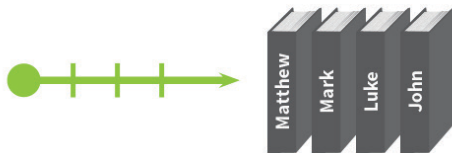


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### A Chronological Narrative of the Life of Christ



## I. Introduction to the Life of Christ

In this lesson, we are at last ready to come to a survey of the life of Christ Himself, putting together the information that we find in the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is important to keep in mind what we stressed in the last two lessons, that as one reads any biblical account from any one of the four Gospels, one needs to keep in mind the larger historical context of the distinctive concerns of whichever gospel writer is the one that is being read at the time. Nevertheless, in a survey series such as this, it is also helpful to combine the information together to create a chronological sequence as best we can reconstruct it of the events of the life of Jesus that the four Gospels narrate.

## II. Chronological Overview

Obviously, we need to begin then with some chronological overview. It may come as a surprise to many people to learn that scholars are agreed that Jesus Christ was born no later than the year that today we call 4 B.C. How could Jesus have been born four years “before Christ?” Well, the answer, of course, is that in the time of Jesus nobody used the terms A.D. or B.C. If one was a Roman, approximately the first year of what we call A.D. would have been 754 by the Roman counting—that is 754 years from the date they believed the city (and later, then, the empire of Rome) was founded.

### A. Date of Christ’s Birth

If one was a Jew, one calculated the year from the date one believed the world was created. It was only in the 500s when a Catholic monk and a chronographer by the name of Dionysius Exiguus tried to recalculate the events of the beginning of the Christian era and came up with the date

S.B.C.		A.D. 30	
PERIOD	TIME	LIFE OF CHRIST	
EVENTS	BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS	PUBLIC MINISTRY	PASSION WEEK
	MARY, JOSEPH, HEROD THE GREAT, JOHN THE BAPTIST	PETER, ANDREW, JAMES, JOHN	PHARISES, ARHO, PHARISEES, PRIESTS, HERODIANITES
GOSPELS	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE
			JOHN

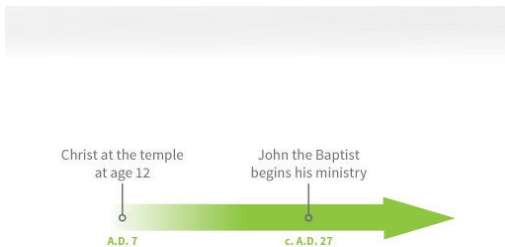


that ultimately became the rationale for recalculating the calendar that is now almost universally adopted throughout the world dating from the year that they thought in those days that Christ was born. Unfortunately Dionysius did not have a variety of historical information available to him that he could have used.

It was later discovered from the writings of Josephus (that had been preserved ever since the first century) that, according to the dates of that Jewish historian, Herod the Great, the leader and ruler in Galilee and Judea—land of Israel at the time of Christ’s birth—actually died in the year that had been now named 4 B.C. Therefore, since the Christ child was alive and perhaps even up to two years in age during Herod’s lifetime, Jesus’ birth had to be dated earlier. I say up to two years of age because we read in the gospel of Matthew that Herod the Great had all the babies in and around Bethlehem massacred up to that particular age, and unless this was just a case of massive overkill (pardon the bad pun) it may be that Herod knew it had been close to the couple of years since this apparently royal child had been born. Therefore we may date Jesus’ birth to sometime between 6 and 4 B.C.

## B. Dating of Christ’s Childhood and Ministry

The only other event that the Gospels described dealing with Christ’s childhood is His teaching in the temple at age 12, which may therefore correspond to roughly 7 A.D. Then, we jump immediately to Christ’s adult ministry. Here there is information that is not completely harmonizable, at least based on the sources that are currently available to us. Luke 3:1 says that Jesus began His ministry at the time that John the Baptist was also ministering—in the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius’ reign. Unfortunately, Tiberius began a co-reign with his predecessor Augustus in approximately 12 A.D.; he began to reign solely, by himself, in about 14 or 15 A.D. and so we are not exactly sure which year to start from; nor is Luke’s wording precise, because he says Jesus was about 30 years of age.



