

Precisely Dating the First Easter – It's All about the Moon

IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEE THE BIBLE AS REAL DATABLE HISTORY. OUR GOAL WILL BE TO PIN DOWN THE EXACT DATE OF JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION, FIRST FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT, THEN FROM THE OLD.

1. How can we know the approximate year when Jesus died from the New Testament?

It is relatively easy to get a rough estimate for the year of Jesus' death and resurrection from the New Testament. We'll use the gospel of Luke because he is the writer who claims to write an "orderly account" and he is respected as one of the best, if not *the* best ancient historian of his time. He is very particular about people, places and times.

LUKE 1 Luke writes history

1 *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*

LUKE 3 Jesus is baptized at the start of John's ministry

3 *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— ² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness...*

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. ...

²³ Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.

- **Tiberias Caesar** began to reign in the fall of 15 AD, so his fifteenth year would have begun in fall 29 AD.
- Based upon the number of Passover feasts celebrated in the gospel accounts, scholars estimate that Jesus' ministry lasted only three to four years. **Thus he must have died in 32-34 AD.**

2. How can we determine the precise date from the New Testament, and what does the moon have to do with it?

The gospel accounts say that Jesus died on the Jewish **Passover**. His Last Supper was a Passover *seder* with his disciples.

- Passover is a religious holiday that has been continuously celebrated for the longest time in human history – over three millennia.
- It commemorates the deliverance of Jews from Egyptian slavery and marks the beginning of their national identity.
- **Exodus 12.6** says Passover is to be celebrated on the 14th day of the first month, Nisan, of the Jewish year. In accord with rabbinic teaching Jews would choose their Passover lamb on 10 Nisan and sacrifice it on 14 Nisan. So Jesus died on 14 Nisan.
- The Jewish calendar is a *lunar* calendar in which a new month always begins with a *new moon*. We use a *solar* calendar, which has 12 months and ~ 365¼ days to correctly fix the seasons relative to our months.
- But there is an approximate 29½ day lunar cycle so ...

Approximately how many days are there in a lunar year of 12 mo(o)nths? (354) How do Jews compensate for the difference?

- Passover has always occurred in the middle of Nisan, near a *full* moon.
- Thus Jesus' death and resurrection were timed by the moon.

Why does Easter wander around our solar calendar so much?

Lunar cycles are extremely precise – we can determine the lunar phase millennia back into the past or forward into the future. So we can easily fix the start of the Jewish month Nisan, and its associated Passover, back to the first century AD in our solar calendar.

Since Jesus died on Good *Friday* (Luke 23.54), we can then ask when Passover occurred on a Friday, in the early 30's AD.

- The answer is that the 14th of Nisan fell on a Friday only in the years 27, 30, and 33 AD (but on *other* days in all other years between 26 and 34 AD). We conclude that Jesus must have died in 33 AD.

14 Nisan in our solar calendar is then April 3, 33 AD, the date of crucifixion; and April 5, 33 AD is the date of resurrection.

3. What is the date of the crucifixion according to the Old Testament and what does the moon have to do with it?

Such a question has an answer only if the Old Testament contains a prophecy regarding the time of the Jewish Messiah's arrival.

JEWISH RABBIS RECOGNIZED THAT ONLY THE PROPHECY OF DANIEL ENABLED A ROUGH CALCULATION OF WHEN MESSIAH MIGHT COME.

Daniel has elucidated to us the knowledge of the end times. However, since they are secret, the wise rabbis have barred the calculation of the days of Messiah's coming so that the untutored populace will not be led astray when they see that the End Times have already come but there is no sign of Messiah.

Rabbi Mosheh Ben Maimon (Maimonides) 1135-1204
Igeret Teiman, Chapter 3

I have examined and searched all the Holy Scriptures and have not found the time for the coming of Messiah clearly fixed, except in the words of Gabriel to the prophet Daniel, which are written in the ninth chapter of the prophecy of Daniel.

Rabbi Moses Abraham Levi *The Messiah of the Targums, Talmuds and Rabbinical Writers*, 1971

How does the ninth chapter of the prophecy of Daniel fix the time of Messiah's coming?

NOTE: Conservative and liberal biblical scholars differ on the date of Daniel's writing. Conservatives date the composition to ~ 540 BC since it details events during Israel's Babylonian captivity, while liberals place it around 165 BC. In any case Daniel was written at least two centuries before the events described in chapter 9.

Daniel's "seventy sevens" prophecy gives a detailed chronology of events prior to Messiah's coming. We can now understand in hindsight that Daniel amazingly dates Jesus' passion to within a few days of the New Testament date! The moon is involved because interpretation involves a lunar prophetic year.

Daniel 9.24-27 Daniel is told the time of Messiah's death in 9.25-26

²⁴ "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

²⁵ "Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. ²⁶ After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood. War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. ²⁷ He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven'. In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

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- Scholars agree that the Hebrew word *shabua*, which is translated 'seven', means seven 'years'; it is analogous to our word decade.
- Daniel has just finished reading Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jewish captivity in Babylon is to last 70 years.
- In a vision Gabriel tells him that to completely wrap up God's plan for Israel, a longer period of $(7+62+1) \times 7$ or 490 'years' will be required.
- "Anointed One" is the literal meaning of the word Messiah or Christ. That is also the sense of the rabbinic quotes above.
- After $7 + 62 = 69$ 'sevens' or 483 'years' Messiah will be "cut off" – the Hebrew word literally means to *kill by piercing*. This is a very apt description of death by crucifixion.

