

Section IV

The Post-Herod Period

Chapter XXII
***The Sabbath Year of
42/43 C.E.***

Our next item of evidence only indirectly points to the year 42/43 C.E., Nisan reckoning, as a sabbath year. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, this information demonstrates that systems “B” and “D” are wholly inadequate as an explanation for the sabbath cycle. Our documentation has to do with the events surrounding the Jewish protest against the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula Caesar, when Caligula tried to place a statue of himself inside the Temple at Jerusalem. It proves that both harvesting and planting took place in the year 40/41 C.E., thereby confirming that the years 40/41 and 41/42 C.E. were not sabbath years.

The Harvest of 40 C.E.

As the result of civil strife in Alexandria between the Jewish and Greek inhabitants, delegates from each faction were selected to appear before Gaius Caligula Caesar at Rome. In that hearing, one of the Greek representatives, named Apion, harshly accused the Jews of being the only people in the empire who “scorned to honour” Caesar “with statues and to swear by his name.” Believing himself to be a god and indignant at being slighted by the Jews, Caligula “ordered a colossal statue to be set up within the inner sanctuary (of the Temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem) dedicated to himself under the name of Dios (Zeus).”¹

Gaius Caligula next sent orders to Petronius, his legate in Syria, to bring a statue to Judaea under the conduct of half of his army quartered on the Euphrates river. Petronius was also instructed to kill anyone who opposed this action.²

After reading the letter, Petronius “was in great difficulties.” He knew that Gaius would have him executed if the orders were not obeyed; he also recognized that the Jews would not permit the pagan image to be placed in their Temple. On the one hand, he faced a danger by removing such a large number of troops from the eastern front and, on the other, it was dangerous to “draw these myriads (of Jews) into war against him” as well.³

Following this line of reasoning, as Philo tells us, Petronius “was slow to set to work” and “shrank from action.”⁴ He was also left with an excuse for delay by Caligula. Caesar had not sent a statue but had left its construction up to Petronius. Petronius knew that if he obtained a finished statue in Syria the speed by which he would then be forced to execute Caesar’s orders

¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:1–2, *Wars*, 2:10:1; Philo, *Gaius*, 18–30; Tacitus, *Hist.*, 5:9.

² Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:2, *Wars*, 2:10:1; Philo, *Gaius*, 31.

³ Philo, *Gaius*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*

would lead “to a speedy outburst of war.” So the legate cunningly commissioned the construction of a statue at Sidon, Phoenicia.⁵

Petronius then sent for the magnates of the Jews, their priests, and magistrates so that he could explain to them Caesar’s orders and the dire consequences forthcoming if the Jews resisted them.⁶ With these matters underway, Petronius left Antioch, Syria with a large army and marched towards Judaea. He next arrived at the Phoenician port city of Ptolemais, where he intended “to spend the winter” and engage in a war during the “spring.”⁷

“The army having already reached Ptolemais,” and upon hearing of the intentions of Petronius, tens of thousands of Jews, with their wives and children, left Judaea and Galilee and proceeded to the plain of Ptolemais. There they implored Petronius to have regard for their Law and for themselves and not to place the image in the holy Temple.⁸

Petronius, quite taken by such a sight, retired to deliberate the problem with his fellow-councilors. He then promised the Jews that he would not press the craftsmen to finish their work but he would urge them to perfect the statue (which would take a “long time”). Petronius more importantly promised to send a letter to Caesar, giving him all of the circumstances, to see whether he might change his mind. He would then delay things until a response was received.⁹

In time Petronius wrote to Caesar. In his letter one of the major justifications Petronius gave to the emperor for stalling was his concern that the crops in Judaea would not be harvested if there was an outbreak of trouble:

For the σίτου (*sitou*; grain) crop was just ripe and so were the other cereals, and he feared that the Jews in despair for their ancestral rites and in scorn of life might lay waste the arable land or set fire to the cornlands on the hills and the plain. He needed a guard to insure more vigilance in gathering the fruits not only of the cornfields but also those provided by the orchards. (Philo, *Gaius*, 33)

The context of the ripe σίτου (*sitou*; grain), barley or wheat crop,¹⁰ and the expected ingathering of fruits, shows that the winter had passed and we are now in late spring or early summer, between late Iyyar (April/May) and Tammuz (June/July).¹¹

When Caesar received the letter from Petronius he was furious that Petronius had not carried out his orders. “After waiting a short time he gave one of his secretaries instructions about answering Petronius.” In this letter Caligula ordered Petronius to continue on his assignment, “since the harvest

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:2, *Wars*, 2:10:1.

⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:2, *Wars*, 2:10:1–3; Philo, *Gaius*, 31–33.

⁹ Philo, *Gaius*, 33.

¹⁰ The Greek word σίτου (*sitou*) refers to “corn, grain,” and encompasses both barley and wheat (GEL, p. 730). Barley is harvested in the spring while wheat is harvested in late summer.

¹¹ HBC, pp. 33f.

which he alleged as an excuse, whether truly or plausibly, could already have been carried out.”¹²

It took about 30 to 45 days for a letter to travel from Syria or Palestine to Rome, or vice versa.¹³ Caesar’s response shows that by the time he decided to write to Petronius, and with the knowledge of how long it would take for the letter to arrive in Syria, the harvest should have already been accomplished.

Since Petronius must have written his letter to Caesar in or about June, Caesar would have received it in August. Caesar then waited “a short time” before making his response. By the time Petronius received a letter back from Caesar, it would have been the month of Tishri (Sept./Oct.), when the Feast of Ingathering (Feast of Tabernacles) was held.

Planting Time: Winter of 40 C.E.

After receiving his new orders to continue, Petronius left Ptolemais “and advanced into Galilee, where he summoned the people, with all persons of distinction, to Tiberias.”¹⁴ As before, he was met by tens of thousands of Jews. They again “besought him by no means to put them under such constraint nor to pollute the city by setting up a statue.”¹⁵

Petronius, meanwhile, tried to convince the Jews of the recklessness of their request. The Jews told Petronius that before he could put the statue in the Temple he would have to “first sacrifice the entire Jewish nation.” The Jews then presented themselves with their wives and children, “and falling on their faces and baring their throats, they declared that they were ready to be slain.”¹⁶

After hearing this, Petronius “for the time” dismissed them, nothing being decided.¹⁷ “During the ensuing days Petronius held crowded private conferences with the aristocracy, and public meetings with the people.”¹⁸ The Jews were quite willing to die and, even worse in the eyes of Petronius, while the Jews were waiting on him for the last 40 to 50 days for an answer, they “had left their fields to sit protesting.”

They (the Jews) continued to make these supplications for 40 days. Furthermore, they neglected their fields, and that, too, though it was TIME TO SOW THE SEED. For they showed a stubborn determination and readiness to die rather than to see the image erected. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3).

Seeing this situation, Petronius called the Jews to him at Tiberias and told them that he was canceling the project and was returning to Antioch. He

¹² Philo, *Gaius*, 34.

¹³ The 30 to 45 day period is based upon an average unimpeded voyage during the summer months. During the winter months, because of winds out of the N.W. and stormy sea, a fortunate journey took about 50 to 70 days (APA, pp. 136–148; cf. Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5; and cf. our comments below pp. 284f).

¹⁴ Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:3.

¹⁵ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3.

¹⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3, *Wars*, 2:10:3–4.

¹⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3, *Wars*, 2:10:3–4.

¹⁸ Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5.

agreed to write a letter to Caesar telling him of his actions in the hope that Caesar would relent and not have him slain for disobeying his orders.¹⁹

As, however, none of these efforts would induce them (the Jews) to yield, and as he (Petronius) saw the country was in danger of remaining unsown—for IT WAS SEED-TIME and the people had spent 50 days idly waiting upon him—he finally called them together and said: “It is better that I should take the risk. Either, the deity aiding me, I shall prevail with Caesar and have the satisfaction of saving myself as well as you, or, if his indignation is roused, I am ready on behalf of the lives of so many to surrender my own.” With that he dismissed the multitude, who rained blessings on his head, and collecting his troops left Ptolemais and returned to Antioch. (Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5)

This evidence shows that we have arrived at the month of Khisleu (Nov./Dec.), the regular planting time for grains in Judaea.²⁰ Petronius considered that, “since the land was unsown, there would be a harvest of banditry, because the requirement of tribute could not be met.”²¹

This second episode of Petronius writing a letter to Caesar, under the guise of his unwillingness to sacrifice the Judaeian food supply, has often been confused with the first letter.²² Nevertheless, when we compare the records from Josephus and Philo, and lay those stories alongside one another, it is clear that the first letter was sent in the spring, during the early harvest, while the second letter was sent during planting time in the winter. Further, the story in Philo shows that the first letter was received before Agrippa visited Gaius;²³ the second letter was received after Agrippa’s visit.²⁴

From Antioch, Syria, Petronius sent his second letter to Caesar telling him of all the things that had transpired, noting that the Jews would not give up without a war and that Caesar would further be deprived of his revenue. He also suggested that Caesar ought to respect the Law of the Jews and return order to the region.²⁵

Meanwhile, Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great of Judaea, who Caesar had made king of Philip’s old tetrarchy, came to visit Caligula. On hearing of the events that had taken place, Agrippa petitioned Caesar to relent in his efforts and not to place a statue in the Temple at Judaea. Caesar agreed and ordered letters to be drawn up and sent to Petronius for that purpose.²⁶

¹⁹ Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5, *Antiq.*, 18:8:6.

