

The Sabbatical Years and Chronology

The correct dating of Jesus' birth is primarily a chronological matter. What one must do is to use all avenues of investigation that contain chronological evidences (or even hints) that can reasonably establish a proper chronological background to that historical event. The prime evidence comes from those individuals who were eyewitnesses (or record information from eyewitnesses). This is why the information in the Bible itself is so important in understanding the chronology associated with the nativity of Jesus. And the information in the Bible does not disappoint us.

Indeed, there is a further method found in the Bible and history for determining the time of the birth of Jesus. This is the Old Testament legislation which demanded that the Jews let their lands in the region of Palestine, lie fallow each seventh year. ¹ Every seventh year, all commercial farming or agricultural activity came to a halt. These years (every seventh year) were known as Sabbatical Years. These Sabbatical Years are important, especially in determining the length of Herod's reign.

Josephus tells us that the battle in which Herod captured Jerusalem took place during a Sabbatical Year, and that he captured the city on the Day of Atonement. We now have abundant evidence that the occurrence of this Sabbatical Year when this well-known conquest of Jerusalem occurred was in 36 B.C.E. The Jewish king Antigonus was killed a few months later. Josephus tells us that Herod reigned 34 years after the death of Antigonus. This means that Herod reigned unto 2 to 1 B.C.E.

This is precisely what I am showing in this book. What I will do in this appendix is to reveal that the New Testament itself supports the fact that the Sabbatical Cycle of years makes the summer of 36 B.C.E. to have been a Sabbatical Year. This will show Herod's death to be in 1 B.C.E.

The Jews and Sabbatical Years

The Jews before and during the time of Jesus were following the Mosaic Law for agricultural inactivity every seventh year in the land of Palestine. Because of this practice, it affords us some excellent chronological clues regarding the time that certain historical events occurred in Palestine. This is because the records show that these events happened in association with Sabbatical Years. Thankfully, it is possible from the Bible and history to accurately determine those years in which the Jews refrained from agricultural activity. Once the cycle of those seven years is understood, then those Sabbatical Years can be used as chronological benchmarks in determining important events in Jewish history during the time of Jesus.

The Cycle of Sabbatical Years Can Be Known

New evidence has become available which gives powerful proof for properly dating the years of Jesus' ministry and even the year of his crucifixion is able to be determined. This new information from the New Testament itself provides a major key which makes other chronological indications of the New Testament more understandable. It also shows that the Sabbatical Year in which Herod captured Jerusalem was indeed 36 B.C.E.

The Gospel of John records some prime chronological references for reckoning the years of Jesus' ministry that the other three Gospels do not report. For example, John mentions three Passovers which occurred during the ministry of Jesus (2:13; 6:4; 13:1). Other Jewish festivals were acknowledged as well. There was the "unknown feast" between the first two Passovers (5:1), and after the second Passover he mentions the feasts of

Tabernacles (7:1) and Dedication (10:22). These feasts provide some chronological indications for establishing the proper sequence of years associated with Jesus' ministry.

The new evidence that I am presenting in this book centers on a statement given by Jesus that John positions between his first two Passovers (2:13 and 6:4) and before his "unknown" feast (5:1). This reference is an important piece of historical information that up to now has been completely overlooked and misunderstood. But when the new research is recognized, we will have one of the most significant chronological keys for ironing out the historical difficulties associated with the chronology of Jesus' life.

A New Testament Chronological Indication

It is first essential to understand the historical environment in which this new chronological evidence occurs. Once this is understood, *the year in which Jesus began His ministry can be determined*, which in turn will also reveal the exact year in which Jesus was born according to New Testament historical indications. This new biblical evidence is important. Let us look at it.

At the end of the third chapter of John's Gospel we are told that Jesus left Jerusalem after the first Passover mentioned by John and He started on His journey toward Galilee (John 4:3). His route necessitated traveling through Samaria. Upon His arrival at Jacob's well, being weary from his journey, Jesus talked to a Samaritan woman while His disciples went into the village to fetch food. No other people were around when the discussion mentioned by John took place (John 4:6–26). However, upon the conclusion of the dialogue, the disciples returned with food. Jesus then gave them some spiritual teaching about what true food actually represented. It is this particular teaching (when the woman had left and no other Samaritans were around) that solves a major chronological problem regarding the time and length of Jesus' ministry. Jesus said,

“Say ye not, ‘There are yet four months and then cometh the harvest?’ behold, I say unto you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields; for they are white [ripe] already for harvest” [2](#)

The real meaning of Jesus' words has not been understood, yet his intention is so easy to comprehend if the legal requirements governing Palestinian agriculture in the 1st century are taken into account. In a moment I will show what Jesus had in mind when he made this statement, but let us first review the normal interpretations given by scholars to explain what Jesus meant.

