamed feast (John 5:1). Therefore, assuming the chronological accuracy of John's Gospel, Jesus' ministry must have proceeded according to the following sequence: the spring Feast of Passover (John 2:13), the unnamed feast (John 5:1), the spring Feast of Passover (John 6:4), the fall Feast of Tabernacle (John 7:2), the winter Feast of Dedication (John 10:22), and the final spring Feast of Passover (John 11:55).

The Unnamed Feast in John 5:1

Much weight has been given to the unnamed feast in John 5:1 in relation to the duration of Jesus' ministry. If this feast was a fourth Passover, Jesus' ministry must have covered a period of at least three years. However, if this feast was not a Passover, a two year ministry may be preferable (though not necessary). Robertson points out that the unnamed feast in John 5:1 has been variously identified with the Feast of Dedication, the Feast of Tabernacles, the Feast of Purim, the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Passover.¹

Hoehner tentatively favors identifying the unnamed feast as the fall Feast of Tabernacles. "In conclusion then, it seems that any of the three pilgrim feasts is more viable than the lesser feasts, and of the three pilgrim feasts, the Feast of Tabernacles probably has a slight edge."² However, Hoehner still holds to a three-year ministry of Jesus based on the idea that John 4:35, which states that there were four more months before the spring harvest, hints at an extended time period between the spring Feast of Passover in John 2:13 and the spring Feast of Passover in John 6:4. He states, "It has been shown that many advocates of a three-year ministry identify the Feast of John 5:1 with Jewish feasts other than Passover."³

Another commonly held view of the unnamed feast in John 5:1 is to identify this feast with an additional spring Passover. According to Robertson, "The arguments in favor of this interpretation are the most satisfactory. We cannot consider them as absolutely conclusive, yet the Passover meets all sides of the case better than any of the other feasts."⁴ The most significant argument supporting this conclusion is the amount of time necessary for Jesus

to complete His lengthy Galilean ministry. Disfavoring this view is the fact that John in other instances refers to the Feast of Passover by name.

Proposed Solutions

Based on the Synoptic Gospels, some have concluded that Jesus' public ministry lasted just a little longer than one year. This view, however, requires a good deal of rearranging of the feasts in the Gospel of John and seems to allow too little time for the unfolding events in the life of Jesus. "Since John's account presupposes a longer period of ministry than the synoptics, it has been the usual procedure of traditionalists to fit the synoptic outlines as far as possible into the Johannine structure."⁵

A two-year minimum duration of Jesus' ministry seems necessary based on the specific references to three Passovers in the Gospel of John. Jesus would have been baptized a few months before the first Passover (John 2:13), ministered through the second Passover in the following spring (John 6:4), and concluded His ministry with His crucifixion at the third Passover (John 11:55). One objection to this approach has to do with activities of Jesus recorded in John 5-6. "The theory, however, is most often defended on the basis of transposing John 5 and 6. Because no manuscript evidence exists for this rearrangement, the two-year theory is weak."⁶ Even if a transposition of John 5-6 is not included in this theory, there are still issues involving the amount of ministry Jesus could have performed within a two-year period that has been recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.

Whether the feast in John 5:1 is an additional spring Passover, the fall Feast of Tabernacles, or another Jewish feast, it does make sense to conclude that an extended period of time intervened between the Passover in John 2:13 and the Passover in John 6:4. With this in mind, many scholars have concluded that Jesus' public ministry lasted for three years and a few months. "Therefore the three-year ministry of Jesus from the first Passover to the passion Passover is the most viable option. Of course, since Jesus' baptism and public ministry preceded the first Passover, the total length of His ministry would be about three and a half years."⁷

An Overview of Jesus' Public Ministry

Assuming that Jesus' ministry lasted for three and a half years, it's possible to summarize the flow of His ministry as follows. From His baptism to the first Passover (John 2:13) Jesus was tempted in the desert, called His first disciples, and attended the wedding in Cana. From the first Passover to the second Passover or Feast of Tabernacles (John 5:1) Jesus conducted His early Judean and Samaritan ministries (including His encounters with Nicodemus and the woman at the well) and His early Galilean ministry (including His rejection at Nazareth). From the second Passover or Feast of Tabernacles to the third Passover (John 6:4) Jesus conducted His great Galilean ministry, including His appointment of the twelve apostles, His Sermon on the Mount, and His miraculous feeding of the five thousand. From the third Passover to the final Passover (John 11:55) Jesus conducted His later Galilean ministry (including His journey to Sidon and Tyre, Peter's confession, and Jesus' transfiguration) and His later Judean and Perea ministries (including the raising of Lazarus and His encounter with Zacchaeus). Jesus was crucified at the time of the fourth and final Passover of His public ministry. This reconstruction demonstrates that the Gospels present a historically accurate portrayal of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

¹ Robertson, A. T. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1922, pp. 267-270.

² Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 59.

³ Hoehner, p. 59.

⁴ Robertson, p. 269.

⁵ Guthrie, Donald. *A Shorter Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970, p. 31.

⁶ Thomas, Robert L. and Gundry, Stanley N., editors. *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988, p. 317.

⁷ Hoehner, p. 60.