

THE CHRONOLOGY OF JESUS' PUBLIC MINISTRY

CLYDE W. VOTAW
The University of Chicago

For all practical purposes the chronology of Jesus' public ministry is fully known and indisputable. The abundant and conclusive testimony of New Testament writers, compared with that of Jewish and Roman historians, establishes the fact that Jesus' life-work was done about 26-30 A. D. We do not need to know the *exact* year of his entrance into public activity, or of his death, or the precise interval between these two events. No doubt a sense of reality and of possession comes to us in knowing the exact year or duration of a past event. But this passion for precise dates is a modern interest. The evangelists who record for us the life of Christ had no such concern for the precise years of Jesus' public ministry—its beginning and end, the deeds and utterances that belonged to it, its culmination. Otherwise they might readily have recorded these dates.

As it is, the gospels give us no exact dates for any of the events in the life of Christ. Luke alone of the four evangelists attempted to fix one date, and strangely enough even this effort has turned out uncertain for us. Luke 3:1, 2 reads:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

This statement of Luke makes absolutely certain the approximate date of Jesus' public ministry, for we know when Tiberius was emperor (14-37 A. D.) and when Pilate was procurator (26-36 A. D.). But it fails to give us an exact date (although Luke intended it should do so), for the reason that it is impossible for us to tell surely whether Luke wished to date "the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar" from the year when he became a "colleague"¹ with the

¹ The exact title was *Collega Imperii*; cf. Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 3.

emperor Augustus (12 A. D.), or to date from the year when he became the emperor after Augustus' death (14 A. D.).² The uncertainty of Luke's datum is therefore a matter of two years, pointing either to the year 26-27 A. D. or to the year 28-29 A. D. Further, it is to be noticed that Luke fixes this date for the public advent of John the Baptist, not of Jesus. How long the public ministry of John the Baptist continued before Jesus began his public ministry is not stated in the gospels, and can only be conjectured. It is commonly assumed, and probably correctly, that Luke would have his readers understand that but a few months intervened between the beginning of John's work and the beginning of Jesus' work, and that in giving this exact date he intended to indicate the year in which Jesus' public ministry also began.

All other information that comes to us, both within the gospels and from non-biblical historical testimony, corroborates the statement of Luke, that the public life of Jesus began about the year 26 or 28 A. D. We may accept this approximate date as certain.³

If, now, we go to the other end of the public ministry and seek the exact date of Jesus' crucifixion, we find that not even Luke endeavors to give us this. Neither inside the Bible nor outside of it has any testimony come down to us which will enable us to reach a decision on this point.⁴ For many years the chronology devised by

² That Luke's reckoning should be counted from the death of Augustus on August 19, 14 A. D., seems altogether likely, for there is no evidence that Tiberius' reign was ever counted from his colleagueship, while there are many instances in Josephus (e. g., *Antiquities*, XVIII, iv, 6) and other literature where his reign is counted from the death of Augustus. Mommsen has shown (*Neue Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtskunde*, 1890, pp. 54-65), and Ramsay admits (*Was Christ Born at Bethlehem*, pp. 201 f.), that this was the uniform and only procedure. See especially Plummer, *Commentary on Luke*, p. 82. Other scholars who count Luke's "fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Cæsar" from the death of Augustus are Eusebius, Wieseler, Meyer, Lightfoot, H. J. Holtzmann, O. Holtzmann, Schürer, and von Soden.

³ The "forty and six years" of John 2:20, which seem at first to point to the year 26 or 27 A. D. for the first Passover in Jesus' ministry, cannot weigh against this datum given by Luke, because of inherent uncertainties in this Johannine verse, and because of the doubt as to the actual place in Jesus' public ministry for the cleansing of the temple with which this verse is associated.

⁴ The calendar argument for determining the year of Jesus' death is notoriously unavailing. It is matter of dispute whether Jesus died on the 14th or the 15th of Nisan, and there is no sure way of discovering how the Jews of the first century A. D. reckoned the year. Turner and Ramsay think this argument favors 29, 30, or 33 A. D. Von Soden thinks 29 is ruled out by it, while 30 or 33 is possible.