Another verse that is relevant is John 2:20, which finds Jesus early in His ministry on a Passover in Jerusalem in the forty-sixth year since Herod the Great had ordered the temple to be rebuilt. Dating from roughly 19 or 20 B.C.,

John 2:20

*The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?"*

according to the information of Josephus, this would put us somewhere around the year 28 A.D. So a good guess is that Jesus began His ministry, following a time in which He perhaps was a follower of John the Baptist for a short period, in about 27 or 28 A.D.

There is also uncertainty as to the date of the crucifixion, because Passover falling on a Friday occurred on that day in both the years 30 and 33. When we try to put together the information from the book of Acts and the later Christian chronology, there are ways in which both of those dates are plausible, although the later date of 33 perhaps crowds the amount of material that we have to include just a little bit. It is fair, then, to say that scholars are fairly evenly divided between the years 30 and 33 for the crucifixion, although there is perhaps ever so slight a weight of evidence, in favor of the earlier date of A.D. 30.

That also fits, then, the gospel of John's information: it alone tells us that Jesus went to Jerusalem at Passover time repeatedly, and it is from John's gospel that we are enabled to assume that Christ's ministry lasted for a period of slightly less, to up to slightly more, than a three-year frame of time. Beyond those ballpark figures it is difficult to fit all of the gospel material together into one, and only one, exact chronology. Harmonies of the Gospels have been written; it is not that the information is hopelessly contradictory. In fact, it is that there are several ways of fitting the information together, and the Gospels themselves often group material topically as well as chronologically. Apparently they were not concerned, as was the case with many ancient historians, with the precision of chronology that we modern people often are.

## A Probable Time Line of the Life of Christ



## Simplified Chronology of Christ's Ministry



## C. Chronological Outline of Jesus' Ministry

We will then simply follow this rough chronology of the life of Christ and talk about major stages of His ministry as we proceed. One very popular way of breaking Jesus' ministry down into three stages, each comprising roughly a year's period of time, is to speak of: the initial year as one of obscurity (John's gospel gives us the greatest amount of information about this period, and we will return to it in our next lesson); a year of great popularity embracing His predominantly Galilean ministry; and then the year

that culminates in His crucifixion in the springtime Passover festival, a year that we might describe as a year of rejection. So now let us go back to the beginning, and for the rest of this lesson and the next several lessons proceed roughly sequentially through the major stages of the life of Christ, pointing out what happens in each stage and key interpretive issues and theological emphases that we find in the four Gospels.

### III. Jesus' Birth and Childhood

There are two gospels that describe Jesus' birth and childhood, the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke each devoting two chapters to that particular topic. But these two gospels are quite different in the information that they provide for us concerning the events surrounding Jesus' birth and childhood.

#### A. Matthew and Luke: Two Different Genealogies

In Matthew's gospel, Matthew begins with the genealogy; Luke includes one too, but he does so later, in his third chapter, and not all the names are the same. The two most popular explanations or harmonizations of this phenomenon are that Matthew is concerned with Jesus' ancestry through his adoptive father, Joseph, while Luke is concerned with Jesus' ancestry through Mary, His human and biological mother. Alternately, others have suggested that Matthew is portraying Jesus' legal genealogy while Luke is portraying His human genealogy, but both through the line of the adoptive father Joseph, from whom He derives His royal ancestry and hence His Messianic credentials.

#### B. Matthew's Account

At any rate, Matthew is very concerned to tie Jesus in with the Old Testament. One way of explaining his choice of material in Matthew chapters 1 and 2 has been to say that he is concerned with the who and the where of Jesus' birth. In the genealogy, he stresses Jesus as the son of Abraham and the son of David, and then in the remaining prose portions of chapter 1 he describes Jesus as Immanuel, "God with us"—the one who fulfilled completely the prophet Isaiah's prophecy of one who would be born to and conceived by a virgin. Chapter 2 continues with additional fulfillment of

- Christ's Ancestry through Joseph
- Christ's Legal Genealogy

#### TWO GENEALOGIES

- Christ's Ancestry through Mary
- Christ's Human Genealogy



*"Son of Abraham"*

*"Son of David"*

*"Immanuel"—"God is with us"*

## Quis et Unde?

Chapter 1 “Who”	Chapter 2 “Where”
Jesus as Son of Abraham and Son of David (1:1-17)	Bethlehem (2:1-12)
	Egypt (2:13-15)
	Ramah (2:16-21)
Jesus as Immanuel “God with us” (1:18-25)	Nazareth (2:22-23)

**Isaiah 7:14**

*Therefore the Lord himself  
will give you a sign: The  
virgin will be with child and  
will give birth to a son, and  
will call him Immanuel.*

prophecy, here all related to various geographical locations important for Jesus’ birth and the events surrounding it: Bethlehem (2:1-12); Egypt and the holy family’s flight there in 2:13-15; Ramah, just outside Bethlehem (2:16-21); and finally Nazareth in the closing two verses of the chapter.