²⁰ HBC, pp. 33f.

²¹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:4.

²² E.g. Blosser, HUCA, 52, pp. 136f; and Wacholder, HUCA, 44, pp. 167ff, HUCA, 54, pp. 128ff; and others. Two letters, one sent at planting season and one at harvest, eliminate the problem, voiced by Balsdon (JRS, 24, p. 20), that it would have taken the unreasonable time of one year from Gaius’ original order until a letter arrived from Petronius and Agrippa’s intervention.

²³ Philo, *Gaius*, 33–35, see esp. Philo’s comments in 35(261).

²⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:7–9.

²⁵ Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5, *Antiq.*, 18:8:5–6.

²⁶ Philo, *Gaius*, 35–47; Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:6:10, 18:8:7–8.

Unfortunately, after composing his orders to Petronius in response to his first letter, Caesar received the second letter from Petronius. Upon reading this second letter Caligula became angry, believing that what Petronius was reporting was a revolt by the Jews. Thereupon, Caligula, instead of sending the proposed orders to quit the statue project, sent another letter threatening Petronius with death for his tardiness in carrying out the original command.²⁷

Shortly after Caesar wrote his response to Petronius' second letter, Caesar Caligula was murdered. Meanwhile, Caligula's letter was delayed in coming to Petronius. Petronius actually received word of Caligula's death before the orders to pursue the war with the Jews over the issue of the statue had arrived. Accordingly, Petronius ignored the letter from Caligula and did nothing against the Jews.²⁸

However, it so happened that the bearers of this message were weather-bound for three months at sea, while others, who brought the news of the death of Gaius (Caligula), had a fortunate passage. So Petronius received the last information 27 days earlier than the letter conveying his own death-warrant. (Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5)

But Petronius did not receive it (the letter) while Gaius (Caligula) was alive since the voyage of those who brought the message was so delayed that before it arrived Petronius had received a letter with news of the death of Gaius. (Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:9)

The Chronology

In this order of events an important chronology unfolds. Prefacing our entire account is the fact that from the time that Petronius received his initial orders to place the statue in the Temple of Yahweh at Jerusalem, he looked for opportunities to stall for time.

- Before his departure to Gaul and the Rhine in September, 39 C.E., Gaius sent orders to Petronius to place a statue of himself at Jerusalem.
- In late 39 C.E. Petronius took his army to Ptolemais to spend the winter.²⁹ Tens of thousands of Jews met Petronius at Ptolemais and protested the venture. Petronius retired for a time to deliberate the problem.
- The deliberations continued until it was time to consider harvesting the spring crops and summer fruits, bringing us to at least the late spring of 40 C.E. At that time Petronius sent a letter to Caesar begging him to reconsider.³⁰
- About a month to six weeks later, Caesar, now back from Gaul, received the first letter from Petronius. He then waited "a short time" before

²⁷ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:8, *Wars*, 2:10:5.

²⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:9, *Wars*, 2:10:5.

²⁹ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:2, *Wars*, 2:10:1.

³⁰ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:2, *Wars*, 2:10:1-3; Philo, *Gaius*, 31-33.

drafting his response. The spring harvest season was now over. These events bring us to approximately mid-August. It took about a month to six weeks for the response from Caesar to travel between Rome and Ptolemais. Therefore, Petronius would have received Caesar's negative response in about October of 40 C.E.³¹

- After receiving Caesar's response, Petronius took part of his army and marched to Tiberias in Galilee. Here they were once more met by tens of thousands of Jews showing that they were willing to die rather than let Caesar put his image in the Temple. After hearing their adamant objections Petronius "for a time" did nothing.³²

- During the period that followed, Petronius began to hold private and public meetings trying to resolve the matter. The Jews then sat in protest for 40 to 50 days awaiting a response from Petronius. As they were sitting, planting season arrived.³³ This detail brings us to the month of Khisleu of 40 C.E., the beginning of the Jewish planting season for grains.

