

# Consular and Sabbatical Years in Herod's Life

**Andrew E. Steinmann**

*River Forest, Illinois*

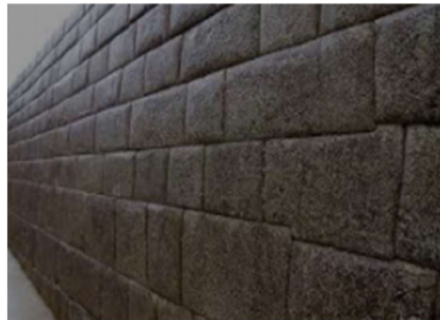
**Rodger C. Young**

*St. Louis, Missouri*

© 2020, Dallas Theological Seminary. This article was published in the October-December 2020 issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Issue 177), pages 442–61. The copy below is being made available on the present site in keeping with *Bibliotheca Sacra* guidelines.



***History built on Josephus's  
Consular years for Herod***



***History built on (correct, =  
Wacholder) Sabbatical years***

# CONSULAR AND SABBATICAL YEARS IN HEROD'S LIFE

*Andrew E. Steinmann and Rodger C. Young*

## ABSTRACT

*Much of New Testament chronology, especially the dating of Jesus's life, depends on the dates for the reign of Herod the Great. In the late nineteenth century Emil Schürer proposed dates for the reign of Herod: 40 (37) BC to 4 BC. These are suspect and are based on Josephus's erroneous use of Roman consular years. Schürer also cites the Sabbatical tables developed by Zuckermann, but this is not an independent source, since they are based on the same citation of consular years in Josephus. When Josephus's error is recognized, the correct dates for Herod's reign are demonstrated to be 39 (36) BC to 1 BC, placing the birth of Christ in late 3 BC or early 2 BC.*

AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF JULIUS CAESAR, the Roman world was embroiled in a civil war that was described extensively by the Roman historians Appian, Dio Cassius, and Livius. Plutarch's biographies also provide historical background for the period. Writings from these Roman historians (except Livius, for whom the relevant portions have not survived) give important information regarding the civil war and also regarding the Roman strife with the Parthians that took place during this unsettled time. Excerpts from the Roman historians show that Herod's appointment as king of Judea by the Roman Senate could not have happened earlier than the autumn of 39 BC, a conclusion that contradicts the most commonly accepted chronology for Herod's reign, that of Emil Schürer.<sup>1</sup> Schürer's chronology has Herod's appoint-

---

Andrew E. Steinmann is Distinguished Professor of Theology and Hebrew at Concordia University Chicago, River Forest, Illinois; Rodger C. Young is an independent researcher in St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>1</sup> Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 5 vols., tran. John Macpherson (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009). This original

ment occurring in late 40 BC and Herod's siege and final capture of Jerusalem, done with the aid of a Roman army under their general Sossius, taking place in 37 BC. The present article will show that the Schürer chronology is not only in conflict with Roman historians, but also in conflict with explicit statements in the writings of Josephus that contradict the statements in Josephus from which Schürer constructed his chronology. It will also be shown that a chronology that places Herod's appointment as *de jure* king in late 39 BC, his siege of Jerusalem in 36 BC, and his death in 1 BC (versus Schürer's 40, 37, and 4 BC) brings Herod's career into harmony with the Roman records and also with most of the relevant texts of Josephus himself. The three-year difference in the date of Herod's death has implications for the dating of Jesus's birth, his ministry, and the question of whether his death and resurrection were in AD 30 or AD 33.

### WAS HEROD APPOINTED KING IN 40 BC OR 39 BC? VENTIDIUS AND THE TREATY OF MISENUM

One faction in the Roman civil war was called the Second Triumvirate, consisting of Octavian (later to become Augustus Caesar), Mark Antony, and the lesser-known Lepidus. They waged war against the party of the assassins Brutus and Cassius, who were defeated in the Battles of Philippi, October 42 BC. After Philippi, Antony and Octavian contended for control, adding to the misery of the Roman populace. During this time of strife between Antony and Octavian, a renegade Roman general named Labienus encouraged the Parthians, long enemies of Rome, to take advantage of the situation and seize control in Syria and to make him general of the forces there.<sup>2</sup> The Parthians obliged, also setting up Antigonus as king and high priest in Jerusalem and causing the Judean tetrarch Herod to flee the country. Herod went to Egypt, where he received

---

English version was published in Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1890. There were three German editions of Schürer's volumes. The first appeared in 1874, the second in 1886–1890, and the third in 1901–1909. In recognition of the enduring importance of Schürer's work, almost a century after his original publication, Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar of Oxford University were asked to translate his third German edition and update it with more recent scholarship: Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135): A New English Version Revised and Edited by Geza Vermes and Fergus Millar* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973). The Vermes/Millar edition occasionally omits chronological information found in the first two editions, and citations in the present article will refer to the 1890/2009 translation of the second edition.

<sup>2</sup> Appian, *Civil Wars* 5:65; Dio Cassius 48:24.

a ship from Cleopatra. After a stormy voyage and a layover in Rhodes, he outfitted another ship, with which he finally came to Rome to seek the help of his friend Antony and the Roman Senate in restoring his tetrarchy.

Antony and Octavian had agreed to put an end to their strife at the Treaty of Brundisium, September or October of 40 BC. The campaign against Labienus and the Parthians, however, needed to be deferred in order to deal with Sextus Pompeius, who was causing famine in Italy by his pirate operations out of Sicily. It would have made no sense for the Romans to initiate war against the Parthians and Labienus before strife with Pompeius was resolved. A (temporary) peace with Pompeius was accomplished at Misenum, ten or eleven months after the Treaty of Brundisium, after which it was possible to initiate the campaign against the Parthians. With the approval of the Roman Senate, Publius Ventidius was chosen as the general, under Antony, to whom was given the task of initiating this operation.

