

Chapter XXI

The Sabbath Year of 22/21 B.C.E.

Our next item of evidence strikes a fatal blow at sabbath cycle systems “B” and “D,” while remaining highly supportive of system “A.” It is by far one of the most important pieces of information for this entire subject. It has been consistently overlooked because of its ramifications. While on the one hand it completely disassembles the two other possible sabbath cycle systems, it firmly establishes the year 21/22 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, as a sabbath year. This evidence comes from Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15:9:1–15:10:4, and it deals with the thirteenth through seventeenth years of King Herod the Great. Josephus tells us:

Now in this year, which was THE THIRTEENTH OF HEROD'S REIGN, the greatest hardships came upon the country, whether from the deity (Yahweh) being angry or because misfortune occurs in such cycles. For in the first place, there were continual droughts, and as a result the earth WAS UNPRODUCTIVE EVEN OF SUCH FRUITS AS IT USUALLY BROUGHT FORTH OF ITSELF. In the second place, because of the change of diet brought about by the lack of cereals, bodily illnesses and eventually the plague prevailed, and misfortunes continually assailed them. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:1)

In this passage we are plainly told that the crops that had been planted by the Jews in the thirteenth year of Herod were destroyed by drought. Even fruits that normally grew of themselves were unproductive. This year, therefore, was not a sabbath year.

Josephus continues his report by showing that these bad conditions were carried over into the next year:

And since, too, the fruits of that year (year 13) were destroyed and those which had been stored up had been consumed, there was no hope of relief left, for their bad situation gradually became worse than they had expected. And it was not only for that year that they had nothing left, but THE SEED OF THE CROPS THAT SURVIVED WERE ALSO LOST WHEN THE EARTH YIELDED NOTHING THE SECOND YEAR.

So their necessity made them find many new ways of sustaining themselves. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:1)

This statement again confirms that there was a crop failure in “Year 13” of Herod, for not only were the fruits of that year destroyed but also the things stored up were consumed.

This passage adds that there was a crop failure the next year, i.e. “Year 14” of Herod, “when the earth yielded nothing the second year” as well. Therefore, “Year 14” of Herod could not be a sabbath year because the Jews were again planting crops and trying to produce a harvest.

The story continues with the observation that King Herod was in no better shape than the rest of the Jews, “for he was deprived of the revenue which he received from the (products of the) earth, and had used up his money in the lavish reconstruction of cities.”¹ Further, the neighboring peoples could not offer help by selling the Jews grain because they had “suffered no less themselves” and Herod did not have the money to buy the grain anyway.²

Herod, in order to obtain grain, cut up into coinage all the ornaments of gold and silver in his palace and bought grain from Egypt. Herod then distributed the grain to his people:

. . . to those who were able to provide food for themselves BY THEIR OWN LABOR he distributed grain in very exact proportions. Then, since there were many who because of old age or some other attendant infirmity were unable to prepare the grain for themselves, he provided for them by putting bakers to work and furnishing them food already prepared. He also took care that they should GO THROUGH THE WINTER without danger (to health). (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:2)

The first thing we notice is that during this year (the fourteenth of Herod) it was permissible for the Jews who were able to “provide food for themselves,” and to do so “by their own labor.” Since the subject is the distribution of grain, we have here yet another proof that crops were being sown and harvested during this year.

Next, Herod made preparations for enduring the winter. That the crops failed in the first place shows that we have passed by the spring and summer harvest. Our story has now brought us to the throes of winter in the fourteenth year of Herod, which began in the middle of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.).

But Josephus does not stop here. His next words are vitally important for our study of the sabbath year cycle. He writes:

And when these things had been provided for his subjects, he also applied himself to aiding the

¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:1.

² Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:2.

neighboring cities, and gave seeds to the inhabitants of Syria. And this brought him not a little profit, for his generosity was so well timed as to bring a good harvest, SO THAT ENOUGH FOOD WAS PRODUCED FOR THEM ALL. IN SUM, WHEN THE TIME DREW NEAR FOR HARVESTING THE LAND, HE SENT INTO THE COUNTRY NO FEWER THAN 50,000 MEN, WHO HE HIMSELF FED AND CARED FOR, AND IN THIS WAY, WHEN HE HAD HELPED HIS DAMAGED REALM RECOVER BY HIS UNFAILING MUNIFICENCE AND ZEAL, he also did not a little to relieve the neighboring peoples, who were in the same difficulties. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:2)

In this passage Herod has already provided for the winter provisions of his own people before he attempts to come to the assistance of the neighboring lands. Since Herod had already made provisions for the winter, the grain that he was providing to the Syrians had to be for the winter and late planting (i.e. from Dec. through March).