Archbishop Ussher in 1650-54 A. D. was commonly accepted, currency being given it by printing it in the margin of teachers' Bibles. In this Ussher chronology the date of the crucifixion was set at the year 33 A. D. This date grew out of a superficial consideration of the chronology, and was arrived at in the fourth century A. D., and promulgated by Eusebius and other eminent scholars. It rested upon a popular interpretation of Luke 3:23: taking Luke's "about thirty years of age" for an exact statement, Eusebius began to count the thirty years from 1 A. D., and postulated a three-year public ministry, which brings one to the year 33 A. D. for the crucifixion.

But Luke's statement is qualified in such a way as to show that he does not understand that Jesus was exactly thirty years old; further, Jesus was not born in the year 1 A. D., as has been for a long time known; and, finally, we have no way of determining the exact number of years in Jesus' public ministry. In fact, the year 33 A. D. for the crucifixion of Christ has been shown to be entirely improbable by the study of the life of Christ during the last fifty years. Scholars have entirely abandoned this year 33 A. D., and have become very well agreed upon the year 30 A. D. for the crucifixion. This is the date which we now find in the writings of scholars generally, and in the better class of Sunday-school and popular literature. But 30 A. D. is not a date which can be counted certain. Recently some first-class scholars have recurred to a different chronology which leads them instead to assign the crucifixion to 29 A. D.⁵

In view of these several dates for the beginning and the close of the public ministry, we have several possibilities as to its duration. (1) If the ministry of Jesus began in 26-27 A. D., and the crucifixion came in the spring of 30 A. D., the duration of the public ministry was three years more or less. (2) If it began in 28-29 A. D. (more precisely, between August 19, 28 A. D. and August 19, 29 A. D., according to the more likely interpretation of Luke 3:1,2), and the

⁵ So Turner (art. "Chronology of the New Testament," in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*), Sanday, O. Holtzmann, Ramsay, and others. In this opinion we see a return to the prevailing opinion of the ante-Nicene period; as Ideler (ii, 412) says: "Nearly all the fathers of the first three centuries, particularly the Latins, accepted this date (29 A. D.)." But the matter was in dispute and entirely uncertain, for Irenæus in the second century says: "Concerning the time of the passion the diversities of opinion are infinite." Augustine also, about 400 A. D., makes a similar statement.

crucifixion came in the spring of 30 A. D., the public ministry would have been a year to a year and a half in length. (3) If it began in 26–27 A. D., and the crucifixion came in the spring of 29 A. D., the public ministry would be two to three years in length. (4) If it began in 28–29 A. D., and the crucifixion came in the spring of 29 A. D., the ministry would have continued but a few months.

We might have anticipated that the gospels would disclose the length of Jesus' public ministry by showing the intervals between the great events which composed it. Again, however, we are disappointed, for the evangelists have not given us this information. The exact intervals were not a matter of primary interest to them any more than were the exact dates of events. We have therefore to construct such hypotheses as we can from the gospel material as to the duration of the public ministry.

In the fourth century A. D., Eusebius constructed a framework for the public ministry by using the allusions in the fourth gospel to feasts during Jesus' public life, proceeding upon the assumption that the fourth gospel referred to these feasts in their exact chronological order. By this method Eusebius found in John 2:13 the first Passover in Jesus' ministry; in John 5:1, a feast which he called a Passover, but which is not said to be that; in John 6:4, a third Passover in the ministry; and in John 13:1, a fourth Passover. Because of these Passovers, as interpreted by Eusebius, his theory of the duration of the ministry is called the quadripaschal theory. It makes a ministry of three full years, plus a little time preceding the first Passover.⁶ This framework of the public ministry has been, from Eusebius' time to our own, the commonly accepted one. All of the popular literature of the life of Christ at the present time uses this outline, assuming three years and a little more for Jesus' public work.

For two reasons, however, this interpretation of the data in the fourth gospel is open to serious question: (1) because the feast in John 5:1 is not called a Passover, and in the judgment of the best scholars cannot be so understood;⁷ (2) because a comparison of the

⁶ The earliest church fathers took varying views of the length of Jesus' ministry. In the second century a ministry of twelve to eighteen months seems to have been the preferred theory. In the third century a ministry of twenty-four to thirty months was the preferred theory. Then in the fourth century came the view that the ministry extended over three years of time.