After writing about the Treaty of Misenum, Plutarch is explicit on the timing of Ventidius's campaign: "After the treaty Antony despatched Ventidius into Asia, to check the advance of the Parthians."<sup>3</sup> Dio Cassius agrees with Plutarch that Ventidius did not leave Rome until after the Treaty of Misenum.<sup>4</sup> Inscriptions recording Roman official transactions found at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor are compatible with dating the Treaty of Misenum to the second half of August, 39 BC.<sup>5</sup> Ventidius, departing for Syria after this, would have landed there in the early fall of 39.

In the course of these events, Herod arrived in Rome and unexpectedly received the kingship of Judea from the Roman Senate, on the recommendation of Antony and Octavian. Josephus relates that Herod stayed in Rome only seven days,<sup>6</sup> which is reasonable because he was anxious to relieve his mother, his fiancée Mariamne, and other relatives who were besieged in Masada by forces loyal to Antigonus and the Parthians. The Senate was also eager to have Herod leave quickly and raise an army to assist Ventidius. Herod therefore departed immediately from Rome to sail to Ptolemais, a port in what is presently Lebanon.

---

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 40:36–39.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome* (Hertford, UK: Stephen Austin and Sons, 1992), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.387/14.14.5.

Ventidius was already at Ptolemais when Herod arrived. This is made explicit by Josephus in both *War* and *Antiquities*.<sup>7</sup> The Parthians and Labienus were gone, Labienus having fled from Ventidius. Herod therefore arrived after Ventidius had come and cleared the area of hostile forces. Since Ventidius did not arrive in Syria until the fall of 39 BC, and the Senate would not have sent Herod there until after Ventidius had established a beachhead, Herod's appointment as king could not have happened before the fall of 39 BC. The consensus (Schürer) history, however, has Herod appointed as king and leaving for Ptolemais in late 40 BC, about three seasons before the Treaty of Misenum and at a time when the Parthians and their surrogate Labienus controlled Syria.

Recognizing these and other problems with the Schürer reconstruction, W. E. Filmer proposed a chronology for Herod the Great that is consistent with the timeline outlined above.<sup>8</sup> Filmer dated Herod's investiture as king by the Senate to a time on or soon after the first of Tishri, 39 BC,<sup>9</sup> so that Herod's appointment year may be written as 39t, the "t" representing that the year did not begin on 1 January (Roman system), but on 1 Tishri (Jewish system).<sup>10</sup>

For Filmer's chronology to be credible, the Roman Senate would need to be in session in the late fall of 39 BC with both Antony and Octavian present. Some years after Filmer wrote, an inscription from Aphrodisias in Asia Minor was translated and published, demonstrating that such was the case.<sup>11</sup> The inscription records a decree of the Roman Senate dated to October 2, 39 BC, at which Antony and Octavian were present; October 2 was 12 days after the first of Tishri that year, which was on September 20. It is also of interest that in the Aphrodisias inscription, Antony is mentioned first, then Octavian,<sup>12</sup> showing that Antony, who was 44 years of age, was a more dominant figure in late 39 BC than Octavian, who had just turned 24. Antony's dominance at this time in

---

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *War* 1.290/1.15.3; *Ant.* 14.394/14.15.1.

<sup>8</sup> W. E. Filmer, "The Chronology of the Reign of Herod the Great," *Journal of Theological Studies* ns 17 (1966): 283–98.

<sup>9</sup> Filmer, 288, 292.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive discussion showing that Josephus reckoned Herod's reign according to a Tishri-based calendar, see Filmer, 294–5, and Andrew E. Steinmann and Rodger C. Young, "Elapsed Times for Herod the Great in Josephus," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 177 (2020): 308–28.

<sup>11</sup> Reynolds, *Aphrodisias and Rome*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, 75

the history of the Second Triumvirate explains why Appian oversimplified somewhat by stating that it was Antony who appointed Herod as king (see next paragraph).

Since Herod could not have been appointed king by Antony, Octavian, and the Roman Senate in the fall of 40 BC, the consensus date for this event must be in error. That date is based on the consular year that Josephus gives for Herod receiving the kingship. In the same sentence in which Josephus gives his consular year for Herod's investiture, he gives an Olympiad year that Schürer recognized as at least one year too early.<sup>13</sup> That Josephus's consular year also is too early is made explicit by Appian, who describes the negotiations and treaty at Misenum and then writes, "After these events [at Misenum]. . . Antony . . . set up kings here and there, as he pleased . . . in Idumea and Samaria, Herod . . ." There is therefore a remarkable concurrence of evidence from Josephus, Plutarch, Dio Cassius, and Appian that shows that Herod was made king by the Romans after the Treaty of Misenum and hence no earlier than the fall of 39 BC. This is contradicted only by Josephus's wrong consular date for the event. But Schürer accepted Josephus's consular date as accurate, thereby contradicting the evidence from the Roman authors and also from Josephus himself related to the Treaty of Misenum and the movements of Ventidius.

#### WAS HEROD'S SIEGE OF JERUSALEM IN 37 OR 36 BC? JOSEPHUS VERSUS DIO AND JOSEPHUS

A Roman author contradicts another consular year for Herod given by Josephus: the year in which Herod and Sossius besieged Jerusalem. Josephus says that the siege lasted for five months<sup>14</sup> and that the city was captured "on the solemnity of the Fast."<sup>15</sup> In the next sentence, Josephus gives a consular year and an Olympiad that correspond to 37 BC, but this is contradicted by the statement, in the same sentence, that Pompey<sup>16</sup> had captured the city "on the

---

<sup>13</sup> *Ant.* 14.389/14.14.5; Schürer I.393, n. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *War* 1.351/1.18.2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ant.* 14.487/14.16.4. The Greek word is *νηστείας*, the same word used in Acts 27:9 to refer to the Day of Atonement.

<sup>16</sup> Father of Sextus Pompeius the pirate.

same date, 27 years earlier." Pompey took Jerusalem in 63 BC;<sup>17</sup> 27 years later is 36 BC, not the 37 BC of Josephus's consular year. The 27 years cannot be calculated to be only 26 by resorting to the Mishnaic principle that a part of year counts as a whole year; there was no part of a year, since it was on the same day of the year, the Day of Atonement, both times.

