

# What Was the Duration of Jesus' Public Ministry? Can a Case Be Made for Two and a Half Years?

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## Introduction

The usual understanding today is that Jesus' public ministry lasted 3½ years. This would mean that four Passovers would have been celebrated during that time. But only three Passovers can clearly be demonstrated from the Gospels.

Even A.T. Robertson felt compelled to change one of the footnotes by Broadus to give audience to a 2½ year view. This was out of the ordinary for Robertson for his harmony is almost entirely a copy of that by Broadus. Broadus wrote,

"The *Tri-paschal* theory finds only three Passovers in the life of Christ. Hence the public work of Jesus would be from two to two and a half years in length. So Wieseler, Godet, Caspari, Tischendorf, Stier, Ellicott, Farrar, etc. These writers usually make the feast of John 5:1 Purim before the Passover of John 6:4, or Pentecost after it."<sup>1</sup>

Robertson replaces the sentence naming the older harmonists with,

"This view is quite possible, as is shown in the Harmony."<sup>2</sup>

Thomas and Gundry give this theory little credential. They write,

"Others favor a ministry of a little over two years. They take the three Passovers in John's gospel as opening and closing each of the two years. This theory, however, is most often defended on the basis of transposing John 5 and 6. Since no manuscript evidence exists for this rearrangement, the two-years theory is basically weak."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Broadus, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, in the Revised Version (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 243f.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1922), 270.

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 326.

Thomas and Gundry are correct. Any defense of a 2½ year theory defended on this basis is too weak to be seriously considered. This is perhaps the fatal flaw in a historical defense of the 2½ year view. However a strong case can be made for 2½ years without transposing John 5 and 6.

In a private communication I received from Craig Blomberg in January of this year he wrote,

“I really like your chronology which limits Jesus’ life to somewhere between two and three years. That accords with the best synthesis of the evidence as I have been able to understand it, as well, and there does seem to be a growing trend among scholars to concur.”

In this paper I will argue for a 2½ year public ministry for Jesus instead of the usually accepted 3½ year.

First I will present a chronological outline of John’s Gospel. Second, I will interface the entire text of the Synoptics with that outline. And third, we will consider the implications of a fourth Passover to that harmonization.

## A Chronological Outline of John’s Gospel

(Note: A verse number that is underlined signifies that it is the last verse in the chapter.)

### The First Passover of Christ’s Public Ministry (John 1:1-4:54)

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| 1:1-18          | John’s Prologue  |
| 1:19 - 2:12     | John the Baptist, Some Disciples, 1st miracle                                    |
| 1:19-28         | One day (Day 1)  |
| 1:29-34         | The next day (Day 2)   |
| 1:35-42         | The next day (Andrew, Peter, possibly John) (Day 3)                              |
| 1:43- <u>51</u> | The next day (Philip, Nathanael) (Day 4)   |
| 2:1-11          | The third day (wedding at Cana) (The third day since leaving Jerusalem on Day 4) |

2:1-11 indicates how long it took to travel from Jerusalem to Galilee.

Verse 11 reads:

<sup>NIV</sup> John 2:11 This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

2:12 Transition to Capernaum

John 1:19-2:12 therefore records Jesus' first journey from Jerusalem to Galilee during His public ministry.

2:13 - 3:21 The 1<sup>st</sup> Passover

<sup>NAU</sup> John 2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Overturns money changers' tables in Jerusalem  
Nicodemus

This is very commonly understood to be the 1<sup>st</sup> Passover of Jesus' public ministry.

3:22 - 4:54 From Jerusalem to Capernaum

NKJ John 3:22

22 After these things Jesus and His disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized.

NIV John 4:1-3

1 The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 When the Lord learned of this, he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

4:4-43 Woman at the well

NIV John 4:44 (Cf. Luke 4:16-30)

44 (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honor in his own country.)

4:46-54 Royal official's son healed at Cana

NIV John 4:54

54 This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee.

Remember the reference to Jesus turning the water into wine in John 2:11? John 5:4 would most easily indicate that these two signs were close chronologically.

Matthew adds here:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 4:13 and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali.

The record is of a single line of travel: Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → Nazareth → Cana → Capernaum.

John 2:13-4:54 records Jesus' second journey from Jerusalem to Galilee during His recorded public ministry.

Therefore John 1:1 - 4:54 record two of Jesus' journeys from Jerusalem to Galilee and the first Passover of His public ministry.

