Timeline of Jesus’ Life

**Jesus of Nazareth was born somewhere between 6 and 2 BCE** (historians have demonstrated that Herod the King, to whom the shepherds came seeking Jesus as an infant, died years before the date set for Jesus’ birth [0 CE]). He is believed to have died between 30–33 CE B.C. – or before Christ, and A.D. – or anno domini, or "in the year of the lord", point to the date of the birth of Jesus. As this language is Christian in orientation, but used throughout diverse cultures, it is more respectful and becoming increasingly common to us the abbreviation CE for “common era”, or BCE for “before the Common Era.”

*Judea, Galilee and neighboring areas at the time of Jesus*

“Jesus” is the English pronunciation of Iesous, which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name “Joshua”.

“Christ” is not a surname, but a title – meaning Christos (in Greek) or Messiach (in Hebrew) – or anointed one. If one wanted to distinguish between two people with the same name, the parentage of that individual would be referenced ... as in “Solomon, son of David.”

**The Gospels**

Jesus is said to have been born in Bethlehem (6-4 BCE), grew up in Nazareth, and ministered around the area of the Sea of Galilee (c. 28-29 CE). He also moved at least once into Judea by way of Samaria, where he taught and was killed, probably on April 7, 30 CE, or April 3, 33 CE (based on coincident events of Passover).

The four Gospels in the Bible provide much of our information about the historical Jesus*. The first three (Matthew Mark and Luke) are called “syn-optic” Gospels, in that they “see-together.” It is clear that Matthew and Luke knew of, and perhaps even had a copy of, Mark as they put their words to print. The materials in the synoptics are similar, but not identical. There ARE many differences – so finding inconsistencies in the chronology should not disturb. Gospels are not trying to write history – they are trying to show the importance of Jesus to their varying audiences.

*There are other Gospels that did not make it into our Bible; like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary.
**Mark** (written before 75 AD) by an Aramaic speaking follower in rudimentary Greek. His style is hurried ... a frequently used term is “immediately.” Mark emphasizes Jesus’ divine power strongly.

**Matthew** (75–85 AD) was probably written by a Jewish scribe, conversant with Judaism, who has converted to Christianity. He writes soon after the destruction of the 2nd Temple (70 CE). His writing suggests the time of friction when Christians and Jews were still “one” but in a “family argument” - struggling with each other’s roles. Matthew takes pains to show his fellow Jews that Jesus is “a new Moses,” a fulfiller of the Covenant.

**Luke** (95-110 AD) uses the most elegant Greek, and was probably a Gentile. Tradition says he was “Luke the physician” who travelled with St. Paul. He is not as familiar with Jewish practices, policies, or places as Mark or Matthew. He is concerned to explain Christianity to a wider Gentile audience. He often repeats themes twice, say in a parable, once with a female and once with a male, protagonist.

**John** (90–125 AD) is NOT one of the synoptics. He writes in a very different style. He has had the longest time to reflect on the meaning of Jesus’ life, and so shows a more distilled, and symbolic approach. He emphasizes several signs that Jesus shows. It is he who emphasizes Jesus as lamb of God, whose blood, like that of the Passover lamb, saves the follower of God.

### Jesus’ Birth and Childhood

!["Adoration of the Shepherds" by Gerard van Honthorst, 1622](image)

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist, and Jesus as an adult already. Matthew includes a genealogy that shows Jesus’ ancestry beginning with Abraham (Jewish focus). Luke pushes that origin earlier with a genealogy beginning with Adam (universal focus). John, with the famous prologue (*in the beginning the Word was with God*) locates Jesus’ beginning before creation (he is the Cosmic, pre-existent, Christ).

The nativity narratives are found only in Matthew (focus on Joseph) and Luke (focus on Mary). St. Paul who was executed in Rome before any of the Gospels were written, seems to know nothing of Jesus’ birth, or ignores it as not crucial to understanding Jesus.
Very little known of Jesus early life. Matthew held Jesus to have been born in Bethlehem; fled to Egypt; and returned to Nazareth, in the pattern of Moses, leading the people to salvation/freedom/promised land. Luke describes Jesus as a teen-aged prodigy who discusses theology with the elders in the Temple while his family think he is heading home with them in the large caravan of travellers.