Some Opinions of Theologians

There are two explanations normally proffered by theologians.

1) Since Jesus was speaking within a context of sowing and reaping, it is recognized (correctly) that Jesus was calling attention to the barley and wheat harvest which farmers reaped between Passover and Pentecost (from late March to early June). Scholars have seen significance in the phrase “four months unto the harvest.” If Jesus meant that there were yet four months until the time of the Palestinian grain harvest, then it is supposed He must have uttered his statement about late December or early January. This would allow the phrase four months to harvest to make reasonable sense. If this is the case, scholars have surmised, it would mean that Jesus gave this illustration to the disciples some 8 or 9 months after John's first Passover, and about 4 months before the beginning of the regular grain harvest which started about late March. So, most conservative theologians have felt that this is a chronological statement which can be placed within the months of December or January near the end of Jesus' first year of ministry.

2) The other theory, however, suggests that Jesus was simply stating a well-known proverb about some four month interval of time from sowing to harvest, and that no chronological significance is to be interpreted from this so-called “proverbial” reference.

There are flaws in both suppositions. For one, Jesus' statement could hardly have been

made some 8 or 9 months after John's first Passover because in verse 45 (given shortly after He returned to Galilee) his Galilean acquaintances recalled the signs He had recently accomplished at John's first Passover. These were Galileans who had gone to the FEAST "for they also went unto the FEAST." Anyone should recognize that this refers to the first Passover mentioned by John which happened about six or seven weeks before. If this is not the case, then the words of John's Gospel are incomprehensible. To say that the Galileans were referring to an unmentioned feast of Pentecost, or an unnamed feast of Tabernacles (or even the feasts of Dedication or Purim) is stretching the matter beyond reasonable belief. Truly, the Galileans must have been talking about the previous feast of Passover during which they had seen Jesus perform certain miracles and that Passover had occurred no more than 40 or 50 days before. This means that Jesus' statement (made at Jacob's Well, about a week before He met the Galileans in Nazareth) was not uttered in the months of December or January, and not 8 or 9 months after John's first Passover. Clearly, Jesus stated His remark in late May or early June. (The reason He did so at that time will be shown shortly.)

The second explanation offered by many scholars is also suspect because no proverb has been found in Jewish literature which refers to a four-month season from sowing to harvest. The period for wheat was more like six months according to the Jewish Mishnah. [3](#)

The Real Meaning of Jesus' Statement

Jesus said that His disciples would reckon four more months to the harvest, yet His statement was proclaimed in late May or early June, right in the midst of the wheat harvest. There is really no doubt that this is the case. Origen who lived in Palestine in the 3rd century recognized that Jesus' teachings in John 4:35 were stated in the middle of the actual harvest season [4](#) Even Jesus Himself acknowledged that this time was during the regular grain harvest.

"Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields for they are white [ripe] already for harvest." [5](#)

This reference by Jesus shows that the grain was already available for harvest (after all, it was late May or early June), but for some reason He put it in the mouths of the disciples that they would not expect anyone to harvest the grain for another four months. Why on earth did Jesus say there were yet four more months before harvest, when the harvest season was at its height?

The answer is simple if one remembers the agricultural legislation that Moses imposed on Jews and Samaritans living in the Holy land. There were agricultural rules that both groups observed in the 1st century. The truth is, Jesus made His statement in the midst of what the Jews and Samaritans called a Sabbatical Year. Such a year was one in which no sowing or reaping were permitted, from the New Year of one autumn to the New Year of the next. When this is realized and understood, all chronological difficulties associated with John 4:35 thoroughly disappear (though they appear to be outright contradictions on the surface).

The Simple Answer

Notice how plain the whole matter becomes. Jesus gave His teaching near the end of the second Hebrew month or the start of the third (late May or early June). When a person counts forward four more months, the month of Tishri is reached. This is the month in which all Sabbatical Years ended and people could legally begin to harvest once again. Jesus was saying what the apostles and the general population were well aware of. That year was a Sabbatical Year. No one could commence any harvesting (even though one were in the midst of the harvest season for grain) until the Sabbatical Year was over. This is the reason Jesus said it was still "four months" to the period of harvest.