Matthew is concerned with the who and the where of Jesus’ birth, and he is concerned to show five different times, once in chapter 1 and four times in chapter 2, how Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy. Sometimes these are very straightforward predictions that have come true, such as Micah’s prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In other cases, Matthew employs the ancient and common Jewish practice of typology—taking a passage which is not necessarily a prediction at all but a reference to some important pattern of God’s redemptive activity in Old Testament times. A clear example of this is Matthew’s quotation of Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” In the context of Hosea that is not a prediction of anything; it is a reference back to God’s people Israel, corporately God’s son, being liberated from Egypt at the time of the Exodus. But Matthew finds that it is not merely coincidental but providentially designed that Jesus, the ultimate and complete liberator of God’s people, should also flee to and then come out of Egypt, even as a baby boy.

This then is another way that Matthew, following a typical Jewish mind set, believes that prophecy is fulfilled or, as we might translate it today, “filled full.” Several other prophecies in these chapters and elsewhere in the Gospels are perhaps best explained as combining both predictive and typological elements. Much controversy, some of it probably unnecessary, has surrounded Isaiah’s famous prophecy of the virgin who would conceive and bear a child—Isaiah 7:14. In context it is clear that that child refers to someone who is alive in Isaiah’s day, because the text goes on to say that before the child is old enough to know right from wrong the two kings that Israel fears will no longer threaten them. And yet the young woman was not strictly a virgin in Isaiah’s day, and Matthew sees that that prophecy was not exhausted by any fulfillment in Isaiah’s time. He believes that there is a more complete fulfillment that Jesus Himself brings with the birth to Mary without the help of any biological father.



## Infancy Stories of Jesus in Luke

1:5-25	Birth of John the Baptist predicted
1:26-38	Birth of Jesus predicted
1:39-56	The two mothers visit
1:57-80	Birth of John the Baptist
2:1-40	Birth of Jesus
2:41-52	Jesus in the temple at age 12

We may speak here perhaps of multiple fulfillments or some would speak of prophetic foreshortening, just as one looking at a mountain range straight on often does not see the multiple peaks that lie one behind another. All of these were commonly understood and accepted Jewish techniques of giving prophecy and understanding it to have been fulfilled, and would have been convincing to the Jewish audience that Matthew was addressing that in fact something supernatural, something God designed, was taking place here. If we compare Matthew's opening two chapters with Luke's two chapters we see the same basic characters, the same basic events, but a choice of largely distinct details.

### C. Luke's Account

Luke's pattern in Luke chapters 1 and 2 is to describe the events leading up to the births of two key characters: John the Baptist, the one who would be the forerunner for Jesus, and then Jesus Himself. A thumbnail outline of the gospel of Luke in these two chapters then would be that, after Luke's preface, 1:5-25 predicts the birth of John the Baptist; 1:26-38 predicts the birth of Jesus; in 1:39-56 the two mothers-to-be who have each received these predictions then visit each other so that the lives of the children soon to be born begin to intersect; 1:57-80 then narrates the birth of John the Baptist; 2:1-40 in great detail the birth of Jesus, and then one feature unique to Jesus' life as a child is teaching in the temple at age 12 in 2:41-52.

It is interesting to note both the similarities and differences between the events surrounding the birth of these two characters. In the case of John the Baptist and Jesus, there are parallels that involve Luke describing them both as being born of godly parents; having miraculous conceptions; being announced by angels and being described as having coming prophetic and redemptive significance; initial disbelief followed by acceptance and praise to God. In fact, one of the things that stands out in Luke 1 and 2 are the number of times that poetic-like language is used on the lips of Jesus or John's parents or the aged prophet and prophetess in the temple, Simeon and Anna.