As pointed out by Filmer, the consensus date for Herod and Sossius's siege of Jerusalem is also contradicted by an explicit statement of Dio Cassius (49:23) that, in the consular year corresponding to 37 BC, "the Romans accomplished nothing worthy of note in Syria."<sup>18</sup> Once again, Josephus's consular year contradicts not only a Roman historian, but his own statement about the elapsed time since Pompey's capture of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *Cambridge Ancient History* ix (Cambridge, 1982), 261. An interesting study that recognizes the problem of the 27 years between Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem and that of Herod and Sossius is Duncan Cameron, "Towards a Re-dating of Pompey's Conquest of Jerusalem," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 69, no. 2 (2018): 224–47. Because of the Ventidius issue, Cameron agrees with Filmer's date of late 39 BC for Herod's appointment as king, although he accepts 37 BC, the consensus date, for Herod's siege of Jerusalem. But this allows only two years between Herod's flight from the newly-installed Antigonus as high priest in Jerusalem and his defeat of Antigonus, whereas Josephus says that Antigonus reigned three years and three months (*Ant.* 20.246/20.10.65). It is also in contradiction to the three-year difference that Josephus gives between Herod's *de jure* and *de facto* beginnings of reign. Other distinctives of Cameron's approach are his rejection of the consular year of 63 BC given by Josephus for Pompey's capture of Jerusalem (*Ant.* 14.66/14.4.3), putting that event one year earlier in order to preserve the (exact) 27 years that Josephus gave between Jerusalem's capture by Pompey and the consensus date for its capture by Herod (*Ant.* 14.487/14.6.4), and his positing 3 BC for the death of Herod, thus necessarily rejecting Josephus's placing that event shortly after a lunar eclipse. But overall Cameron is one of the curiously few authors who have appreciated the insurmountable problem that the Treaty of Misenum and the career of Ventidius present to the consensus dates for Herod.

<sup>17</sup> *War* 1.160/1.18.2.

<sup>18</sup> Filmer, "Chronology," 286.

<sup>19</sup> Steinmann and Young, "Elapsed Times for Herod," Tables 1 and 2, examines all elapsed times that Josephus gives for dates in Herod's career, showing that Josephus was consistent in using non-inclusive numbering for these elapsed times except when an ordinal number is used. Josephus's practice is therefore consistent with the ordinary use of language, whereas the two tables in that Steinmann and Young article show that the consensus viewpoint, with its presuppositions of inclusive numbering and Nisan years for Josephus, produces a chronology that is incoherent throughout. For one example of this incoherency, see note 22 of the present article. See also the discussion in Steinmann and Young, "Elapsed Times for Herod," about the impossibility of fitting all the events related to Herod's funeral into the 13 days that the consensus theory must have between Herod's death on or after Nisan 1 of 4 BC and Archelaus's being king on the first day of Passover, 13 days later. Filmer's chronology, with Herod dying a few days after the lunar eclipse of January 10, 1 BC, allows adequate time for these events.

## THE APPEAL OF JOSEPHUS'S CONSULAR YEARS FOR ESTABLISHING HEROD'S CHRONOLOGY

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the two consular years given by Josephus for events related to Herod the Great. There are no textual problems with the names of the consuls for these years as given by Josephus: Gaius Domitius Calvinus and Gaius Asinius Pollio for his investiture as king by the Senate<sup>20</sup> and Marcus Agrippa and Caninius Gallus for the year of the siege of Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> The first consular year is firmly dated by Roman records to 40 BC, the second to 37 BC.

When Josephus wrote his first work, *The Jewish War*, he did not give consular years for the events under discussion. Neither did he provide dates according to the Seleucid Era; had he done so, the present confusion would not have arisen. Instead his sources seem to have used the method of dating prominent in the Hebrew kingdom period: reign lengths. Thus in relating the line of Hasmonean high priests, Josephus gives the length of time served for each of the priests, from Simon (started in 142 BC) until the last Hasmonean, Antigonus, who was deposed when Herod and Sossius captured Jerusalem. The sum of the individual reigns puts the end of the Hasmonean Dynasty (the defeat of Antigonus by Herod) in 36 BC, not the 37 BC of the Schürer consensus.<sup>22</sup> As related above, 36 BC is also the date derived from the 27 exact years to the day from Pompey's capture of Jerusalem to that of Herod and Sossius.

Josephus, then, was not concerned with consular dates when he wrote *War*. In writing *Antiquities*, however, he apparently thought it necessary to assign some consular dates for his Roman audience. The appealing points of Josephus's consular dates to subsequent historians such as Schürer may be listed as follows:

1. Consular dates were based on the Roman calendar that started the year on January 1 and ended it on December 31, like our modern calendar, which is derived from the

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ant.* 14.389/14.14.5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ant.* 14.487/14.16.4.

<sup>22</sup> Filmer, "Chronology," 292. Filmer points out that the summing of these individual reign lengths would not equal the total elapsed time if inclusive reckoning is used; the sum would be several years too short. But inclusive reckoning is a necessary presupposition of the consensus chronology for Herod. Thus when Josephus says that Herod reigned 37 years from his appointment by the Romans and 34 years from the time that he had Antigonus slain (*Ant.* 17.191/17.8.1), the figures are taken by Schürer as 36 years and 33 years, respectively, in order to come up with his date of 4 BC for the death of Herod.



Roman, so there was no necessity of worrying about whether Josephus was using a Nisan-based year or a Tishri-based year in giving these dates.