There is more evidence to support this interpretation. Jesus elaborated on His teaching about the harvest by saying in John 4,

"And herein is this saying true, 'One soweth and another reapeth.' I send

you to reap that which ye bestowed no labor.”

• *John 4:37–38*

Even Jesus adopted the theme of a Sabbatical Year by telling his disciples that the harvest He asked them to engage in was one in which they HAD DONE NO LABOR. How true this illustration would have been even for the physical harvest of a Sabbatical Year. During Sabbatical Years no one could labor on the land. No sowing, plowing, pruning or harvesting were permitted. So even Jesus' statement that the disciples had bestowed no labor on the harvest that He was talking about, is indicative of the fact that that year was sabbatical. Jesus used terms only applicable to Sabbatical Years.

Another point needs to be made. Since Jesus gave His illustrations in John 4:35–38 at the time the fields were already white for harvest, He strongly implies that no one was in the fields doing any reaping. If all the fields were then ripe for harvest (and that is what Jesus said), this is a powerful suggestion that none of the fields (no matter how many there were) was then being harvested by the people. And, of course, this would have been the case in a Sabbatical Year. All the fields were not then being harvested.

In case some might doubt that fields in Sabbatical Years would produce much grain, since they had not been sowed in the previous autumn and winter, all one has to do is to recall that Leviticus 25:5 indicates there would always be a crop during the fallow Sabbatical Year from the grains that fell on the ground in the sixth year of harvest. Grain was in the stalks, but unharvested.

The Day of Pentecost?

There is yet another piece of evidence that the event which occurred at Jacob's Well happened in a Sabbatical Year. This is Luke's parallel account of what transpired in Galilee soon after Jesus had returned to His hometown of Nazareth from the Passover at Jerusalem. Luke tells us in the Greek that on “*The Day of the Sabbaths*” (or, “The Day of the Weeks”) [another possible way of saying Pentecost to agree with the terminology of Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10; and 2 Chronicles 8:13], Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah and He read chapter 61, verses 1 and 2. Luke recorded the occasion. [I am translating from the Greek.]

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the Day of the Sabbaths [or, The Day of the Weeks] and stood up to read. And he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And he opened the scroll, and found the place where it was written: ‘The Lord's Spirit is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and sight to the blind, to set free the bruised, to proclaim the Lord's acceptable year.’ And he rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him. And he began to say unto them, ‘Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears’.” [6](#)

It should be noted that the synagogue attendant handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah. This hints that the synagogue liturgy required Isaiah to be read that day. If so, this could indicate that Jesus read the regular triennial cycle selection from the prophets that accompanied the sequential readings from the five books of Moses. It is interesting that the section that Jesus quoted was that which paralleled the readings from the Law of Moses for Pentecost on the second year of the triennial cycle. [7](#) This is just another indication that this event in the synagogue in Nazareth occurred on Pentecost.

Though I am in no way insisting that the phrase “*The Day of the Weeks*” on which Jesus read Isaiah 61:1–2 was Pentecost (yet it may have been), it is still clear that the event happened in the late springtime just after Jesus had returned from Jerusalem from John's first Passover. It was certainly the same year that Jesus gave His teaching about the Sabbatical Year in John 4:35. With this in mind, we have a further reference that that year was sabbatical. Note that Jesus called that year “*the acceptable year of the Lord.*” This

is a phrase indicating the time of release. Even the use of this phrase shows that this year was a Sabbatical Year.

The First Year of Jesus' Ministry was Sabbatical

These terms that Jesus was using in His discourse at the synagogue at Nazareth were those associated with Sabbatical Years (and with the Jubilee which was a type of Sabbatical Year). Jubilee Years were not being celebrated by the Jews in the 1st century, yet the ordinary seven-year sabbatical cycle was very much in evidence among the Jews and Samaritans.

Look at the factors within Jesus' quote from Isaiah which suggest this. He said that,

1. He was anointed, to preach good tidings to the poor. This is a reflection on the sabbatical regulations that the poor and the stranger could eat from the fields without hinder.
2. He was to proclaim a release and to free the bruised. This recalls the sabbatical release regulations and being free of debt as mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:1–6.
3. And, Jesus was ordained to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. This is a reference to a sabbatical period (which years officially commenced on the Day of Atonement, Leviticus 25:9 and Isaiah 58:1–14).

Such years are always associated with “**unloosing the bands of wickedness, undoing heavy burdens, letting the oppressed go free, and the breaking of every yoke**” (Isaiah 58:6). This is the type of “acceptable year” that Jesus was proclaiming at the synagogue in Nazareth, and the theme is clearly that of a Sabbatical Year.