Luke 1:46-49

*And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name."*



Some have understood these to be, as was common in ancient Judaism, almost hymn-like in nature—outbursts of praise to God for what He is about to do through two children. And indeed in the more liturgical wings of the Christian church many of these prayers and praises have taken on great significance in Christian history, the most famous undoubtedly being Mary's hymn of praise known as the *Magnificat* from the Latin translation of the first word of her hymn. Despite all of these various parallels there are obviously clear differences: John will simply be a forerunner pointing the way ahead to Jesus; John is supernaturally conceived by one who has been barren, but Jesus is far more supernaturally conceived by one who has not even sexually known a man; and even the amount of attention that is given to Jesus makes it clear that He is the focal point of these two chapters and the one as the angels celebrate in 2:11—"Today is born to you in the City of David a Savior who is Christ the Messiah and also the Lord."

The one other detail that Luke includes at the end of these two chapters is the famous incident of Jesus astounding the teachers in the temple with His wisdom and His questions and answers at the age when a Jewish boy would have come of age, would have taken on himself the yoke of the commandments, what still today is called in Hebrew the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. And yet it is interesting that apart from this one incident we learn nothing in the Gospels about Jesus' life as a young person, as a child, as a teenager, even as a young adult. We assume that He worked as an apprentice to His father Joseph and eventually, perhaps, as a full partner in his carpenter's workshop. But unlike later apocryphal gospels, which tried to celebrate, magnify, and glorify Jesus the child by attributing to Him all kinds of prodigious and miraculous feats, apparently His childhood was otherwise relatively normal.

He was a good obedient Jewish boy, but not one who astounded the masses with the types of miracles that He would work later. Luke confirms this in the closing verse of his opening few chapters, Luke 2:52, which says that after Jesus returned with His parents to Nazareth He grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men, the four ways that all human children naturally grow—intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially.

### **D. Comparison of Matthew's and Luke's Accounts**

Matthew and Luke then, each in their own way, have key themes in common: Jesus is the one who will be the hope of Israel and the fulfillment of the Old Testament, but He will also be one who will extend God's blessings to the Gentiles and to others who are ostracized. Matthew in particular emphasizes Jesus as the legitimate king, over against Herod the usurper, despite Herod's attempts to exterminate the young Christ child; whereas Luke emphasizes more Jesus' universality, His coming as Savior and Lord, and, in the hymns of praise that the characters sing in these opening chapters, the fact that He will bring both spiritual and socioeconomic liberty, inverting the world's standards and beliefs. So now, the Gospels jump forward to the beginning of Christ's adult ministry when His life again intersects with John the Baptist and culminates in His baptism by John, thus setting the stage for the approximately three-year, more public phase of His life.

## **IV. John the Baptist**

All four Gospels, in fact, introduce us to John the Baptist, who next to Jesus Himself apparently is the most prominent character—at least in terms of the amount of text devoted to Him—of any in the Gospels. John is described as a prophet, a prophet particularly reminiscent of Elijah in terms of his dress, in terms of his location, his ministry in the wilderness, in terms of his message, at times an austere message of judgment. That message, in fact, is summed up particularly in Mark and Matthew as one of calling for repentance and baptism, leading to the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance in the Jewish context meant a change of behavior as well as a change of heart and for a Jew to call fellow Jews to such radical contrition and change before God was largely unprecedented, at least since the age of the great prophets who had rendered God's judgment of faithlessness against the majority of the people of Israel. He also called people to be baptized primarily in the Jordan River. Baptism was known from rituals practiced by the Essenes at Qumran and although we are not exactly sure when its date began the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism, of asking Gentiles who converted to Judaism seems to have formed another precedent for John's call and ministry.



**Matthew 3:15**

*Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness". Then John consented.*

But what was unique was the call for all Jews, even those who seemingly had been faithful, law-abiding ones, to undergo this ritual as if in fact they were not right with God. John speaks also of a baptism of the Spirit and of fire that the one who follows Him will produce, apparently a reference to the simultaneous cleansing and judging element of the ministry of Jesus depending on people's responses to Him. Jesus appears in the Gospels at one stage as virtually a follower of John; in fact, Jesus comes to John to be baptized by him. But the gospel of Matthew in particular makes it clear that Jesus is not being baptized because of some sin of His, as He explains in 3:15, but rather to "Let it be so for now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, He is putting His divine stamp of approval on John's ministry.