2. The two consular dates are the proper three years apart, agreeing with Josephus's statement, derived from the regnal year data, that Herod died 37 years after his appointment by the Romans and 34 years after his siege of Jerusalem and the deposing of Antigonus.
3. There are two consular dates, not just one, seemingly implying two independent, yet agreeing, measurements.
4. Using 37 BC as the date of the capture of Jerusalem in association with stating that the Battle of Actium was in the seventh year of Herod's reign<sup>23</sup> agrees with September 2, 31 BC, for the Battle of Actium, in which Octavian defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra.
5. The consular date for the siege of Jerusalem, which was during a Sabbatical year,<sup>24</sup> agrees with Zuckermann's chronology<sup>25</sup> of post-exilic Sabbatical years.
6. These consular dates seem to agree with the date of 4 BC from which at least two of Herod's heirs dated the start of their reigns, but only if inclusive numbering is used for the 37 years and 34 years of Herod's reign, although inclusive numbering has been shown to produce incoherency when applied elsewhere in Josephus.<sup>26</sup>

The thesis of the present article is that, contrary to appearance, items 2 to 5 in this list are not independent. Their agreement is explained by one simple mistake: Josephus's first assignment of a consular year to either Herod's being appointed king, or, alternately, to his siege of Jerusalem. Let us assume the latter. Once that single mistake was made, Josephus would have consulted the standard table of consular years and compared it with his prior

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ant.* 15.121/15.5.2; *War* 1.370/1.19.3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ant.* 14.475/14.16.2; 15.7/15.1.2.

<sup>25</sup> B. Zuckermann, "Über Sabbatjahrcyclus und Jobelperiode," in *Jarhesbericht des jüdisch theologischen Seminars "Fraenckelscher Stiftung"* (Breslau, 1857). Citations in the present article will be from an English translation by A. Löwy, *Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee*, reprinted by Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1974, from the original English version published in London in 1866.

<sup>26</sup> Steinmann and Young, "Elapsed Times for Herod," Table 1.

information stating that Herod's siege of Jerusalem came three years after his investiture as king by the Romans. He then would assign a consular year from his table that was three years earlier, based solely on the consular year table, not on any independent matching of events of that year with a consular year. The same applies to Josephus's statement that the Battle of Actium happened in Herod's seventh year. The consular year for the Battle of Actium was well known, and all Josephus needed to do was to compare that consular year with his (mistaken) consular for Herod's siege of Jerusalem and therefore reckon that six years had elapsed between the two events, thereby placing the Battle of Actium in Herod's seventh year.

In short, if Josephus made a mistake in assigning a consular year to one event for Herod, the well-known table of consular years would assure that nearby events in Herod's life would also be assigned a consular year that would be in agreement with the consular year table, although they could be wrong in an absolute sense. This would explain why items 2 through 4 would agree even if the consular year for Herod's siege of Jerusalem was one year too early. That it is one year too early was demonstrated in the section above regarding the year of Herod's appointment as king.

This next section will show that Zuckermann's Sabbatical years (item 5) are not an independent verification of Josephus's consular years, but are instead derived from them. Further, a clear indication that Josephus made a mistake regarding the consular year for the siege of Jerusalem comes from an analysis of how Zuckermann derived his calendar. After examining the awkwardness of Zuckermann's derivation, it will be shown that the true Sabbatical-year calendar brings harmony not only with Roman histories and Josephus's other statements related to this time for Herod, but also with several exactly defined Sabbatical years over a span of time from 135 BC to AD 749.

#### ZUCKERMANN'S SEARCH FOR A SABBATICAL YEAR

In the 1850s, Benedict Zuckermann published an analysis of the biblical Sabbatical and Jubilee years. His treatise is marked by an extensive knowledge of previous studies dealing with these subjects in early works such as the *Seder 'Olam*, the *Mishnah*, and the Babylonian Talmud. He also included the later Jewish scholarship of Maimonides, Rashi, and others. There was a general consensus among these scholars, based on a statement in the second-century AD *Seder 'Olam*, that the cycle of Jubilee and Sabbatical years was interrupted by the Babylonian Exile, so that counting was started

afresh after the return from exile. Consequently, any calendar of the pre-exilic cycle would not match the calendar of Sabbatical/Jubilee years after the Exile.

After a lengthy discussion of these and other issues related to the Jubilee and Sabbatical cycles, Zuckermann addressed the specific question of post-exilic Sabbatical years. Realizing that there were several references to Sabbatical years after the Exile, Zuckermann sought for one that would provide a firm anchor to which all the others could be related. This he thought he had found in Josephus's dating of Herod's siege of Jerusalem, which was during a Sabbatical year.<sup>27</sup> On page 45 of his treatise, he presents Josephus's date for the start of the siege as "the best ascertained fact" that allows the fixing of a Sabbatical year in the post-exilic period. Josephus's consular year for Herod's siege therefore formed the basis for Zuckermann's calendar of post-exilic Sabbatical years. However, the first part of the present article has presented arguments showing that Josephus's consular year for the siege of Jerusalem was one year too early. If that is the case, then we should expect that Zuckermann's calendar, taking as it does this date for its starting place, will conflict with the timing of events for which the year of their occurrence is fairly secure—or in some cases, such as the Caligula statue episode, absolutely secure. These conflicts arising from Zuckermann's wrong starting date are the subject of the next four subsections.

#### THE CONFLICT OF ZUCKERMANN'S CALENDAR WITH SABBATICAL YEARS IN 1 MACCABEES

Accepting the consular year given by Josephus that would put Herod's siege in the summer of 37 BC, Zuckermann then determined that a Sabbatical year began in the fall of 38 BC. On the next page after determining this "best ascertained" anchor date, Zuckermann checked its congruence with the Sabbatical years in 1 Maccabees. First, he correctly calculated that the year he assumed for Herod's conquest of Jerusalem, 37 BC, was, in the Seleucid system, year 275 SE (Seleucid Era).<sup>28</sup> In the Babylonian method of reckoning used in most of 1 Maccabees, year 1 SE was the year starting in Nisan of 311 BC, which we shall write as 311n, the 'n' showing that the year began on Nisan 1, the "new year's day" of the Babylonian Seleucid calendar. In the west, the Macedonian system was used, in which 1 SE started six months earlier, in Tishri of 312 BC,

<sup>27</sup> *Ant.* 14.475/14.16.2; 15.7/15.1.2.