There is even more proof to show that this year was a Sabbatical Year. This is because Luke states that a few weeks later the disciples found themselves on a day that Luke called the “**second-first Sabbath**” and they began to eat from the grain that was in the ears of the wheat. What is the “second-first” Sabbath? The “**second-first Sabbath**” was the first weekly Sabbath of the month of Tishri (in the autumn of the year) in which the twenty-four priestly courses commenced their second annual cycle (from weekly Sabbath to weekly Sabbath) for administering in the Temple. [8](#)

The fact is, in normal harvest years ALL the grain found in barley and wheat stalks would have long been harvested. But here were the disciples on the first weekly Sabbath of the month of Tishri and they were still finding plenty of stalks of wheat with grain in them. This again shows that the year in which this happened was a Sabbatical Year. That Sabbatical Year lasted until the Day of Atonement. [9](#) This indication in Luke 6:1 shows that there was still plenty of wheat in the fields by the first week of Tishri (as late as autumn). This would have been an extraordinary thing in normal agricultural years because the wheat harvest would have been completed by around Pentecost time, three months earlier. But again, that summer in Palestine in which all of this happened was a Sabbatical Year.

This means that we have several biblical proofs that the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry and that of Jesus' teaching started in a Sabbatical Year. This is why it makes excellent sense why so many people were able to follow both of them during the times of their preaching. Many of the people would have been off from their farm labor and able to travel at leisure over the land of Palestine.

The Sequence of Sabbatical Years

Though over the past few centuries historians studying the records about Sabbatical Years have been able to arrive at their former sequence within a year or two, only within the last 50 years (and especially the last 30), has it become possible, through archaeological discoveries, etc., to determine to a near certainty what the exact Sabbatical Years' sequence was and is. This can now be known from 163 B.C.E. to the present. Two brilliant historical studies by Prof. Wacholder of Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, have solved the riddle of when the Sabbatical Years occurred in ancient times, and when they ought to be

observed today. His first study is in the *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1973, titled "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period," and the same *Annual* for 1975 has his "The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles." [10](#)

I will summarize the results of Prof. Wacholder's excellent studies. I also will give some research materials of my own from three further references in Josephus which substantiate the conclusions of Wacholder. It will demonstrate the number of precise years over the centuries which were reckoned as Sabbaticals, and how we can know the exact sequence of the seventh years for the period we are discussing.

1. We are told by 1 Maccabees 6:49 that Judas Maccabee's defeat at Beth-Zur was in a Sabbatical Year. And this can be dated to the Sabbatical Year from the autumn of 163 to autumn 162 B.C.E.
2. Josephus, the Jewish historian, shows the murder of Simon the Hasmonean as happening in the Sabbatical Year of autumn 135 to autumn 134 B.C.E.
3. Josephus shows Herod's conquest of Jerusalem as occurring in the last part of the Sabbatical Year of 37 to 36 B.C.E.
4. King Agrippa the First recited the section of Deuteronomy which a king was required to do as associated with the Sabbatical Year (Deuteronomy 31:10–13). He performed it at a time which historically shows that Agrippa's Sabbatical Year was C.E. 41 to 42.
5. A papyrus document written in Aramaic has recently been found in Palestine which is dated to the second year of Nero, and it says that that year was a Sabbatical Year. Thus, C.E. 55 to 56 was Sabbatical.
6. A reference in the 2nd century Jewish work called the *Seder Olam* can be interpreted as showing the Temple at Jerusalem being destroyed in a Sabbatical Year. That would have been C.E. 69 to 70.
7. Dated documents have been found concerning the Bar Kokhba revolt of the Jews against the Romans which show that the year C.E. 132 to 133 was also a Sabbatical Year.
8. The ruins of an ancient synagogue have recently been uncovered which have a date, in a mosaic, for the Jewish year 4000, and that it was the second year of a Sabbatical cycle. This answers to C.E. 237 to 238.
9. There is a reference in the Jewish Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b) that the Messiah will release the world from its bondage of corruption in the year after 4291 of the Jewish calendar. Since it was believed this would occur in a Sabbatical Year, this reference becomes important (though the prophecy did not occur) because the year after 4291 was C.E. 531 to 532, and it was Sabbatical.

The Sequence of Sabbatical Years is now Known

The interesting thing about these Sabbatical Years is the fact that they are all in proper sequence. This gives the historian a great deal of confidence that they are correct. This would mean that all the Sabbatical Years in between can be known.

