A second group of questions about Rabbi Jesus

Many of the questions directed my way after the publication of *Rabbi Jesus* have involved chronology. As I continue to work through the letter I mentioned last time, I see that several of its concerns are also chronological. Here I identify some principles discussed in a detailed treatment that is available elsewhere (*Historical Knowledge in Biblical Antiquity* [edited with Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green; Blandford Forum: Deo, 2007]). They are designed to provide anyone interested with chronological orientation in the study of Jesus.

Ancient systems of dating were not coordinated into a single system, so that historians today are compelled to relate differing calendars to one another as they try to reckon events in their sequences. Determining dates for Jesus is especially difficult, because the Gospels are liturgical documents, which often lay out events in the sequence of how churches worshipped through the year, rather than in historical order.

I have given an example of the difference between liturgical time and historical time in the most recent issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (34.2, for March and April of 2008; see [http://www.bib-arch.org/bswb_BAR/indexBAR.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=34&Issue=2&ArticleID=19](http://www.bib-arch.org/bswb_BAR/indexBAR.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=34&Issue=2&ArticleID=19)). Historically, Jesus entered Jerusalem in the autumn of the year before he died, during the feast of Sukkoth (or Tabernacles), rather than only one week before his death. Similarly, the authorities in Jerusalem decided to execute prior to Passover (Mark 14:1-2), not during the feast, in order to avoid a riot.

Chronology faces a final complication: when those who compiled the Gospels did not have historical reminiscences to go on, they sometimes filled in narrative gaps with references to the Scriptures of Israel, which they alleged predicted Jesus’ coming, or with legendary stories. Given these difficulties, it is vital take the most public of the events of Jesus’ life and coordinate them with datable events from his time. That means not starting at the beginning his life, because only two Gospels (Matthew and Luke) deal with that period, and their material is contradictory and widely agreed not to be historical.

Jesus’ death is the key to a chronology of his life. If he entered Jerusalem during the Sukkot of one year, and was killed prior to Passover the next year, just when was that? Within the tenure of Pontius Pilate as prefect of
Judea, that must be the period after October 18, 31 C.E. That was when that Pilate’s protector back in Rome, Sejanus, was put to death on imperial orders. During the months that followed, Pilate entered into an unaccustomed alliance with Caiaphas, the high priest, which aligned the power of Rome with the power of the Temple in deadly enmity to Jesus. No other time brought about those conditions.

Because Jesus’ was thirty by the time of his death, as Luke 3:23 indicates, that puts his birth in 2 C.E. In that year, Mars traveled to the west, from the perspective of observers in the east, and entered into alignment with Saturn, the likely messianic portent that stands behind Matthew’s story of the star and the wise men (Matthew 2:1-12). Of course, putting Jesus’ birth then puts him after the time of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C.E., and during the time of Herod Antipas. But that accords with scholarly opinion: the first chapters of Matthew are woven from passages of the Israelite Scriptures which Jesus is alleged to have “fulfilled,” and are not directly historical. There is no good evidence, for example, that Herod the Great ordered the slaughter of the male children of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18), and the picture of taking Mary to Egypt is not plausible so soon after childbirth and opposed to Rabbinic law (Matthew 2:13-15). These are example of spinning a story out of biblical passages: Jeremiah 31:15, and Hosea 11:1, which Matthew cites verbatim. Similarly, Luke’s Gospel strains credulity in making Jesus and John the Baptist cousins, and in attributing psalmic arias to various characters in its nativity story: in this case, legend and the desire to idealize the holy family have overcome any appeal to history. Sometimes, the stories are so inconsistent that it is hard to believe people still try to take them at face value. If gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh were really presented to the holy family (Matthew 2:11), where is the evidence of that wealth in their lives thereafter? And who ever heard of a Roman census, whose purpose was to collect taxes, that required Israelites to register at the place of their birth (Luke 2:1-7)?

Fortunately, there is another date that can be computed with some confidence, and that is the death of John the Baptist. The report of Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, permits us to place John’s execution by Herod Antipas in 21 C.E., and that aligns well with the dates of Jesus’ birth and death. I have detailed the discussion of Josephus in this regard in a separate article: “John the Baptist: His Immersion and his Death,”
A chronology for Jesus, with pages numbers referring to discussion in *Rabbi Jesus: an intimate biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000)

40–4 BCE The reign of Herod the Great as a client king of Rome.

31 BCE The empire of Augustus becomes secure, following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE

4 BCE The death of Herod results in the division of his kingdom: his son Archelaus takes Judah, Herod Antipas inherits Galilee and Perea; Herod Philip rules Trachonitis.

2–16 CE The birth of Jesus in Galilean Bethlehem, his childhood in Nazareth.

In early spring of 2 BCE, Joseph and Mary meet, marry, and conceive Jesus in Nazareth prior to establishing a common residence there (pp. 6-8). Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem of Galilee, Joseph’s residence, in late autumn (pp. 6, 8-9). [By October 23, for example. Mars has traveled to the west, and is in alignment with Saturn.] Eight days later, his circumcision in accordance with the Torah at Bethlehem (pp 3-5, 9-15). The family moves in with Mary’s family in Nazareth before the end of the year (pp. 13-14). Jesus begins his local travel with Joseph as a journeyman just after he turned ten in 12 CE (pp. 20). Joseph dies in 15 CE (pp. 20-22). A year later, Mary takes her family to Jerusalem for the feast of Sukkot in the autumn of 16 CE, staying with Mary and Martha of Bethany (pp. 23-32).