Depending on the Gospel read, Jesus made one or many pilgrimages to Jerusalem for Passover. Jesus was called a (tekton), or son of a tekton. Although traditionally translated as "carpenter", tekton (as in "technical" and "technology") could better translate as “builder”. It is possible he and his father both worked as stone masons in the larger economically important Greek town of Sepphoris just west of Nazareth. The Gospel of Thomas has more stories of his youth.

Jesus was baptized by his cousin John as an adult at about 29 years of age in the River Jordan – the actual site is disputed, but probably was near the north end of the Dead Sea at a place today called Qasr al Yahud (or Castle of the Jews). The Gospels from Mark to John gradually diminish John’s presence at the baptism.
Ministry around Capernaum

Jesus spends 40 days in the desert reflecting on ministry and temptations. He then travels back to Galilee in the north and begins his ministry.

The first thing Jesus does is call companions or community to travel with him. They move around the relatively small area of Galilee, where he preaches, teaches, heals, lives life, and performs miracles. The main message he gives is for people to “repent” – metanoeo – which means “turn around” “for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

“Kingdom,” the most usual translation of Basileia might better be translated “rule” or “King-ship”. Jesus is saying the age where God is in charge (sovereign) has begun. Jesus is not a King like Herod or Caesar; his rule is one of love and justice and relationship, hence “Kin_ship” is a helpful translation of his emphasis.

He taught (on the basis of Jewish scriptures) the greatest commandment was the Shema: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Both of these commands arise from Tanakh. The Shema references the first Commandment in Ex. 20.

The Sermon on the Mount (in Matthew; on the Plain in Luke) shows Jesus both affirming the Law given on Sinai, and amplifying it with his own rabbinic explanations. Some scholars suggest he was making the Law impossible to fulfill so that one would necessarily recognize a need for divine grace.

Jesus taught in parables – a form found in many of Jesus’ teachings. These are not fables or morals in the usual sense –heavenly stories with an earthly purpose. They are more like evocative puzzles designed to engage the listeners, to question for themselves what is going on ... like a Trojan Horse, the spirit of the parable sneaks inside the hearer, who then takes responsibility to wrestle and discover truth for themselves..

Miracles accompanied Jesus teaching, but were not his primary purpose. As God is sovereign, God’s will IS BEING done on earth as in heaven. Consequently relationships are set right ... including each person’s relationship to life ... healings are a sign of what God wants for us – life in abundance. Nature once again falls under God’s order – so even wind and waves obey God’s child – Jesus.
The Galilean Ministry period ends with Peter recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah, at Caesarea Philippi (modern day Banios) at the headwaters of the Jordan. The location was a “shopping mall of spirituality” with temples to Zeus and Pan and others carved into the cliff walls at the foot of Mt. Hermon. At that point, Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, and the inexorable movement toward confrontation with the powers of this world.

The Transfiguration follows where Jesus is seen with the greatest law giver (Moses) and prophet (Elijah) of Tanakh. The gradual disclosure of the identity of Jesus to his disciples and his prediction of his own suffering and death follow. The Transfiguration reaffirms Jesus is the Son of God (as in his baptism), and the command "listen to him" identifies him as God’s messenger and mouthpiece.

Jesus then moves toward Jerusalem along the Jordan River route (although the locations jump around somewhat), teaching along the way.
Ministry around Jerusalem

Jesus enters Jerusalem from the East (Bethany and Bethphage). Here he is confronting authority in an act of prophetic drama – riding a donkey into the capital during the high holy days of Passover (a Freedom Festival). The city may have had as many as 100,000 pilgrims present ... so it was an explosive environment. He was directly challenging the authorities ... but doing so in a distinctly non-violent way, so as not to trigger violence. The donkey, the cries of Hoshiyana (God save us!), and the palm leaves referenced the arrival of OT warriors liberating Jews from Greek domination.

Jesus possibly taught and healed in Jerusalem for as many as six weeks before he is arrested. The porticoes of Solomon, the collonaded passageways surrounding the temple mount were narrow, and crowded, and so not accessible to the movement of many soldiers who were sent to arrest him. Jesus evades capture in the crowds and flits out of the city to overnight with his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus in a nearby town.

