

How Old Was Jesus When He Was Crucified?

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The crucifixion of Jesus is the focal point of Christian theology. At the time of the event, the nascent Christian community, if it can be called that, was thrown into turmoil and confusion. Jesus had declared Himself to the Samaritan woman to be the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is certain that His apostles believed Him to be so. Yet, those same scriptures had no direct mention of such a fate for the Savior of Israel.

It was left to Paul to give meaning and substance to this otherwise unremitting tragedy. Despite its importance, theologically and historically, the actual date of the crucifixion is unknown and the New Testament texts only add to the confusion. Two events are necessary to establish the date of the crucifixion: the date of Jesus' birth and His age when He was crucified.

Two characters loom large in the problem of the date of Jesus' birth: Herod and Quirinius. Matthew tells us that at the time of Jesus' birth, Herod was king of Judea (2:1), and we know that Herod died in 4 BC by our present calendar. Luke, on the other hand, tells us that Quirinius was governor of Syria (2:2). From Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 18:1.1, where he is called 'Cyrenius', and is identified as a Roman senator and consul), we learn that Quirinius held such a position, and historians have set his accession to this rank in AD 6 by our present calendar. This gives us a full decade between the two events and probably even more since the text of Matthew asserts that Herod lived for some period after the birth of Jesus, and Quirinius ruled Syria for several years (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962, vol. K-Q, p. 976). If we accept the Herod date and place the birth of Jesus before 4 BC, say a year, then we are on more solid ground with respect to the rest of the story as Matthew tells it—the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the innocents, the wise men, etc. None of which are possible under Luke's chronology, and in fact, he mentions none of these events.

Now, the conventional date for the crucifixion is AD 33. Why this particular date was chosen is a mystery since the text of the New Testament clearly suggests an older age for Jesus as in John 8:57 where there is a claim that He is not yet fifty, unlikely if He is still in His thirties. An age of forty or a little more would accord with the assumption of His birth during the reign of Herod.

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