To calculate the date of Messiah's death we need to do two things:

- 1) Identify the start date of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem.
 - 2) Find how long Daniel's 'year' is.
- 1) **The decree, given by the Persian king Artaxerxes, is found in Nehemiah 2.1-6.** This decree permitted the King's cupbearer, Nehemiah, to return in order to rebuild the broken walls of the holy city Jerusalem. The decree can be determined very precisely since Nehemiah dates it to the (Passover) month Nisan as well as to the 20th year of the King's reign. Since the day of the month is not specified, Jewish convention would demand that we take 1 Nisan, 444 BC as the starting day. On our calendar this would be **March 5, 444 BC**. Because it is the *only* decree permitting the rebuilding of Jerusalem, it seems clearly to be the command to which Gabriel refers.
 - 2) If we were to take Daniel's 'year' to be a solar year, we would have to add 483 years to 444 BC, resulting in a date for Messiah's death of 40 AD. (Remember there is no year 0; we jump directly from 1 BC to 1 AD.) 40 AD would be in clear disagreement with the New Testament 33 AD date. But no one used solar years when the bible was written.

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In fact Jews used a lunar calendar. In the bible, from Genesis to Revelation, the 'year' is taken to be twelve months of 30 days. For example in the story of Noah (Genesis 7:11,24 and 8:3-4), in one place Noah's time in his ark is called five months and in another the same time is 150 days. In the book of Revelation a 'year' is explicitly calculated as 360 days = 12 months of 30 days each. In a passage which many scholars identify as pointing to the 70th 'seven' of Daniel's prophecy we read:

Revelation 11.2-3 A lunar prophetic year is 360 days.

"... do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. ³ And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."

- How many days would be in Daniel's 483 'years'? (173,880 days)
- One solar year = 365.242 days, so how many solar years is this? (= 476.068 years = 476 years + 25 days)
- Add this to our (presumed) starting date of March 5, 444 BC to find that Daniel's 69th 'seven' ends on March 30, 33 AD.

CONCLUSION

Daniel prophesies that Messiah is to be "cut off" on the following Passover, which is April 3, 33 AD, in spectacular agreement with the New Testament record.

Final note on Daniel 9.26: The "people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary." This happened in 70 AD when Titus and his Roman legions sacked Jerusalem, leaving not one stone standing upon another in the Temple complex, as Jesus had predicted. (**Matthew 24.1-2**) The final battle for the land of Israel occurred at Fortress Masada, after which most Jews were exiled.

According to Daniel's prophecy, the Anointed One had to be cut off before this! Messiah had to come before the destruction of the Second Temple. This fact persists even beyond the amazing details of our prophetic calculation. It is what probably motivated Maimonides' comment that *"the End Times have already come, but there is no sign of Messiah."*

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EPILOGUE: The moon again, plus a little bit of science

As further confirmation of the April 3, 33 AD date for Jesus' crucifixion, consider the events recorded by Luke in Acts 2, seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection. Peter preaches a sermon in the city of Jerusalem to thousands of Jews gathered to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost, at which Luke says 3000 people believed in Jesus as their Messiah and were baptized. Peter preached that this event fulfilled what the prophet Joel wrote centuries before about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Joel 2.28-32

- ²⁸ *"And afterward,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
sons and daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
your young men will see visions.*
- ²⁹ *Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*
- ³⁰ *I will show wonders in the heavens
and on the earth,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.*
- ³¹ *The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.*
- ³² *And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;*

Joel refers to celestial signs ("wonders in the heavens") that will accompany the gift of God's Spirit to everyone who believes. Gospel writers refer to the solar darkness that accompanied Jesus' crucifixion, but what could be meant by the moon turning to blood at the same time?

This can actually be understood as an astronomical term that refers to the lunar color when the moon is eclipsed by Earth's shadow. The reddish color is caused by the preferential scattering of blue from the solar rainbow of colors as light from the sun is refracted through Earth's atmosphere to strike the moon. The moon then reflects back to Earth this preferentially red color. The phenomenon is exactly the same as that which causes the red-orange color of a sunset (and the blue color of the sky).

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image by [Chris Kotsiopoulos](#), Greece

<http://pod.wikispaces.com/April+19,+2009>

Behind the temple of Poseidon at Sounio, Greece a red moon in eclipse rises.

- **So was there in fact a lunar eclipse on the Passover of 33 AD?** Yes, there was, and I believe Peter referred to it. Because the moon follows such a regular pattern of motion around the Earth, astronomers can calculate lunar eclipse details forward or backward in time for millennia from today. In fact NASA has an eclipse site from which all these details can be readily gleaned. Thus we know that there was an eclipse visible at sunset in the city of Jerusalem on April 3, 33 AD, and we know its complete description.

<http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/LEhistory/LEplot/LE0033Apr03P.pdf>

- In Jewish tradition lunar eclipses in Jerusalem have been and still are seen as bad omens for Israel. Perhaps Peter's sermon was given greater impact for this reason! As they listened to it, Jerusalem residents might have thought: "We have killed our own Messiah on a Roman cross, and God has signaled his displeasure to us through the blood red lunar eclipse that followed."

<http://www.astronomyisrael.com/2010/12/does-jewish-tradition-consider-eclipses.html>