

Chapter XXIV

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

Our next item of evidence strikes the fatal blows to the 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 22/21 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 13th through 17th years of King Herod the Great. Josephus tells us:

Now in this year, which was THE 13TH 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 LAND 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 13th 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 2ND 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 then adds that there was a crop failure the next year, i.e., “Year 14” of Herod, “when the earth yielded nothing the 2nd 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 Furthermore, the neighboring peoples could not offer help by selling grain to the Jews 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, was forced to cut up into coinage all the ornaments of gold and silver in his palace. He then bought grain from Egypt. Herod now 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 their health). (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:2)

The first thing we notice is that during this year (the 14th 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 both the spring and summer harvests. Our story has now brought us to the throes of winter in the 14th year of Herod, which began in the middle of the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.). Yet 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 neighboring cities, and gave seeds to the inhabitants of Syria. And this brought him not a little profit, for

¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:1.

² Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:9:2.

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 15th year!

Since we are now in Herod’s 15th 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 15th year, like his 13th and 14th, could not be a Sabbath year because the Jews were harvesting crops! This fact proves that the 13th, 14th, and 15th years of Herod were not Sabbath years.

No information is provided by Josephus for Herod’s 16th 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 16th year was a Sabbath. Yet Josephus does give us evidence for Herod’s 17th year. Josephus writes that “after Herod had completed the 17th 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 18th 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 purpose of getting back the goodwill of those who were disaffected. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:4)

³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:3.

⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 15:10:3f, 15:11:1.

Tax collection was normally carried out in the 7th month of the year, Tishri, when the harvest was gathered in and people could afford to pay their taxes. Yet 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 17th year of Herod, proving that “Year 17” was not a Sabbath year.

Dating the 13th through 17th 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 1st year as ruler from Jerusalem and the year from which events in his reign were numbered.

- Herod’s 7th year was the same year that the battle of Actium was fought (Sept. 2, 31 B.C.E.).⁵ Therefore, Herod’s 7th 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 17th year and the beginning of his 18th 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 17th year equals 21/20 B.C.E., and his 18th year represents 20/19 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning. These dates are also perfectly in tune with Herod’s 1st year as 37/36 B.C.E. and his 7th year as 31/30 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning.

Based upon these firmly established dates for Herod’s 1st, 7th, 17th, and 18th years, Herod’s 13th through 17th years are easily dated as follows (all using 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.*, 15:5:1f, *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 14th and 15th years, when crops were being sown and harvested. Therefore, System "B" 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 15th 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 15th 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 15th year of Herod with his 2nd year.

As demonstrated in Chapter XIX, Herod conquered Jerusalem on the 10th of Tebeth, the 10th 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. Nevertheless, 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 autumn.

For System "C" to work, Herod would have had to conquer Jerusalem before the 1st day of the Hebrew 7th 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 6 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 6 months but 5 months and 1 day—would be on the 1st day of the Hebrew 8th month, the month of Marheshuan (Oct./Nov.). Since System "C" does not work for the beginning of the 2nd year of Herod, it certainly will not work for the beginning of his 16th 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 16th year of Herod, a Sabbath year. Therefore, it is not eliminated as a possibility by the events of Herod's 13th through 17th years; yet it does agree with the cycle established by the records from the 15th year of Hezekiah (Chart C). System "A" remains the only viable option.

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.

Other Relevant Details

Most historians accept the fact that Herod conquered Jerusalem within the year 37/36 B.C.E. Yet some then argue that events mentioned by Josephus, 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., festival) 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 חג (ha-khag; the festival) was used to indicate the Festival of Tabernacles, the festival par excellence.¹³

This conclusion is discredited by the fact that Josephus often refers to the "Festival of Tabernacles" by name and not as "the festival."¹⁴ In the *Ancient Table of Contents* attached to Josephus' book of *Jewish Antiquities*, we find ἑορτῆ (festival) used by itself as a reference to the Festival of Passover.¹⁵ Further, the Greek term ἑορτῆς (festival) is also used for the Festival of Passover in the New Testament,¹⁶ which is contemporaneous with the time of Josephus. In John, 7:2, the Festival of Tabernacles is called "the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles" and not simply "the festival." Josephus, as another example, tells us of "the celebration of Pentecost, as it is called, which is a ἑορτῆ (*heorte*; festival)" and "at the ἑορτήν (*heorten*; festival), which is called Pentecost."¹⁷ The expression, "the festival," 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 "festival" referred to by Josephus in *Antiquities*, 14:11:5, is the Festival of Pentecost, for it is associated with the event of Cassius coming to Judaea

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), 23:17 (cf. 22:1); Matt., 26:5 (cf. 26:2); Mark, 14:2 (cf. 14:1); John, 4:45 (referring to John, 2:13–3:36), and 5:1, where the Passover is defined as "the festival of the Jews."

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

¹⁸ Josephus mentions all three festivals as occurring in Judaea during this period: the Festival 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), the Festival 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 Festival 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).

and then marching against Antony.¹⁹ Josephus thereby places it sometime after the 1st month of the Jewish year, when the Passover occurred, yet before the 7th month, at the time of the Festival of Tabernacles, which was also the time when Cassius was defeated by Antony and Augustus Caesar.²⁰

According to Dio, Cassius secured possession of Syria and then set out for Judaea, where he came into alliance with the Jews, during 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 (March/April) 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 1st day 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 Festival of Pentecost 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 9th 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 7th 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 13th through 15th and 17th years, there is nothing useful for us one way or the other with regard to the issue of a Sabbath year.

¹⁹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 14:11:1–7.

²⁰ See below n. 25.

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.

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 13th through 15th and his 17th years. These facts assure us that the years 36/35 and 22/21 B.C.E., Nisan reckoning, were Sabbath years.