

Jot & Tittle

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

April 2003

The Year of Christ's Death

by Dana L. Goodnough

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a historical event that took place in space and time. While the New Testament provides historical reference points relating to Jesus' life and death, there is a level of uncertainty regarding the precise year in which Christ died. However, based on the ancient Jewish calendar and events taking place in the Roman Empire in the early part of the first century, it is possible to identify the year of Christ's death with reasonable accuracy.

A Friday Passover

While proposed dates for the death of Jesus Christ range from A.D. 21 to 36,¹ the field of choices narrows based on a Friday crucifixion. The record in the Gospels presents a Friday crucifixion, as Finegan affirms:

All four Gospels indicate that the day of the crucifixion of Jesus was a Friday (in our terminology), because they describe the following day as the Sabbath (Mark 15:42; Matt 28:1; Luke 23:56; John 19:31), our Saturday, and because they state that the visit of the women to the tomb on the next

day was on the first day of the week (Mark 16:2; Matt 28:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1), our Sunday.²

A Friday crucifixion best fits the New Testament account of Christ's death.

The Gospels present the crucifixion as taking place during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, who ruled over Judea from A.D. 26-36.³ A Friday crucifixion points to four possible dates for the death of Jesus Christ, and only two of these dates fit comfortably into the New Testament framework.

Since the Jewish month was determined by a new moon, we can determine through astronomical calculations which years between 27 and 37 the fourteenth or fifteenth of Nisan preceded or involved a Sabbath. These are the years 27, 30, 33, and 36. The first possibility is clearly too early, and the last is too late. Thus for all practical purposes we are limited to either 30 or 33 as the date of Jesus' death.⁴

Therefore, we can conclude that Jesus died during the Passover in either A.D. 30 or 33.

The Reign of Tiberius and the Ministry of John the Baptist

While many Bible scholars accept A.D. 30 as the most accurate date for the death of Jesus, Luke 3:1 makes this date difficult to support. According to Luke 3:1, John the Baptist began his ministry "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar." Caesar Augustus died on August 19, A.D. 14.⁵ This date marks the beginning of Tiberius' reign as emperor. Therefore, the fifteenth year of Tiberius would be A.D. 28/29⁶ in our modern calendar (A.D. 14 would count as the first year of Tiberius' reign).

Jesus' public ministry followed that of John the Baptist's and lasted a little over three years. Therefore, an A.D. 30 date for Jesus' crucifixion seems unlikely. Those who hold to the A.D. 30 date must apply the Luke 3:1 reference to the period of Tiberius' co-regency with Augustus, which took place during the last two or three years of Augustus' life. But this reckoning of the beginning of Tiberius' reign would not be characteristic of Luke's historical accuracy. Therefore, based on the New Testament record and historical

evidence, Jesus' death most likely occurred on Friday, April 3, A.D. 33.⁷

Lucius Aelius Sejanus and Pontius Pilate

In addition to the biblical and historical records that point to A.D. 33 as the year of Jesus' crucifixion, there is an interesting confirmation of this date found in the political climate of that year. The political indications involve a man by the name of Lucius Aelius Sejanus. Sejanus became the most influential leader in Rome under Tiberius Caesar, and during Tiberius' later years he entrusted most of the affairs of state to Sejanus. Sejanus was likely responsible for the appointment of Pontius Pilate to his role as governor of Judea in A.D. 26.

Sejanus was noted, among other things, for his open hatred for the Jews.⁸ As an appointee of Sejanus, Pilate would have enjoyed a great deal of freedom in treating the Jews with harsh cruelty. He, in fact, did do a number of things that offended his Jewish subjects.

However, the description of Pilate in the Gospels presents him as being more submissive to the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders demanded Jesus' crucifixion and threatened Pilate by saying that they would report any resistance to their demands to Tiberius. John 19:12 records this threat. The Jewish leaders declared that if Pilate released Jesus, who had claimed to be King, then Pilate was "no friend of Caesar." To be a friend of Caesar meant to be in a special standing of favor with the Roman Emperor. Why would such a threat compel Pilate to disregard Jesus' innocence and send Him to the cross?

The answer seems to come from the career of Sejanus. Sejanus' power in Rome had grown to the extent that Sejanus began to plot against Tiberius to take over the Roman Empire. Tiberius became aware of this plot, and quickly put his previously trusted adviser to death.⁹

Sejanus' death took place on October 18, A.D. 31.¹⁰ If Jesus' crucifixion took place in A.D. 30, it would be difficult to account for Pilate's more submissive attitude toward the demands of the Jewish leaders. But if the crucifixion took place in A.D. 33, the political climate forced Pilate to take a more submissive role. Anyone

suspected of being in league with Sejanus was "no friend of Caesar." Furthermore, Tiberius treated his Jewish subjects with more dignity than did Sejanus. Therefore, Pilate could not afford to risk offending the Jewish leaders when they brought Jesus for trial and crucifixion. An A.D. 33 date for Jesus' death fits the political climate in Judea at that time and best accounts for the New Testament chronological references.

Jesus Christ died on the cross in space and time. His death is a historical reality, as is His resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus also has personal ramifications for today. They confirm Jesus' message, that salvation and life are possible only through faith in Him. The Christian faith is historically accurate and it is personally fulfilling to all believe.

¹ Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 95.

² Finegan, Jack. *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*. Revised Edition. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998, p. 354.

³ Hoehner, Harold W. *Herod Antipas*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p. 172.

⁴ Stein, Robert H. *Jesus the Messiah*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 59.

⁵ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 102.

⁶ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 104.

⁷ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 114; Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, p. 362.

⁸ Philo. *Flaccus I.1. The Works of Philo: New Updated Edition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993, p. 725.

⁹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*. 18.6.6. *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, Inc. pp. 488-489.

¹⁰ Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects*, p. 109.