While Schurer, following Zuckermann, felt that the Sabbatical Years' cycle was a year earlier than the one presented above, Wacholder has shown this to be untenable. For example, in Schurer's sequence, the year C.E. 40 to 41 was Sabbatical, but Josephus says that crops were able to be harvested that year. [11](#) Even Schurer admits to the difficulty. [12](#) Indeed, to use Zuckermann's and Schurer's cycle of years, C.E., 61 to 62 would have been Sabbatical, but Josephus makes it clear that in the spring of C.E. 62 people were working at the threshing floors. [13](#) But, in the very next year (C.E. 62 to 63), Agrippa II started to rebuild Caesarea Philippi which is what would ordinarily have happened when many farmers were seeking work in the building trade during a Sabbatical Year. [14](#) Prof.

Wacholder has given us the proper sequence of Sabbatical Years, and my references to Josephus given above corroborate his findings. [15](#)

Historical Events in Judaea Can Now Make Better Sense

Once the proper annual occurrences of Sabbaticals are understood, all other intervening years in sequence can be tallied. We then discover how important events occurred on them. Those years were times when the majority of the population (being mostly in agriculture) were off from their ordinary jobs, and something had to be done to keep them busy and earning a proper living. There was a simple answer to this that many people have not thought of. During the six years of farm labor the government took some grain and foodstuffs (like Joseph did in Egypt) and when the Sabbatical Year came around, they paid the people this produce to work at construction or other types of labor. Since there was a vast reservoir of workers then available, new buildings, cities, walls, roads, irrigation projects were undertaken. For the most part the people did the work willingly because they believed God to be behind their efforts of keeping the Sabbatical Years. Note examples of these building activities.

Herod commenced his work on the outer parts of the great Temple of God on the Sabbatical Year of 23/22 B.C.E. [16](#) This was also the exact year he commenced work on building the new city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. [17](#) And later, Herod's son Philip started to build Caesarea Philippi [18](#) in the Sabbatical Year 2/1 B.C.E. The city of Tiberias probably had its founding in C.E. 20, which was also the beginning of a Sabbatical Year. [19](#) Also the expansive third wall around the northern parts of Jerusalem (which, if finished, Josephus said would have made Jerusalem impregnable) was no doubt started by King Agrippa the First in the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 41/42. [20](#) And, as I stated earlier, his son Agrippa II also began huge construction projects in similar circumstances in the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 62/63. Josephus said that,

“King Agrippa enlarged Caesarea Philippi and renamed it in honor of Nero. He furthermore built at great expense a theatre for the people of Beirut and presented them with animal spectacles, spending many tens of thousands of drachmas upon this project. [21](#)

It is because so many Jews had to take different types of jobs in Sabbatical Years that it was common for most of them in the 1st century to have two trades. Recall that the apostle Paul was a trained tentmaker. [22](#) Most learned these secondary trades during the Sabbatical Years when so many new construction projects were then underway. This is one of the main reasons that the Jewish people went along with many of the building endeavors of Herod during Sabbatical Years.

The Sabbatical Year of Jesus' Ministry

The sequence of Sabbatical Years is now established with almost certainty by Professor Wacholder. His information, with the new interpretation of John 4:35 that I am giving in this book, provide a logical chronology for the years of Jesus' ministry. We can now know that Jesus gave His information about the **“four months to harvest”** in a Sabbatical Year and that year is the one from the autumn of C.E. 27 to the autumn of C.E. 28.

There is another chronological indication in Luke's Gospel that helps substantiate this. Luke said that John the Baptist began his ministry in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar. [23](#) Scholars have recognized several ways of reckoning this fifteenth year, but with our new information identifying Jesus' first year of teaching as the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 27 to C.E. 28, we are now helped in understanding the regnal years of Tiberius as reckoned by Luke. [24](#) We can now consider two of the explanations which blend in perfectly well with this new chronological information.

If one acknowledges the fifteenth year of Tiberius as being in conformity with the non-accession method based on the official Roman Year (called the Julian), that fifteenth year would be from January 1, C.E. 28 to December 31, C.E. 28. This would dovetail nicely with our new proposal, yet it would mean that John the Baptist began baptizing in January C.E.

28 in the Jordan Valley. This would be acceptable since it was not excessively cold in the Jordan depression even during mid-winter. However, it does press events between January and the next Passover (which occurred in late March or early April) into a “hurry up” situation. (Recall that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness after His baptism.) Though this reckoning for the fifteenth year is not improbable, it is not to be preferred over the following determination which fits in much better with all factors. Let's notice it.