The “good harvest” mentioned by Josephus as following upon Herod’s generosity to the neighboring countries refers to the harvest of both the Jews and their neighbors. Therefore, it is a reference to the next spring harvest of May and June. As a result, we have now come to the harvest of Herod’s fifteenth year!

Since we are now in Herod’s fifteenth year, it is all important for our study to notice that during this harvest period Herod sent “into the country (of Judaea) no fewer than 50,000 men” to help in the harvest, and that this assistance “helped his damaged realm recover.” In short, Herod’s fifteenth year, like his thirteenth and fourteenth, could not be a sabbath year because the Jews were harvesting crops! This fact proves that the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth years of Herod were not sabbath years.

No information is provided by Josephus for Herod’s sixteenth year that would indicate whether or not it was a sabbath. Nevertheless, this fact is in itself noteworthy since there is nothing that stands against this possibility and according to system “A,” Herod’s sixteenth year was a sabbath. Yet Josephus does give us evidence for Herod’s seventeenth year. Josephus writes that “after Herod had completed the seventeenth year of his reign, Caesar came to Syria.”³ Josephus follows this statement with a discussion of Caesar’s visit with Herod, i.e. in Herod’s early eighteenth year.⁴ He then adds:

It was at this time also that Herod remitted to the people of his kingdom a third part of their taxes, under the pretext of letting them recover from a period of LACK OF CROPS, but really for the more important

³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:3

⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:3–4, 15:11:1.

purpose of getting back the goodwill of those who were disaffected. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:4)

Tax collection was normally carried out in the seventh month of the year, Tishri, when the harvest was gathered in and people could afford to pay their taxes. But the crops for that period were planted in the last half of the previous year (i.e. beginning in December). The report given by Josephus demonstrates that crops had been planted but that once again there had been a bad harvest. This data shows that the Jews were sowing crops in the seventeenth year of Herod, proving that “Year 17” was not a sabbath year.

Dating the Thirteenth through Seventeenth Years of Herod

As we have already demonstrated in our earlier chapters, Herod began his reign at Jerusalem in the year 37/36 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. This represents his first year as ruler from Jerusalem and the year from which events in his reign were numbered.

- Herod’s seventh year was the same year that the battle of Actium was fought (Sept. 2, 31 B.C.E.).⁵ Therefore, Herod’s seventh year was 31/30 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. This date is in perfect agreement with “Year 1” of Herod being 37/36 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning.

- The end of Herod’s seventeenth year and the beginning of his eighteenth occurred when Augustus Caesar came to Syria.⁶ According to Dio, Caesar arrived in Syria during the spring of the consul year of Marcus Apuleius and Publius Silius (i.e. 20 B.C.E.).⁷ As a result, Herod’s seventeenth year equals 21/20 B.C.E., and his eighteenth year represents 20/19 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. These dates are also perfectly in tune with Herod’s first year as 37/36 B.C.E. and his seventh year as 31/30 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning.

Based upon these firmly established dates for Herod’s first, seventh, seventeenth, and eighteenth years, Herod’s thirteenth through seventeenth years are easily dated as follows (all use a Nisan reckoning):

Year 13 = 25/24 B.C.E., crops planted.

Year 14 = 24/23 B.C.E., crops planted.

Year 15 = 23/22 B.C.E., crops planted.

Year 16 = 22/21 B.C.E., no information.

Year 17 = 21/20 B.C.E., crops planted.

⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:5:1–2, *Wars*, 1:19:1–3; cf. Dio, 50:10–51:1.

⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:3.

⁷ Dio, 54:7.

Comparing Sabbath Cycle Systems

Our effort now is to compare these above dates with the four possible sabbath cycle systems:

System “B” requires that there is a sabbath year from Tishri (Sept./Oct.) of 24 until Tishri of 23 B.C.E. This date falls within Herod’s fourteenth and fifteenth years, when crops were being sown and harvested, and therefore must be eliminated from consideration. It simply will not work.

System “D” requires that there is a sabbath year from Nisan (March/April) of 23 until Nisan of 22 B.C.E. Since this represents the fifteenth year of Herod, it too must be eliminated.