16–21 CE His apprenticeship with John the Baptist. Turning fourteen, Jesus remained in Jerusalem after his family returned from the celebration of Sukkot in 16 CE (pp. 32-37)
Jesus seeks out and meets John the Baptist early in 17 CE (pp. 37-43).
During the course of immersions following John’s practice, Jesus increasingly experiences divine Spirit, and by 19 CE John begins to call him “the lamb of God” (pp. 55-58).
Jesus new view of purity, derived from his experience of divine Spirit, put him in conflict with his rabbi during 20 CE (pp. 58-60).

21 The death of John.
Herod Antipas orders the execution in 21 CE, on a critical reading of Josephus (pp. 60-63).

21-24 The return of Jesus to Nazareth at the age of 18, and his excursions outward as journey worker and rabbi until his expulsion from Nazareth.
Jesus returns home to a festive reception through Samaria in order to avoid capture in 21 CE, but his conversation with the Samaritan woman has alienated some of John’s former disciples (pp. 62-71).

Beginning in 22 CE, Jesus’ journeywork from the base of Mary’s house in Nazareth took on the character of holy feasts that involved him and his family in increasingly heavy debts of honor (pp. 74-78).
By 23 CE Jesus’ came into contact with Capernaum and Magdala, denouncing their wealth (pp. 78-82).
Jesus conviction that purity is a power released within people leads him to practice exorcisms that are unusually direct and abrupt (pp. 83-93).
The strain on his family exerted by his debts of honor and his embarrassing exorcisms (pp. 93-95) leads to a break, and he makes his way to Capernaum in 24 CE.

24-27 Using Capernaum as a base, Jesus’ itinerancy makes him a major figure in Galilee by his 25th year.
His reputation in Capernaum was established by an exorcism in the synagogue in 24 CE (pp. 96-97). But his fame there leads Jesus to confront the elders in Nazareth with his claim that he has been anointed by God’s Spirit, and he is nearly killed by stoning late in the summer (pp. 97-106), leading to a brief retreat to Jerusalem to enjoy the hospitality of some of John’s former disciples and Barnabas.
At the pool of Bethesda, a healed a person for the first time, leading to his contact with Barnabas during Sukkot and with Nicodemus during the feast of the Chanukah. But increasing opposition from priestly and Pharisaic authorities pushed him back to Capernaum the following year (pp. 106-123).

From 25 CE, Capernaum became Jesus’ base of support, and until 27 CE a stables haven where he enjoyed his holy feasts, traveled less than he had, and accepted disciples, exorcized and healed (pp. 124-148). During the fifteenth year of Tiberius, in 27 CE, Jesus became such a renowned figure that Herod Antipas sought to end his life, just as he had executed John the Baptist, so that Jesus was forced to flee Capernaum (pp. 148-149).

27-31 Herod Antipas’ threat forces Jesus to skirt and crisscross Galilean territory, and gather his followers in Syria.

- Stilling of the storm in 27 CE occurs during a transit to the eastwards, to Bethsaida, formerly the home of Peter and Andrew. (pp. 153-161)
- His sojourn in Bethsaida followed Jesus’ contact with a centurion, 27-8 CE, which drew attention (pp. 161-168).
- Sojourn on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, ending with the destruction of the pigs, 28-9 CE (winter) (pp. 168-171)
- Dispatch of delegates, 29 CE (pp. 174-178)
- Revival of Jairus’ daughter, 29 CE (pp. 178-179)
- Encounter with the Syro-Phoenecian woman, 30 (pp. 181-182)
- Wedding at Kana, 30 CE (pp. 182-185)
- The sign of feeding in Gaulanitis, 30 CE (pp. 186-188)
- The Transfiguration, 30 [Sukkot], followed by the Temptations (pp. 190-197)
- Walking on the water, 31 (p. 197), with Mark 7:31-37 and 8:22-26 prior (MM 62).

31-32 Jesus last year in Jerusalem, aged 30.
- Final drive through Galilee (with Shabbat and tax issues), 31 CE (pp. 197-203)
- The death of Sejanus in Rome on 18 October 31 CE (pp. 239-242).
Jesus’ execution prior to Passover in 32 CE, and visions of him risen from the dead during the spring and summer (pp. 254-268, 269-289).

35 The meeting of Peter and James and Paul in Jerusalem, and the availability of the earliest sources of the Gospels: Peter’s instruction for apostles such as Paul, and the mishnah of Jesus’ teaching known to modern scholarship as “Q.”

37 The removal of Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas from power.

40 The adaptation of Peter’s Gospel by James, the brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem.

45 In Antioch, outside of Palestine, followers of Jesus are for the first time called “Christians.”

53-57 Paul writes his major letters, Galatians, Corinthians, and Romans.

62 The death of James by stoning in Jerusalem, at the instigation of the high priest.

64 The death of Paul and Peter in Rome.

70-73 The burning of the Temple by the Roman troops under Titus; the composition of Mark’s Gospel in Rome; the end of the revolt against Rome in Palestine.

75 Josephus publishes his Jewish War.

80 The composition of Matthew’s Gospel, in Damascus.


93 Josephus publishes his Antiquities of the Jews.

100 the composition of John’s Gospel, in Ephesus.