<sup>28</sup> Zuckermann, *Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee*, 46.

which, as explained previously, can be written as 312t.

Zuckermann therefore did well to check the validity of his “best ascertained” date in the reign of Herod versus the references to Sabbatical years, and their dating, in 1 Maccabees. However, things did not work out as he expected. Zuckermann’s first check-point was the murder of high priest Simon by his son-in-law Ptolemy, described in 1 Maccabees 16:14–21 as happening in Shebat (January/February) of year 177 SE, which is 135n (135/34 BC). This event is also dealt with by Josephus, who was of the Hasmonean line of priests. He was therefore concerned about the murder of one of his distant relatives, and he had at his disposal information from an unknown source that is not found in 1 Maccabees. He says that when John Hyrcanus tried to avenge Simon’s murder by besieging Ptolemy in Ptolemy’s fortress, the siege dragged on until a Sabbatical year began.<sup>29</sup>

According to Zuckermann’s calendar that started with 38t as the “best ascertained” Sabbatical year, a Sabbatical year should have begun in the fall of 136 BC, 14 Sabbatical cycles (98 years) before 38t, not in the fall of 135 BC as required by 1 Maccabees in dealing with Hyrcanus’s siege of Ptolemy. How did Zuckermann handle this contradiction to his Sabbatical-year calendar? In a footnote on page 46, he says that the sentence in Josephus stating that a Sabbatical year commenced when Hyrcanus was besieging Ptolemy “has proved a difficulty to learned inquirers, because it seems to express that the Sabbatical year only commenced after the siege had lasted some length of time.”

Recognizing the difficulty, Zuckermann made his own translation of the relevant sentence in *Antiquities* (13.234/13.8.1) as follows: “The siege lingered on for some time, and the year *had already arrived* in which the Jews had Sabbatical rest” (emphasis added).<sup>30</sup>

This cannot be supported by the Greek of Josephus, which reads:

Ἐλκομένης δὲ οὕτως εἰς χρόνον τῆς πολιορκίας ἐνίσταται τὸ ἔτος ἐκεῖνω, καθ’ ὃ συνβαίνει τοὺς Ἰουδαίους ἀργεῖν κατὰ δὲ ἑπτὰ ἔτη τοῦτο παρατηροῦσιν, ὥς ἐν ταῖς ἑβδομάσιν ἡμέραις.

Marcus’s translation in the Loeb series:

But while the siege was being protracted in this manner, there came around the year in which the Jews are wont to remain

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ant.* 13.234/13.8.1, *War* 1.60/1.2.4.

inactive, for they observe this custom every seventh year, just as on the seventh day.

To justify his (mis)translation of the verb ἐνίσταται, “came around,” Zuckermann made the following comment:

However, whether it be that here Josephus is chargeable with carelessness in style, and with making use of an illogical construction, or that he, by mistake, placed the beginning of a Sabbatical year in the spring, or that he was so ignorant as to consider the waging of war in the Sabbatical year to be unlawful, so much is sure, that Josephus designates as Sabbatical the year when Simon was murdered and Hyrcan besieged the murderer of his father.<sup>30</sup>

So much is *not* sure in Zuckermann's allegations against Josephus. First, he tries to place the murder of Simon in a Sabbatical year, while Josephus says that, following the murder, Hyrcanus besieged the murderer, and in the course of that siege, a Sabbatical year started. Then, in order to justify his mistranslation of the passage, Zuckermann charges that Josephus was ignorant about Sabbatical years or that he misused the Greek language. Regarding the latter charge, the verb in question, ἐνίσταται, must be considered in conjunction with the verb that begins the sentence, ἐλκομένης. Ἐλκομένης is the present middle participle of ἔλκω, “to drag, draw.” Preserving the inherent connection between the participle and the main verb, a somewhat wooden English translation would be “The siege dragging on, there came around” the Sabbatical year. The construction of Josephus's sentence cannot bear the temporal disassociation of the two verbs, and it is Zuckermann, not Josephus, who is guilty of “carelessness in style” and “making use of an illogical construction.” Josephus plainly intended to communicate that the onset of the Sabbatical year came as the siege “dragged on” (Marcus: “was being protracted”).

The parallel passage in *War* (1.60/1.2.4) also contradicts Zuckermann's interpretation. Here again the main verb, an aorist, is closely tied to the first verb in the sentence, a participle: “The siege dragging on (τριβομένης), the year of repose came round (ἐπέστη).” Thackeray's translation in the Loeb series: “The siege consequently dragged on until the year of repose came round which is kept septennially by the Jews as a period of inaction, like the seventh day of the week.” Both *War* and *Antiquities* state that some time had

---

<sup>30</sup> Zuckermann, *Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee*, 47, note.

passed (the siege “was being protracted,” “dragged on”) before the Sabbatical year began.

Josephus and 1 Maccabees testify about an earlier Sabbatical year at the time that Beth Zur and Jerusalem were besieged by Antiochus Eupator. This is dated to 150 SE (=162n) in 1 Maccabees 6:20. That the sieges took place in the summer is shown by the mention of the juices of grapes and mulberry trees that were used to provoke Eupator’s elephants to fight. The besieged in Beth Zur surrendered “because they had no victuals there to endure the siege, it being a year of rest to the land.”<sup>31</sup> The Sabbatical year would have begun in the preceding fall; 163t was therefore a Sabbatical year according to 1 Maccabees 6:20, 49. 163t is 28 years, or exactly four sabbatical cycles, before the Sabbatical year 135t, during which Hyrcanus besieged Ptolemy. Both dates indicate that Zuckermann’s calendar is too early by one year. Even if there were no other evidence that Josephus gave the wrong consular date for Herod’s siege of Jerusalem and its Sabbatical year, the references to Sabbatical years in the Maccabean period, in both 1 Maccabees and Josephus, indicate that such was the case.