System “C” requires a sabbath year extending from Tishri, 23 until Tishri, 22 B.C.E. This system may escape the fact that the last mentioned harvest of the fifteenth year of Herod (23/22 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning) is said to be the first harvest after winter (i.e. the spring harvest of May and June), but it fails the test when we compare the fifteenth year of Herod with his second year.

As demonstrated in Chapter XIX, Herod conquered Jerusalem on the tenth of Tebeth, the tenth month of the Hebrew year. System “C” would have the sabbath of that period extend from Tishri of 37 until Tishri of 36 B.C.E. But this arrangement is impossible since after Herod conquered Jerusalem the sabbath year was still “approaching,” and therefore was arriving in the spring and not in the fall.

For system “C” to work, Herod would have had to conquer Jerusalem before the first of the Hebrew seventh month, Tishri, in 37 B.C.E. Contrary to this, the siege is described as one of great length, the result of which had made the Roman soldiers “furious.”⁸ Not only had the siege taken six months from the time that the Romans had joined Herod,⁹ but the siege works were not built until the summertime.¹⁰ Therefore, the earliest that one can date the conquest of Jerusalem—even if we assume that the conquest did not happen after six months but five months and one day—would be on the first day of the Hebrew eighth month, the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.). Since system “C” does not work for the beginning of the second year of Herod, it certainly will not work for the beginning of his sixteenth year either.

System “A,” on the other hand, meets every requirement. Not only does it ideally fit the description of a Nisan beginning for the year, fully demonstrated by such things as the oncoming sabbath year after Herod conquered Jerusalem, but its cycle makes the year 22/21 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, the sixteenth year of Herod, a sabbath year. Therefore, it is not eliminated as a possibility by the events of Herod’s thirteenth through seventeenth years; yet it agrees with the cycle established by the records from the fifteenth year of Hezekiah (Chart B). System “A” remains the only viable option.

Other Relevant Details

Most historians accept the fact that Herod conquered Jerusalem within the year 37/36 B.C.E. But some then argue that events mentioned by Josephus,

⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:6:2, *Wars*, 1:18:2.

⁹ Jos., *Wars*, 1:18:2, 5:9:4.

¹⁰ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:16:2.

which they date to the year 43/42 B.C.E., preclude that year from being a sabbath, which in turn would eliminate the years 36/35 and 22/21 B.C.E. from being sabbaths as well. Supposedly, it was during this year that Herod was placed in charge of an army by Cassius and Murcus, that Antipater collected his own army, and because of the death of Antipater a civil war almost began (all unlikely possibilities during a sabbath year).

In response, the dating of these events to 43/42 B.C.E. is wholly without substance. To begin with, these events occurred in the year that Antipater, the father of Herod, was murdered. Josephus places the story of the death of Herod's father in the year that Cassius was preparing to fight Mark Antony, i.e. the first half of 42/41 B.C.E.¹¹

The ἑορτῆς (*heortēs*, i.e. feast) held "not long afterwards"¹² is hypothesized by some to be the Festival of Tabernacles which occurred in October of 43 B.C.E. This conclusion is based solely on the merits that in some of the Rabbinic Hebrew literature the term *he-hag* (the feast) was used to indicate the Feast of Tabernacles, the festival par excellence.¹³

This conclusion is discredited by the fact that Josephus often refers to the "Feast of Tabernacles" by name.¹⁴ In the *Ancient Table of Contents* attached to Josephus' book of *Jewish Antiquities*, we find ἑορτῆ (feast) used by itself as a reference to the Feast of Passover.¹⁵ Further, the Greek term ἑορτῆς (feast) is also used for the Feast of Passover in the New Testament,¹⁶ which is contemporaneous with the time of Josephus. In John, 7:2, the Feast of Tabernacles is called "the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles" and not simply "the feast." Josephus, as another example, tells us of "the celebration of Pentecost, as it is called, which is a ἑορτῆ (feast)" and "at the ἑορτῆν (feast), which is called Pentecost."¹⁷ The expression, "the feast," therefore, is an inexact one and can apply to any of the three major festivals practiced by the Jews in the period of Josephus: Passover, Pentecost, or Tabernacles.¹⁸

The "feast" referred to by Josephus in *Antiquities*, 14:11:5, is the Feast of Pentecost, for it is associated with the event of Cassius coming to Judaea and then marching against Antony.¹⁹ Josephus thereby places it sometime after the first month of the Jewish year, when the Passover occurred, yet before the seventh month, at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, which was also the time when Cassius was defeated by Antony and Augustus Caesar.²⁰

¹¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:4.