⁷ See Westcott, *Commentary on John*, *in loco*.

order of events in the gospel of John with the order of events as given in the synoptic gospels has awakened much questioning as to whether John's order of events was that of the history.

If the feast in John 5:1 is not a Passover, but the Feast of Tabernacles, or Pentecost, or Purim, or some minor feast, John himself bears witness to a public ministry of two years, and possibly a few months. Further, if the synoptic gospels give the right location for the cleansing of the temple by Jesus—and there was but one cleansing—the Passover mentioned in John 2:13 must be regarded as the final Passover. This would remove any other Passover from the chronological framework in John, and would allow the public ministry, even on Johannine evidence, to be compressed into a single year.

Going now to the synoptic gospels, we interrogate them as to the length of the ministry which they seem to presuppose. The only Passover mentioned in the synoptic gospels is the one in connection with which Jesus was crucified. For this reason it was assumed in the second century that the public ministry of Jesus extended over but one year, and this view is now held by certain eminent scholars.⁸ In only two ways can this conclusion be avoided: (1) by a conviction that the number and character of the events in Jesus' public ministry is such that they could not reasonably be supposed to have all taken place in so short a time; (2) by finding some indirect evidence in the synoptic gospels that a Passover season, though not specifically named, was included somewhere in the middle of the ministry. Many scholars think that both of these last-named considerations are substantiated by the evidence of the synoptic gospels.

The history of the public ministry of Jesus, as we know it from the four gospels, suggests a longer time for its accomplishment than twelve months. The way in which Jesus went about his work, gathering a few choice men about him, unfolding to them gradually his thought of the kingdom of God, leading them step by step toward an understanding of his mission and an ability to assist him in its performance, seems to make probable a longer time than one year. Moreover, his method of giving the gospel to the people—first the simpler truths of it, and gradually more and more, in order that they might assimilate it a little at a time—suggests more than one year.

⁸ See especially von Soden, art. "Chronology of the New Testament," in Cheyne's *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

Furthermore, the development of the opposition to him by the Pharisees and Sadducees, which progressed from stage to stage until it reached its culmination in his death, speaks for a longer time than a single year. It is, of course, to be recognized that this consideration does not prove a two years', or a three years' ministry, it simply makes probable, in the minds of many scholars, a ministry of more than twelve months' duration.

The other consideration in favor of a ministry longer than a single year rests upon the allusion in all three gospels (Matt., chap. 12; Mark, chap. 2; Luke, chap. 6) to a harvest time in the early portion of the public ministry, when Jesus and his disciples walked through the grain-fields, and the grain was ripe. This would seem to mark a passover time in the ministry a year before the crucifixion.⁹

It is obvious, therefore, that we are not able to determine the exact length of Jesus' public ministry. The nearest we can come to a decision is (1) that the ministry of three years or more does not find any probable support in the four gospels, historically interpreted; (2) that a ministry of only twelve months seems too short to contain satisfactorily the succession of the events of the ministry as described by the evangelists; (3) that the ministry of eighteen months or two years seems, on the whole, to meet the requirements of the gospel data more fully and satisfactorily than any other view.

The last word to be said about the matter is this: It is not of great importance that we should know the exact years, or the exact length, of the public life of Christ. That life is not less certain because we are sure only of the approximate dates belonging to it. After all, the evangelists and the early Christians who disregarded these details were right in fixing their attention upon the really important things in the life of Jesus—his deeds, his teaching, his example, his character, his personality, his authority, his world-significance.

⁹ Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, which is recorded in all four gospels, is in the gospel of Mark (6:39) said to have taken place at a time of the year when the grass was green. But this datum fails to establish a second Passover for two reasons: (1) Grass is green in Palestine in the spring of the year, the Passover season; but it may also be green in the late fall after the first rains. (2) It is altogether possible that the "green grass" mentioned in Mark 6:39 is a literary rather than a historical detail of the narrative; it is not found in the Matt. and Luke accounts of the incident.