For these and other reasons, Ben Zion Wacholder maintained that Zuckermann’s calendar is one year too early; Herod’s siege of Jerusalem must be dated to 36 BC (Sabbatical year 37t) to be in harmony with, not only 1 Maccabees, but also references to Sabbatical years in legal records dated after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.<sup>32</sup> The purpose here is not to repeat Wacholder’s arguments, some of which are not well reasoned, such as his assumption that the year in which Alexander the Great granted the Jews relief from taxes for a Sabbatical year must have itself been a Sabbatical year. Nevertheless, two incidents that Wacholder treats (the first well, the second poorly) will be expanded on in what follows: the episode of Caligula’s statue and the Sabbatical year associated with the burning of the Second Temple.

#### THE CONFLICT OF ZUCKERMANN’S CALENDAR WITH THE DATE OF PROTESTS AGAINST CALIGULA’S STATUE

Toward the end of his life, Gaius Caesar (Caligula) ordered that a statue portraying him as the god Jupiter be set up in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple. The ensuing conflict with leaders of

---

<sup>31</sup> 1 Macc 6:49 and 6:53.

<sup>32</sup> Ben Zion Wacholder, “The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles during the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973): 153–96.

the Jewish nation is described at some length by Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.257–309/18.8.1–9 and *War* 2.184–203/2.10.1–5. It is described in even greater detail in a work by Philo of Alexandria, the *Legatio ad Gaium*. Philo was leader of the Jewish delegation from Alexandria that went to Rome to protest their treatment at the hands of their pagan neighbors. Philo's embassy learned of the statue project when they met with the emperor in the fall of AD 40. Both Josephus and Philo agree that the events related to the statue must be dated from that time to the early spring of the next year. Philo's testimony is especially valuable because he was intimately connected with these events and wrote about them before his death some nine years later.

Petronius was the general sent by Caligula to commission the statue and place it in the temple. When he came to Phoenicia and Judea, he was met by tens of thousands of Jews who said they were willing to die rather than see their temple desecrated in this manner. As a demonstration of their earnestness, they said they had left off the tilling of their ground in order to present their protest to Petronius, even though it was time for the sowing of seed, which was fall. After some consideration, Petronius said he would send a letter to the emperor advising against placing the statue in the temple, and that the Jews should return to sowing their seed so that there would be a crop to harvest in the spring. Caligula was furious when he received Petronius's letter, and he responded by saying essentially that Petronius should die, but that first he should see to hastening the placement of his statue in the holy of holies of the temple. But this letter from Caligula was delayed in transit, arriving after another letter that related that Caligula had been murdered on January 24, AD 41, and so Petronius was spared.

The problem for those who follow the Schürer consensus for the chronology of Herod is that these events happened from the fall of AD 40 to the early spring of AD 41, all of which time should have been during a Sabbatical year (AD 40t) if a Sabbatical year was ongoing in the summer of 37 BC, which is Zuckermann and Schürer's date for Herod's siege of Jerusalem. It is hard to conceive that these devout Jews who were willing to die rather than see their temple desecrated would, at the same time, be violating the stipulations of the Sabbatical year by sowing and reaping their crops.<sup>33</sup> The difference between 38t BC and AD 40t is 77 years, or

---

<sup>33</sup> Unlike the First Temple period, when the people generally did not observe the stipulations of the Sabbatical years, Josephus says that in his days and in the days of Herod the Great, "we are forbidden to sow our land in that year" (*Ant.* 15.7/15.1.2).

exactly 11 Sabbatical cycles. There is no problem, however, when we accept Wacholder's calendar of Sabbatical cycles and Filmer's placing Herod's siege in 36 BC, so that the Sabbatical year 11 cycles later began in the fall of AD 41, several months after Caligula's death.<sup>34</sup>

THE CONFLICT OF ZUCKERMANN'S CALENDAR WITH *SEDER 'OLAM*  
CHAPTER 30

A reference to Sabbatical years in the *Seder 'Olam* is widely recognized for its importance in the Zuckermann vs. Wacholder debate. The *Seder 'Olam* is a second-century AD writing that forms the basis of chronological calculations in the Talmud, where its authority in chronological matters is unquestioned. It is also the basis of the present *Anno Mundi* (year of the world) reckoning of the Jewish calendar. Zuckermann<sup>35</sup> appealed to *Seder 'Olam* chapter 30 to support his calendar, as did Schürer.<sup>36</sup> The problem is how the passage should be translated and interpreted. It is as follows in Guggenheimer's translation:

You find it said that the destruction of the first Temple was at the end of Sabbath, at the end of a Sabbatical year, when the priests of the family of Yehoiariv was (*sic*) officiating, on the Ninth of Ab, and the same happened the second time. Both times the Levites were standing on their podium and sang. Which song did they sing? (*Ps.* 94:23) "He repaid them for their evil deeds . . ." <sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> For an extended discussion of the importance of the Caligula statue episode in refuting Zuckermann's sabbatical-year calendar, and the failure of subsequent consensus scholarship to deal adequately with the issue, see Rodger C. Young and Andrew E. Steinmann, "Caligula's Statue for the Jerusalem Temple and Its Relation to the Chronology of Herod the Great," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 63 (2019): 759–73. As explained, Caligula was dead in the spring of AD 41 and he was not in Rome in the spring of 40, since Suetonius (*Gaius Caesar*, 8, 49) noted that Caligula did not get back to Rome from Gaul until August 31, AD 40. (The puzzling reference in Philo, *Embassy* 249, to the Jews not harvesting that year probably referred to Caligula's concern that when spring of AD 41 came there would not be sufficient food for the Roman soldiers if the Jews left off their fall tillage and sowing.) This chronological note in Suetonius ought to have been known to Don Blosser ("The Sabbath Year Cycle in Josephus," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 [1981], 129–39), since it is mentioned in the Vermes and Millar edition of Schürer. This alone invalidates Blosser's effort to blunt the testimony of the Caligula statute episode against the Schürer and Zuckermann chronologies. We apologize for our oversight and not responding to Blosser's argument in our discussion of how consensus scholars have failed to deal adequately with the Caligula statue episode.

