

You've probably seen the popular inspirational quote that goes something like this, "Jesus didn't start his ministry until he was 30 years old, and yet he changed the world."

I guess this is supposed to encourage people in their teens and twenties that haven't accomplished much in their life. *(As if comparing their potential future to the accomplishments of the supposed "son of God" is supposed to make them feel better! Ha!)*

It also illustrates a common assumption (or perhaps misconception), that Jesus was 30 years old when he began his ministry.

Is that a fact? If so, where does the Bible say so?

Do we also know how old was Jesus was when he was baptized or when he died?

How Old Was Jesus When He Died?

This is not a slam dunk answer.

In fact, I ask all my students at Chapel Hill this question (many of whom answer incorrectly) [on their first-day quiz](#).

Almost everyone who thinks about the matter thinks that Jesus was 33 years old when he died. **But the New Testament never says so** and I bet most people don't know how that age is calculated. Moreover, I bet even more people don't know that there was an early Christian tradition (attested in the second century) that he was much older than that!

Yesterday I was reading one of the most important proto-orthodox authors of the second century, Irenaeus, whose five-volume work "Against the Heresies" is a sustained attack against various Gnostics (and other Christians that he considers to be "heretics"). In doing so I ran across a passage I had highlighted many years ago, when I first read the text. It involves Jesus' age. And it has a surprising view of the matter.

So let me start at the beginning. Why do people always say that Jesus was 33 when he died, if the New Testament never says so?

It is by combining **two pieces of evidence** that come to us from two different Gospels.

ONE - Jesus' Age at His Baptism and Start of Ministry

According to Luke 3:23, Jesus was "about thirty" years old when he was baptized by John. Now, let me say that, historically, there's no way to know whether Luke had special information about this or if he was just guessing. Mark gives no indication at all of Jesus' age. Either does Matthew or John. How would Luke, writing so many decades after Jesus' life, know? Either he (a) had a reliable source unavailable to the others; (b) had an unreliable source; or (c) came up with it himself. My guess is that it is the latter, but there's no way to know for sure.

In any event, that is the starting point for the calculation.

TWO – The Duration of Jesus’ Ministry

The second datum comes from the Gospel of John, where Jesus attends three separate Passover feasts during his public ministry. Since this is an annual festival, it means that in John his ministry must have lasted somewhat over two years. But it is normally taken to be three years.

As to this second datum, I should point out that in the other Gospels there is only *one* Passover Feast mentioned, the one at the end, during which Jesus is executed. In fact, Mark’s Gospel – where Jesus’ age is never mentioned – seems to take place only over the course of months. It appears to start in the fall, when there is grain to be plucked in the fields (2:23; Or maybe it’s the spring harvest?) And after that, everything happens “right away.” Read Mark carefully. One thing happens after the other. One of Mark’s favorite words is “immediately.” And then we come to the Spring Passover festival, and Jesus is arrested and executed. It seems that the ministry lasted only a few months.

In any event, if you take the “about 30 years old” of Luke and the three Passovers of John, you come up with 33 years at the time of death.

But, as I indicated, there was a contrary tradition embraced rather emphatically by Irenaeus, who claims...

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