Dating the Planting Season

That the planting season mentioned by Josephus belongs to December of 40 C.E. is verified in yet another important way. We are told that Petronius received notice of Caligula's death 27 days before the second response from Caligula arrived in Syria ordering Petronius to continue the operation against the Jews. Caligula's second letter to Petronius was "bound for three months at sea" due to bad weather conditions.³⁴

Caligula was assassinated "on the ninth day before the Kalends of February (i.e. Jan. 24)" in the year 41 C.E., after reigning three years and ten months.³⁵ According to Josephus, Caligula "died not long after having written to Petronius this letter consigning him to death."³⁶ His statement indicates that the letter at question was composed in early to mid-January of 41 C.E.

Those who brought word of Caligula's death "had a fortunate passage" and as such would have arrived in Antioch about 30 to 45 days after his demise, i.e. roughly between March 1 and 15, 41 B.C.E. Those who were carrying the letter from Caesar Caligula, on the other hand, "were weather-bound for three months at sea." The severe weather is further indication that their travel took place during the winter months. Petronius received this letter "27 days" after obtaining notification of Caesar's death. Therefore, he received it approximately between March 27 and April 10, 41 C.E.

Caligula must have written his letter to Petronius shortly before the three month period at sea began. Therefore, three months prior to March 27 through April 10 brings us back to the time from about December 27, 40 C.E. to January 10, 41 B.C.E. This detail agrees well with the statement that the

³¹ Philo, *Gaius*, 34. Gaius returned to Rome by May 29 of 40 C.E. (JRS, 24, p. 21).

³² Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3, *Wars*, 2:10:3-4.

³³ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:3.

³⁴ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:9, *Wars*, 2:10:5.

³⁵ Suetonius, 4:58-59; Dio, 49:29-30. Cf. Jos., *Wars*, 2:11:1, who counts Caligula's reign differently, making him rule only three years and eight months.

³⁶ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:9.

letter was written shortly before Caligula's death (i.e. Jan. 24, 41 C.E.).³⁷

From this above mailing date we must subtract another 30 to 45 days travel time to allow for the second letter from Petronius to Caligula, written while Petronius was at Antioch, to arrive at Rome. As a result, Petronius must have written his letter to Caesar in late November or early December, 40 C.E.; and it was at this very time that the Jews had refused to begin planting their crops. In the year 40 C.E. the month of Khisleu began on November 24. Therefore, our records are all in complete accord with one another.

Conclusion

The ramifications of this evidence are very important for our study. It is clear from these records that the year 40/41 C.E., Nisan reckoning, was not a sabbath year, for not only did the Jews harvest their crops in the spring and summer of that year, but they planted crops towards the end.

What has completely gone unnoticed is the fact that the only reason one would plant grain crops in December of 40 C.E. is so that these grains would be harvested in the spring of 41 C.E. Under Talmudic law sowing of crops was forbidden in the last months of the year prior to a sabbath year.

That their intent was to harvest is further evidenced by Petronius' fear that the failure to plant these crops would deprive the empire of its revenue and tribute.³⁸ This revenue would come to fruition after the beginning of the next Hebrew year (i.e. after Nisan 1 of 41 C.E.). That fact, in turn, means that the year 41/42 C.E., Nisan reckoning, was NOT a sabbath year.

When we compare these facts and details with the four possible sabbath cycle systems, the following conclusions are reached:

System "B" is disqualified by this evidence since it would demand a sabbath year for Tishri (Sept./Oct.), 40 to Tishri, 41 C.E., during which time the Jews were planting and harvesting crops.

System "C," as we have explained before, cannot work either, since the sabbath year actually began with the month of Nisan (March/April) and system "C" would require a sabbath year from Tishri of 41 to Tishri of 42 C.E.

System "D" is also disqualified, since it would require a sabbath from Nisan, 41 to Nisan, 42 C.E. The Jews of this period avoided planting a winter crop that was to be harvested in the spring of a sabbath year. For the year 40/41 C.E., Nisan reckoning, to be a sabbath year, therefore, there would have been no crops planted after October of 40 C.E. Yet in the above story crops were planted in the winter of 40/41 C.E. There seems little doubt that the rabbinical interpretation which forbade the sowing of crops at least six months prior to the beginning of a sabbath year was in force during the first century C.E. There is also no doubt that this practice was another impetus towards the rabbinical view of the second century C.E. which formally started the sabbath year with the first of Tishri.

System "A," on the other hand, demands a sabbath year from Nisan (Abib) 1, 42 to Nisan 1, 43 C.E. As a result it stands in perfect harmony with the evidence, both from this period and previous sabbath years (See Chart B).

³⁷ Jos., *Wars*, 2:10:5.

³⁸ Jos., *Antiq.*, 18:8:4, 6.

Figure 2

NOTE OF INDEBTEDNESS, "YEAR 2" OF NERO