<sup>35</sup> Zuckermann, *Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People*, 1.41.

<sup>37</sup> *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology*, tran. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, with commentary (Lanham, NY: Oxford, 1998).



Jerusalem was captured, and its temple burned, in the summer of AD 70, in the month of Ab. According to the translation of Guggenheimer just given, it was “at the end of a Sabbatical year,” consistent with Ab being the tenth month in a Tishri-based calendar such as was used for Sabbatical years. This translation therefore supports Wacholder's calendar that starts a Sabbatical year in the fall of AD 69. Zuckermann's calendar, based as it is on Josephus's consular years, has a Sabbatical year one year earlier.

The importance of this passage in the *Seder 'Olam* is shown by its repetition, in the original rabbinic Hebrew, in the *Tosefta*, Babylonian Talmud (three times), and the Jerusalem Talmud.<sup>38</sup> Filmer, in dealing with this important source for determining Sabbatical years, was puzzled because when he examined the rabbinic sources in English translation, some translations said that the destructions of the two temples were in the latter part of a Sabbatical year, which would agree with Guggenheimer's translation given above, while other translations indicated that it was in the year *after* a Sabbatical year.<sup>39</sup> If Filmer had pursued the issue farther and looked at the original text of the *Tosefta* and the two Talmuds, he would have seen that the problem is entirely one of translation. All these rabbinic sources say the same thing, and all copy the quote directly from the earlier *Seder 'Olam*. What then does the Hebrew say?

The phrase of interest is מוֹצֵאֵי שַׁבָּעִית, rendered as “at the end of a Sabbatical year” in Guggenheimer's translation. מוֹצֵאֵי is the plural participial form of the common verb יָצָא, “to go out.” Jastrow gives “exit” as a one-word translation of the singular form of that participle.<sup>40</sup> Nothing in the etymology or usage of this word suggests the meaning “after,” which is how it is rendered in some English translations of the rabbinic literature, possibly with the intention of making *Seder 'Olam* and the sources that quote *Seder 'Olam* compatible with Zuckermann's widely accepted chronology.

Since all parties recognize the importance of the *Seder 'Olam* passage in determining whether Jerusalem fell to the Romans in a

---

<sup>38</sup> *Tosefta Ta'anit* 3:9; Babylonian Talmud *'Arakin* 11b, 12a, *Ta'anit* 29a; Jerusalem Talmud *Ta'anit* 4:5.

<sup>39</sup> Filmer, “Chronology,” 291.

<sup>40</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York, Berlin: Choneb, 1926). There is an extended discussion of the citations Jastrow gives to illustrate the word מוֹצֵאֵי in Young and Steinmann, “Caligula's Statue,” where it is concluded that the word cannot bear the meaning “after” that would be necessary in order to translate the *Seder 'Olam* passage so that it supports Zuckermann's Sabbatical years.

Sabbatical year (Filmer) or a post-Sabbatical year (Zuckermann, Schürer), it is important to examine the context to determine if that can decide the issue. The result shows unambiguously that Rabbi Yose, principal author of *Seder 'Olam*, can only be understood as putting the destructions of both temples toward the end (Jastrow: “exit”) of a Sabbatical year, that is, while the Sabbatical year was still going on.

This is established by three synchronisms that Rabbi Yose gives in *Seder 'Olam*. The first appears in chapter 25, where it is recounted that Jehoiachin, penultimate Judean king, began his exile “in the middle of a Jubilee cycle, in the fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle.” The Babylonians took Jehoiachin captive on the second of Adar, 597 BC.<sup>41</sup> This was in the Jewish regnal year that began in Tishri of 598, i.e. 598t. If 598t was the fourth year of a Sabbatical cycle, then 595t and 588t would be Sabbatical years; the latter of these is when the Babylonians captured the city for the last time and burned the temple.<sup>42</sup>

The second synchronism is taken from *Seder 'Olam* chapter 24, where it is related that a Jubilee was observed in the 18th year of King Josiah. Modern scholarship has determined that the 18th year of Josiah was 623t. Since the year of Jubilee was identical to the seventh Sabbatical year,<sup>43</sup> this again necessarily implies that 588t, 35 years later, was a Sabbatical year. Finally, apparently based on historical remembrance and not on his sometimes faulty chronological schemes, in chapter 11 Rabbi Yose relates that Ezekiel saw the vision that occupies the last nine chapters of his book at the beginning of the 17th Jubilee year (necessarily implying that the Mosaic legislation for the Sabbatical and Jubilee years went into effect in 1406 BC). Ezekiel 40:1 says that this was 14 years after the fall of the city, again necessitating that the city fell in a Sabbatical year, since the Jubilee was itself a Sabbatical year. The three synchronisms all agree, and they all show that *Seder 'Olam* chapter 30 must be interpreted as saying that both temple destructions, the one in the summer of 587 BC and the other in the sum-

---

<sup>41</sup> D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicle of Chaldean Kings* (London: British Museum, 1956), 33.

<sup>42</sup> For the demonstration that Jerusalem fell in 587 BC, not 586, as advocated by some authors, see Rodger C. Young, “When Did Jerusalem Fall?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (2004): 21–38.

<sup>43</sup> One of the best sources establishing that the Jubilee year was identical to the seventh Sabbatical year, and that the Mosaic legislation never intended there to be two fallow years in succession, is in Jean-François Lefebvre, *Le Jubilé Biblique: Lv 25—Exégèse et Théologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 159–61.

mer of AD 70, took place in a Sabbatical year. It is Wacholder's calendar, not Zuckermann's, that agrees with the *Seder 'Olam*. Rabbi Yose's mentor, Rabbi Akiba, was a young man of about 20 when the Second Temple was burned, and so it is highly unlikely that Rabbi Yose was mistaken on the matter of the Sabbatical year in which the Second Temple was destroyed.