The night before his arrest Jesus arranges a Last Supper (the Passover meal in the Synoptics, Passover Eve in John) with his twelve key followers (later called the apostles, or the “sent”). This meal appears in all four Biblical gospels and the traditional words instituting the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper appears in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11). John does not refer to the meal directly, as Jesus is sacrificed as the Passover lamb a day earlier in his telling. Instead John refers to the washing of his disciples’ feet.

One of the 12, Judas Iscariot (which means Judas of the City, perhaps more sophisticated than the Galillean fishermen), leaves the supper and goes to the Jewish authorities and offers to lead them to Jesus in the olive gardens below the eastern walls of the Temple (Gethsemane). The 30 silver coins he was paid have become symbolic of “selling out”. Judas may have thought he was forcing Jesus to reveal himself in power, and foment an uprising of Jesus’ followers. Judas identifies Jesus with a kiss, and he is arrested without risk of antagonizing crowds. Peter betrays Jesus by denying him three times as Jesus said he would. The rest of the disciples flee – suggesting that all have betrayed him.
Jesus is brought to Caiaphas’ house where he is beaten and tried in an illegal court (at night). He is then marched to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate in hopes of finding a sentence of death. The historical Pilate was a brutal leader who was subsequently fired by Caesar for being too violent. In later Gospels, his role is downplayed (he is shown trying to release Jesus) lest it offend the Gentile readers of the widening audience. As a result blame was inappropriately shifted to the crowd shouting “Crucify him!” This latter description contributed significantly to Christian anti-semitism in later years.

Pilate tries to wriggle out of the difficulty of killing a popular prophet by claiming not to have jurisdiction. He sends Jesus to Herod Antipas, who governs Galilee. As in most of the interrogations, Jesus says nothing. After mocking and beating him, Herod sends him back to Pilate.
**Crucifixion**

Jesus’ ministry concludes has he is mocked, beaten, wearing a spikey crown of thorns, forced to carry the cross beam to his execution. The traditional route of his death march is now called the Via Dolorosa (way of sorrows). The site of his crucifixion, called Calvary (a.k.a. Golgotha, or Skull Hill), originally outside the city walls, is now located inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Jesus is crucified between other Jews being killed for various crimes. The soldiers gamble for the possessions of the condemned (Jesus seamless cloak is a prize). Passers-by mock Jesus.

This was an excruciatingly slow, tortured death, designed by Romans to terrify would be rebels into submission. Death usually took days, and was the result of heart failure or suffocation as the body was pitched forward, stressing the chest and shoulder muscles. The religious authorities petition Pilate to break the legs of the condemned men to hurry the process along so as not to defiled the Passover Festival! Jesus however, dies within 3 hours of his crucifixion, so his legs are not broken. He is speared in the Gospel of John, with symbolic water and blood flowing from his side (baptism/communion). When Jesus dies, an earthquake happens and the curtain dividing the inner sanctum (the Holy of Holies) from the rest of the temple is torn open – suggesting the way to God is now open to all.

**Resurrection and ascension**

Only the female followers remain faithful, remaining with Jesus to the end. Some prominent followers of Jesus (*Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus*) claim his body, and see to his burial in one of two traditional locations visible today. After three days, the length of time Jewish culture needed to guarantee that a body was well and truly dead, first Mary Magdalene, and other followers, begin announcing that Jesus has been raised from the dead by God. The Gospels contain several accounts of Jesus appearing alive to his followers – in some, in a very ghostlike manner, in others, in a very tangible fashion. Jesus even appears to Simon Peter (who has gone back to his original name and profession) on the shores of the sea of Galilee. Peter is reinstated as leader of the church, and commissioned to lead the flock. Proof and the technology of resurrection is not given; rather the disciples are offered evidence, leaving the decision of belief to faith rather than knowledge.

Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus commissions his disciples to “go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.” Luke 24:51 then says Jesus was “carried up into heaven” – returning to God, His intention is that disciples should share in his ministry, and not remain dependent on his physical presence. On the day of Pentecost (the 50th day after the resurrection), Jesus’ Holy Spirit is sent to dwell within each of his followers, so that they might multiply the work he began.