### The Last Passover of Christ's Public Ministry (John 11:55-21:25)

This section begins with Jesus' Arrival in Bethany just before His Triumphal entry and ends with a post-resurrection appearance.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 11:55 Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves.

The remaining verses of John's Gospel that fits between John 4:54 and 11:55 can readily be divided into five chronological packets. Each of these packets cannot be broken apart in order to insert another Passover. Another Passover can only be placed between them.

### The Unnamed Feast (John 5:1-47)

<sup>NAU</sup> John 5:1 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

This is the story of the man lying by the pool of Bethesda. Now Jesus healed him on the Sabbath and so invoked the ire of the Jewish leaders.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 5:16-18 For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." <sup>18</sup> For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

## Feeding of the 5,000; Peter walks on water, and the synagogue at Capernaum (John 6:1-71)

<sup>NAU</sup> John 6:4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.

## The Feast of Sukkot or Tabernacles (John 7:1-10:21)

This Feast usually occurred in the month of October, approximately six months after the Passover. At this feast Jesus made some very important comments relating to the chronology of this gospel.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 7:21-23 Jesus answered them, "I did one deed, and you all marvel. <sup>22</sup> "For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on *the* Sabbath you circumcise a man. <sup>23</sup> "If a man receives circumcision on *the* Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on *the* Sabbath?"

This can only be a clear reference to His healing the man by the Pool of Bethesda in John 5, prior to the Passover of John 6:4. If John 5 is a Passover, then that chapter relates events that occurred eighteen months before John 7. This is too long a time span for such a casual comment. John 5 cannot reasonably be a Passover.

Consider also how the three clear Passovers in John are introduced and how the feast of John 5 is introduced.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 6:4 Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 11:55 Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover to purify themselves.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 5:1 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

They are introduced very differently, also suggesting that John 5 is not a Passover.

## The Feast of Hanukkah or Dedication (John 7:10:22-42)

This feast took place in late December.

## The Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-54)

### Interfacing the Synoptics with John

Now, let's interface the Synoptics in John's Gospel.

It's important to remember that John chapters 5 and 7-11 have absolutely no parallels in the Synoptics! John 6 does.

Last year at the ETS Annual Meeting in Atlanta, I presented a paper in which I argued that Luke 9:18-19:28, and its parallels in the other two Synoptics, cannot be interwoven with John 7:1-11:54 but must of necessity come after those verses. Besides not being interwoven with John they also cover a time span of weeks, not months.

Other than Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, this leaves relatively few verses in Matthew and Mark, none in Luke that come between John 6 and John 12, a period of one year. So, if another Passover were placed between John 6 and John 12 this would leave huge time gaps in the Synoptics when they related very little of Jesus' public ministry.

The Synoptic material between John 4 and John 7 is much more voluminous so this is where another Passover is nearly always placed by those who argue for a 3½ year chronology.

But, what is left unsaid is that in this large volume of Synoptic material there are only thirteen chronological packets, each of which cover a very sort period of time. Let's consider a fuller interface of the Synoptics with John. And, ask yourselves as we go through them how long a time period each packet covered.

#### *Jesus' Birth and Childhood*

*Matthew 1:1 - 2:23*

*Luke 1:1 - 2:52*

#### John 1:1-4:54

#### Pesach / Passover #1 (John 2:13)

*Matthew 3:1-4:17*

*Mark 1:1-15*

*Luke 3:1-4:30*

## #1 Peter, Andrew, James and John Called

*Matthew 4:18-22*

*Mark 1:16-20*

## #2 Sermon on the Mount

*Matthew 4:23-8:1*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Matthew 7:28** *When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching;<sup>29</sup> for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.*

### *In Capernaum Immediately Following This Sermon*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Mark 1:21** *They went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach.<sup>22</sup> They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