#### THE CONFLICT OF ZUCKERMANN'S CALENDAR WITH THE SABBATICAL YEAR EARTHQUAKE

In the mid-eighth century AD a great earthquake caused tens of thousands of fatalities and much devastation in the Near East. Effects were felt from Egypt to Persia, with the worst destruction apparently centering along the Jordan valley.<sup>44</sup> A document found in the Ben Ezra Synagogue's geniza in Cairo stated that a great earthquake, which it called the "Sabbatical year earthquake," occurred on the 23rd of Shevat, in the year 679 after the destruction of the Second Temple. This would be the year starting in Tishri of AD 748; the date according to the Julian calendar would be January 18, AD 749. Two Syrian writers give the year as 1059 of the Seleucid Era. According to the Babylonian reckoning of Seleucid dates that was used in the eastern parts of the Seleucid Empire, 1059 SE began on Nisan 1, AD 748. Since January of 749 was in that Nisan-based year, this date is in agreement with the date found in the Cairo Geniza. Muslim sources are conflicting; most date the quake to A.H. (Anno Hegira) 130, which ended on August 30, AD 748, but a minority give A.H. 131, which would include January of 749.<sup>45</sup>

Tsafrir and Foerster recount an interplay of archaeological and numismatic evidence that supports the 749 date. Excavations were done in the area of a shop in Beth Shean that was destroyed in the earthquake. Coins were found in the shop dated to A.H. 131, confirming the minority Muslim records that date the disaster to the year that agrees with Syrian and Jewish sources. The Sabbatical year would therefore have been AD 748t. This is 97 Sabbatical cycles (679 years) after the Sabbatical year of the burning of the Second Temple in AD 69t and 112 cycles (784 years) after Herod's siege of Jerusalem in 37t BC. The evidence from Beth Shean, published nineteen years after Wacholder's initial article, therefore corroborates his calendar of Sabbatical years and, once again, demon-

<sup>44</sup> Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster, "The Dating of the 'Earthquake of the Sabbatical Year' of 749 C.E. in Palestine," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55, no. 2 (1992): 231–35.

<sup>45</sup> There were lesser quakes preceding the great earthquake, which may explain the earlier A.H. dates.

strates that Herod's siege of Jerusalem took place in 36 BC, not the 37 BC of the consensus chronology for Herod.

### CONCLUSION

For over a century many popular and technical discussions of early New Testament history have simply accepted Emil Schürer's date for the death of Herod the Great (early 4 BC). As a result, the usual date found in reference works for the birth of Jesus is 6 or 5 BC. Schürer's conclusions are based on the lines of evidence discussed above. As has been demonstrated, what appear to be several *independent* lines of evidence (numbers 2–5 in the list given earlier appealing points of consular dates in Josephus) that undergird Schürer's argument depend on the same assumption: that Josephus's use of Roman consular years is accurate. Since this assumption is demonstrably false, all of them are disproven. Moreover, the remaining arguments adduced by Schürer are also demonstrably false: One cannot assume that Josephus's references to the Roman calendar are determinative for Josephus's chronology, since Josephus or his sources used the Jewish calendar extensively. Instead, one must be cognizant of both Roman and Jewish calendars when making chronological arguments based on the data he provides. Moreover, it can be demonstrated when Josephus discussed the Roman period in Palestine he normally did not employ inclusive numbering for elapsed time spans (contrary to Schürer's assumption). The incoherency of Schürer's use of inclusive numbering in interpreting Josephus is discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> Thus, although they are frequently encountered throughout contemporary literature, the commonly accepted dates for Jesus's birth and Herod's death are based on palpably false assumptions and reasoning.

The investigation into these matters may appear to be technical and of little consequence, easily dismissed or ignored as fastidious inquiries into the historical details of the late first century BC. However, they have consequences for understanding the historical accuracy of the New Testament, especially the Gospels. If Jesus was born in the summer of 5 BC or earlier, it leads to the conclusion that he must have been at least 33 years old, perhaps 34 years old, in the summer of the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (AD 29) when he was baptized as reported at Luke 3:1. Yet Luke asserts that Jesus was "about thirty years old" at that time

---

<sup>46</sup> Steinmann and Young, "Elapsed Times for Herod."

(3:23). It is impossible to discount Luke's assertion without resorting to special pleading.<sup>47</sup> In turn, this effects debate about the year of the crucifixion: Was it AD 30 or AD 33? Clearly, if Jesus was born before Herod's death (as implied by Matthew 2:1–15), and Herod died in 1 BC, not 4 BC as held by the consensus view based on Schürer, then the date of Jesus's crucifixion could not be AD 30, since that would allow less than one year for his ministry—an impossibility if the Gospels' accounts of his activities are reliable.

While tracing the details of history and historiography in Josephus and other ancient sources for the first century before Christ requires great effort and attention to detail, it is not without its reward: It allows us to place the life of Christ in its proper historical setting and also confirms the absolute trustworthiness of the Gospels' chronological statements.

---

<sup>47</sup> One common attempt to do this follows a suggestion first made by Theodor Mommsen in 1887 that Tiberius's reign should be reckoned as the beginning of his rule of the provinces with Augustus sometime between AD 11 and AD 13. This would place Jesus's baptism some three years earlier, in AD 26. (See the discussion in Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], 330–37; Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan], 31–37; Messner, “‘In the Fifteenth Year’ Reconsidered: A Study of Luke 3:1,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 1 [1998]: 202–205 including note 3.) However, as far as is known, ancient sources always counted Tiberius's reign as commencing after the death of Augustus. Martin notes that surviving coins and inscriptions also reckon Tiberius's reign from either January 1 or August 19, AD 14 (Ernest L. Martin, “The Nativity and Herod's Death,” in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos: Nativity and Chronological Studies Presented to Jack Finegan*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989], 89).