Since Luke was a Gentile and writing to a nobleman named Theophilus (traditionally both were from Antioch, Syria), it is possible that Luke was using the non-accession method of reckoning regnal years in Syria from the time of Augustus to Nerva. The fifteenth year of Tiberius was then from Tishri 1, C.E. 27 to Tishri 1, C.E. 28. This would mean that Luke was calculating the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry (and consequently that of Jesus' ministry) according to the calendar with which he and Theophilus would have been familiar. [25](#) It also has the advantage of paralleling the Jewish Year which also commenced with Tishri 1 (near our September). And more than that, this reckoning would also correspond precisely with the Sabbatical Year from the autumn of C.E. 27 to the autumn of C.E. 28. The Jewish authorities in the Talmud state clearly that this is the very method used by Gentile rulers in relationship to the calendar of the Jews. The Gentile Romans commonly reckoned Jewish years from Tishri One. [26](#)

Chronological Importance of Sabbatical Years

What a significant symbolic time for John and Jesus to start their ministries. The Jewish people were keenly aware of the prophetic significance of Sabbatical Years as they related to prominent people of the Old Testament periods, and also to the advent of the Messiah into the world. In literature written not long before Jesus began to preach, we have these symbolic features about Sabbatical Years emphasized. The non-canonical Book of Enoch presents an apocalyptic account based on the seven sabbatical ages, and in Enoch 91:12–17 it adds three more, a total of ten sabbatical periods. The Book of Jubilees records that at the creation God partitioned off time periods into Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles. [27](#) The births of significant people such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and other patriarchs were timed to dovetail precisely with Sabbatical eras. [28](#) The Dead Sea sectarians recognized future reigns of the Kings of Wickedness and Righteousness relative to a Sabbatical calendar, and believing that the last year of the cycle would be the start of the Messianic age. [29](#)

These early opinions on the symbolic teaching concerning Sabbatical Years were no doubt prompted by the Sabbatical periods recorded by the Prophet Daniel. His Seventy Weeks' prophecy was an extension of a Sabbatical Years' theme, and this prophecy was the prime reference point for the advent of the Messianic age that the Jews were expecting in the 1st century. “**Passover of the Sabbatical Year became the period when the redeemer's coming was expected most.**” [30](#)

Many People Were Off Work During Sabbatical Years

It is thus no surprise that vast crowds of people came out in the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 27 to C.E. 28 to be baptized of John the Baptist and Jesus. This was not only a time when a great percentage of the people would have been free of agricultural duties and able to travel at leisure following the great teachers around Palestine, but it was also the Sabbatical Year when many of them were expecting Messianic signs to occur.

It makes perfectly good sense that John the Baptist would have started his ministry in the autumn, at the beginning of the Sabbatical Year, and that Jesus would have commenced His own teaching later.

This would indicate that John the Baptist inaugurated his teaching ministry at the beginning of a Sabbatical Year. Soon after that, Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and then returned to Galilee. It appears that He was waiting for Passover in C.E. 28 to begin officially his ministry. As Prof. Wacholder states, “**Passover of the Sabbatical Year became the period when the redeemer's coming was expected most.**”

It was also in the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 27 to C.E. 28 that Jesus was 30 years of age. At the Passover of C.E. 28, when He officially began his ministry, He was within His year 30. It

would be rather a strange way for us westerners to reckon the years of a person's life. During the whole of a person's 30th year the word meaning "about" or "as if" was used to denote the year. Luke records: "Jesus began [his ministry] *about thirty years of age.*" ³¹ Irenaeus, however, shows what Luke meant. "For when he [Jesus] was baptized, he had not yet completed his thirtieth year [He was indeed 30 already, but He had not completed year 30], but was beginning to be about thirty years of age." ³² Irenaeus had just said He was already 30 in paragraph 4, so "beginning to be about 30" was used of a person all the way from the beginning to the ending of a person's year 30.

During the whole of a person's year 30, the word meaning "about" or "as if" was applied. When His year 30 ended, He had then concluded his year 30. This means that Jesus was indeed 30 when He began His ministry, but He had not yet completed His 30th year. Irenaeus said this was the time that the Jews called a man a "Master." ³³ It may appear strange to us that the word "about" is used to indicate something like our word "being," but this is the way it was interpreted by Irenaeus and he spoke Greek in the idiom that was near that of the New Testament. Gregory Nazianzen also understood the idiom to signify the fact that Jesus was a full 30 years of age. He said: "Christ was thirty years old when he was baptized." ³⁴ A man had to be fully 30 to be a "Master."