*Matthew 8:14-18*

*Mark 1:21-39*

*Luke 4:31-44*

## #3 Let Down Your Nets for a Catch

*Luke 5:1-11*

## #4 Leper Healed and Instructed Not to Tell Anyone

*Matthew 8:2-4*

*Mark 1:40-45*

*Luke 5:12-16*

## #5 Paralytic through Roof at Capernaum

*Matthew 9:1-17*

*Mark 2:1-22*

*Luke 5:17-39*

## *Two Sabbaths*

### *#6 Picking Heads of Grain*

*Matthew 12:1-8*

*Mark 2:23-28*  
*Luke 6:1-5*

### *#7 Healed Man with Shriveled Hand*

*Matthew 12:9-21*  
*Mark 3:1-12*  
*Luke 6:6-11*

### *#8 The Twelve Chosen and the Sermon on the Plain*

*Mark 3:13-19*  
*Luke 6:12-49*

### *#9 Centurion's Servant Healed at Capernaum*

*Matthew 8:5-13*  
*Luke 7:1-10*

### *#10 Widow's Son Raised in Nain*

*Luke 7:11-17*

### *#11 Jesus Answers John the Baptist and Speaks about Him*

*Matthew 11:2-19*  
*Luke 7:18-35*

### *#12 Woman with Alabaster Jar of Perfume in Pharisee's House*

*Luke 7:36-50*

### *#13 Events Surrounding Confrontation in One House*

*Jesus' Mother and Brothers*

*Matthew 12:22-50*  
*Mark 3:20-35*  
*Luke 8:1-3, 19-21*



## *Parables by the Lake*

<sup>NIV</sup> **Matthew 13:1** *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.*

*Matthew 13:1-35*

*Mark 4:1-34*

*Luke 8:4-18*

## *Back in the House*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Matthew 13:36** *Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field."*

*Matthew 13:36-53*

## *The Gerasenes*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Mark 4:35** *On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side."*

*Matthew 8:23-34*

*Mark 4:35-5:20*

*Luke 8:22-39*

## *When Jesus Returned*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Luke 8:40** *And as Jesus returned, the people welcomed Him, for they had all been waiting for Him.*

*Matthew 9:18-34*

*Mark 5:21-43*

*Luke 8:40-56*

## *Again Without Honor at Nazareth*

<sup>NAU</sup> **Mark 6:1** *Jesus went out from there and came into His hometown; and His disciples followed Him.*

*Matthew 13:54-58*

*Mark 6:1-6a*

## John 5:1-47 Unnamed Feast

John 5 must be placed somewhere within these thirteen packets, but there is no firm evidence as to where. I have placed it here so it would be close to John 7.

## John 6:1-71 Feeding of 5,000 Pesach / Passover #2 (John 6:4)

*Matthew 9:35-11:1; 14:1-36*

*Mark 6:6b-56*

*Luke 9:1-17*

### *Immediately Following Events*

*4,000 fed*

*Disciples reminded of 5,000 and 4,000*

*Matthew 15:1-16:12*

*Mark 7:1-8:26*

*(Notice that Luke has no parallel verses in this area.)*

## John 7:1-10:21 Sukkot / Tabernacles (7:2)

October

## John 10:22-42 Hanukkah / Dedication (10:22)

Late December

## John 11:1-54 Lazarus

### *Last Journey to Jerusalem*

*Matthew 16:13-20:34*

*8:19-22*

*11:20-30*

*Mark 8:27-10:52*

*Luke 9:18-19:28*

John 11:55-21:25

Pesach / Passover #3 (John 11:55)

*Matthew 21:1-28:20*

*Mark 11:1-16:20*

*Luke 19:29-24:53*

## The Implications of a Fourth Passover

Those thirteen chronological packets have to fall between John 4:54 and 6:1. John 5 would then have to be placed somewhere in those packets.

Here are some natural observations.

1. John 5 is not a Passover.

We have discussed this earlier.

John 5, if it is Purim, would fall about seven months before Jesus' comments at Sukkot. The largest objection to Purim, however, is that people stayed home at Purim. They didn't normally travel to Jerusalem. But, take a close look at John 5:1.

<sup>NAU</sup> John 5:1 After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

It doesn't say that Jesus went to Jerusalem *for* the feast, but *at the time of* the feast. This may or may not be significant, and this is not proof that John 5 relates the feast of Purim. The point is that Purim would be chronologically in range of Jesus' comments in John 7.

2. These thirteen packets cover days, not months.
3. There is absolutely no *hint* of another Passover in any of these packets.
4. There is absolute no *need* of another Passover among these packets.

*Why* try to place a fourth Passover?

5. Placing another Passover among these packets would force at least one year, and possibly two, where very little is recorded of Jesus' public ministry in any of the Gospels

## Conclusion

A 2½ year public ministry for Christ can be argued without the historical error of transposing John 5 and 6. This 2½ year theory cannot be proven, but neither can the 3½ year theory. However, the 2½ year theory does have something that commends it. It avoids the otherwise necessary large time gaps of the 3½ year theory.

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