¹² Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:5, *Wars*, 1:11:6.

¹³ E.g. Marcus, *Jos.* vii, pp. 413, n. d, 601, n. c.

¹⁴ E.g. Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:2:3, 13:8:2, 13:13:5, 15:3:2, 15:3:3.

¹⁵ Jos., *Table*, 17:15.

¹⁶ E.g. Luke, 2:42 (cf. 2:41); Matt., 26:5 (cf. 26:2); Mark, 14:2 (cf. 14:1); Luke, 23:17 (cf. 22:1); John, 4:45, referring to John, 2:13–3:36; John, 5:1, where the Passover is defined as "the feast of the Jews."

¹⁷ Jos. *Antiq.*, 14:13:4, *Wars*, 6:5:3.

¹⁸ Josephus mentions all three feasts as occurring in Judaea during this period: The Feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread (e.g. Jos., *Antiq.*, 17:9:3, 18:2:2, 18:4:3, 20:5:3, *Wars*, 2:1:3, 2:12:1, 7, 2:14:3), Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (e.g. Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:8:4, 14:13:4, 17:10:2, *Wars*, 2:3:1, 6:5:3), and the Feast of Tabernacles (e.g. Jos., *Antiq.*, 13:2:3, 13:8:2, 13:13:5, 15:3:3, *Wars*, 1:3:2, 2:19:1, 6:5:3).

¹⁹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:1–7.

²⁰ See below n. 25.

According to Dio, Cassius secured possession of Syria and then set out for Judaea, where he came into alliance with the Jews, in the consul year of 42 B.C.E. (Jan. reckoning).²¹ The most likely time for Cassius to leave winter quarters and come to Judaea would be at the beginning of spring, i.e. around Abib of 42/41 B.C.E.

The appointment of Herod as governor of Coele-Syria, placing Herod in charge of an army, and the promise to make Herod the king of Judaea after the war—a war which Cassius had just begun with Antony and Caesar—therefore, occurred after the first part of the Jewish year of 42/41 B.C.E. (the promise being made while Cassius and Murcus were still in Judaea).²² We should also comment that Herod was made ruler of Coele-Syria not Judaea. The army he commanded was most probably Syrian and not Jewish. Therefore, the whole issue of his being appointed over an army is probably moot to begin with, since the Syrians did not observe the sabbath year.

It was after Cassius had left Judaea that Malichus plotted against Antipater, the father of Herod.²³ Therefore, the statement that Antipater “moved across the Jordan and collected an army of Arabs as well as natives” shortly after Cassius left Judaea does not conflict with a sabbath year in 43/42 B.C.E.,²⁴ for it was done after the first of the Jewish year of 42/41 B.C.E. and shortly before Pentecost (early June).

Antipater’s death, Herod’s resolve to avoid a civil war, the Pentecost festival that followed “not long afterwards,” the murder of Malichus, Cassius leaving Syria to fight Antony in Macedonia, the disturbances which subsequently arose in Judaea, and Herod’s war with Antigonus all follow in order. “Meanwhile,” Cassius marched against Antony and Caesar and met his defeat in Macedonia during October of 42 B.C.E.²⁵

What of the ninth year of Herod (29/28 B.C.E.), which according to system “A” is a sabbath year, or later dates in Herod’s reign? Josephus tells us that Herod was secure in his kingdom after his seventh year. Only building projects and other political, non-military subjects are mentioned after that point.²⁶ Except for the discussion of crops during Herod’s thirteenth through fifteenth and seventeenth years, there is nothing useful for us one way or the other with regard to the issue of a sabbath year.

Conclusion.

There is no evidence whatsoever for the years both before and after Herod’s conquest of Jerusalem that disqualifies the system “A” sabbath cycle. On the other hand, several valuable points of evidence demonstrate that the Jews did not celebrate a sabbath year during Herod’s thirteenth through fifteenth and his seventeenth years. These facts assure us that the years 36/35 and 22/21 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, were sabbath years.

²¹ Dio, 47:28; cf. 47:16.

²² Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:4, *Wars*, 1:11:4.

²³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:5–14:12:2, *Wars*, 1:11:4–1:12:4; Dio, 47:32–48:2; Marcus, *Jos.*, vii, p. 609, n. g.

²⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:5:1–15:11:1, *Wars*, 1:19:1–1:23:1.