More Evidence from the Apostle Paul

In the Book of Galatians the apostle Paul said the Gentile Galatians were suddenly going over to keeping the Mosaic law because people from Jerusalem taught them the need to do so. Indeed, the Galatians were "*observing days, months, times, and years.*" ³⁵ Note the italicized word "years." Within the context of Paul's rebuke to the Galatian Gentiles, this can only refer to their observing (the verb is in the present tense) the Sabbatical Years of the Mosaic law. This, again, is an important chronological clue.

The sequence of Sabbatical Years in the period when the Book of Galatians could have been written was C.E. 41/42, C.E. 48/49; and C.E. 55/56. Since C.E. 55/56 is well after the Jerusalem Council of C.E. 49, this could not be the Sabbatical Year the Galatians were observing. It is manifestly too early for C.E. 41/42 to be considered. The only possibility is the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 48/49. If this were the Sabbatical Year they were actively observing (and note that Paul used the present tense "*observing*"), one can understand the apostle Paul's urgent concern for their behavior. In fact, it was not even necessary for Jews to observe Sabbatical Years outside the designated lands associated with Palestine, but here were the Galatians (and Gentiles at that) now observing the official Sabbatical Year of C.E. 48/49 in Asia Minor — and only that year fits.

Important New Testament Deductions

Once the proper sequence of Sabbatical Years is understood, we can now appraise some significant New Testament historical statements in a much better way. For one, we now know that the autumn of C.E. 48 to autumn C.E. 49 was a Sabbatical Year. This is a time when all agricultural activity in Palestine would have ceased. Such ritualistic requirements were often very traumatic for the Jewish people who lived in the Holy land and this was especially true in the six months' period that succeeded any Sabbatical Year. The fact is, they had effectively been cut off from earning any money from land products during the Sabbatical period. This point is a major one in interpreting several statements in various sections of the New Testament. Since Palestinian Jews were usually in dire economic straits during Sabbatical Years, and the six months that followed, it was customary for Jews in the Diaspora (those living outside Palestine) to send money and foodstuffs to their brethren in the Holy land.

However, when Palestine was not undergoing drought or keeping Sabbatical Years, there is ample evidence to show that the region was very productive in which to live. Even Titus, the later Roman emperor, said that Judaea was proportionately more prosperous than Rome itself. ³⁶ But when the Jews ceased agricultural pursuits in Sabbatical Years, many of them became poor as the Scriptures attest. It may seem like a moot point, but when Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand of fellowship that they should go to the Gentiles and the "pillar" apostles were assigned to the circumcision, the only extra requirement imposed on Paul was that he "*remember the poor.*" ³⁷ The poor in question, as the context

certainly shows, were the poor among the Jews in Palestine because Paul and Barnabas would surely have considered it incumbent on them to show benevolence upon the Gentiles to whom they were commissioned to preach.

Why were the Jews poor? The answer should be evident once the sequence of Sabbatical Years is recognized. The truth is, C.E. 48 to C.E. 49 was a Sabbatical Year, and the apostle Paul had the conference with the “pillar” apostles sometime in C.E. 48 right at the start of a Sabbatical Year. There would have indeed been many poor in Palestine during the next year or so. It was always the year after a Sabbatical that was most severe in food shortages. Yet there is more.

The apostle Paul went to Corinth while on his second journey, arriving there near the autumn of C.E. 50 or early C.E. 51. He spent 18 months in Corinth. ³⁸ There is archaeological information which shows that Gallio, the Roman proconsul, was in office between January 25, C.E. 52 and before August 1, C.E. 52. ³⁹ Paul went before Gallio at that time. ⁴⁰ Afterward, in the middle part of C.E. 52, Paul went to Jerusalem, and finally back to his home base in Antioch of Syria. ⁴¹ Then in the spring of C.E. 53, Paul started out on his third journey, ⁴² reaching Ephesus in late spring of C.E. 53. He stayed there for two years ⁴³ and near that end of that period, and just before the Passover season in C.E. 55, he wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians. ⁴⁴ He ordered them, as he had those in Galatia, to save up money and goods to give to the poor saints at Jerusalem. ⁴⁵

Afterwards, he went to Macedonia (from whence he wrote Second Corinthians in late C.E. 55). He wrote the Corinthians (two long chapters) about the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, praising them that even “from before” the Sabbatical Year began with Tishri in C.E. 55, the Corinthians had started to save their money and produce. ⁴⁶ Then, in late C.E. 55, Paul went on to Corinth, where he wintered with them for three months (Acts 20:3). This is when he wrote his epistle to the Romans, telling them he was soon journeying to Jerusalem to deliver the collections he had secured from Galatia, Macedonia, and Greece. ⁴⁷ The Book of Romans was written in the early spring of C.E. 56. He then left Corinth and went to Ephesus, now telling them it had been three years since he started preaching to them. ⁴⁸ He got to Jerusalem about Pentecost in C.E. 56 ⁴⁹ approaching the end of the Sabbatical Year.

Why are these chronological data important to know? Because they show that Paul was taking produce and money to Jerusalem to help them through the Sabbatical Year from autumn C.E. 55 to autumn C.E. 56. Not only does this information help us date the times when the epistles of First and Second Corinthians (as well as Romans) were written, but also the evidence helps to confirm the sequence of Sabbatical Years which Professor Wacholder has provided. When the complete ramifications of this chronological subject are recognized, it will be seen how important the proper interpretation of John 4:35–38 really is. Jesus in that verse is talking about a Sabbatical Year. That indication represents a powerful chronological benchmark which can help us identify the years when the festivals took place that John mentioned in his Gospel. When it is realized that the Sabbatical Year of C.E. 27 to C.E. 28 is the first year of Jesus' ministry, most of the other chronological indications in the Gospels and epistles can make much better sense. It especially denotes that 30 years before this Sabbatical Year, one arrives at 3 B.C.E. for the birth of the Jesus. All makes sense when these things are understood.

¹ Leviticus 25:1–7.

² John 4:35.

³ Mishnah, Ta'anith, 1.7.

⁴ *Commentary on John*, tom.xiii.39, 41.

⁵ John 4:35.

- [6](#) Luke 4:17–21.
- [7](#) See the chart accompanying the article on the “Triennial Cycle” in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (Funk and Wagnalls, 1906).
- [8](#) See my proof of this in chapter five of this book.
- [9](#) Leviticus 25:1–22, see especially verse 9 which shows that Sabbatical Years began and ended on the Day of Atonement.
- [10](#) B.Z. Wacholder, *Hebrew Union College Annual* (43) 1973, “The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period” (pp. 183–196), and *Annual* (46) 1975, “The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles” (pp. 201–218). See also, “The Calendar of Sabbath Years During the Second Temple Era: A Response,” *Annual* 54 (1983).
- [11](#) Josephus, *War* II.200; *Antiquities* XVIII.271–284.
- [12](#) Schurer, *History of the Jewish People*, I.I., 42–43.
- [13](#) *Antiquities* XX.206.
- [14](#) *Ibid.*, 211–214.
- [15](#) See also “*The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*,” Suppl. Vol., pp.762–763.
- [16](#) Josephus, *War* I.101 and Loeb, vol.VIII, p. 184 note c.
- [17](#) Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* XV.341 and Loeb note d.
- [18](#) Cf. Schurer, *JPJC*, I.I., 42–43, revised., II.169–171.
- [19](#) *Ibid.*, 179.
- [20](#) Josephus, *War* II.218.
- [21](#) Josephus, *Antiquities* XX.211.
- [22](#) Acts 18:3.
- [23](#) Luke 3:1.
- [24](#) For a full discussion on the various ways that Tiberius’ fifteenth year have been reckoned, see the works of Prof. Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, First Edition, pp.259–273, and Prof Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, pp.29–37.
- [25](#) Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, pp.34–35.
- [26](#) Abodah Zarah, 10a.
- [27](#) Jubilees 1:27–29.
- [28](#) 4Q181, fragments 1–2.
- [29](#) 1 Qmelch.3:2.
- [30](#) Wacholder, *Interpreters’ Dictionary*, One Vol., supplement, 763.

[31](#) Luke 3:23

[32](#) *Against Heresies*, II,xxii,5.

[33](#) *Ibid.*

[34](#) Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration on Baptism*, XXIX.

[35](#) Galatians 4:10.

[36](#) Josephus, *War* III.516–521; VI.317, 333–336; *Antiquities* V.76–79.

[37](#) Galatians 2:10.

[38](#) Acts 18:11.

[39](#) Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, First Edition, 316–318.

[40](#) Acts 18:12–17.

[41](#) Acts 18:21–22.

[42](#) Acts 18:23.

[43](#) Acts 19:10.

[44](#) 1 Corinthians 16.

[45](#) 1 Corinthians 16:15.

[46](#) 2 Corinthians 8:10; 9:2

[47](#) Romans 15:25–33.

[48](#) Acts 20:31.

[49](#) Acts 20:16.

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