

THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JESUS BEGINS

Mark 1: 14-20

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How old was Jesus when his public ministry began? How long did the public ministry of Jesus last? How old was Jesus when it ended?

These are questions that were answered long ago for us in Sunday School. But, recently some of these early lessons and their conclusions have been challenged by Biblical scholarship.

When was Jesus born? We do not know. Herod the Great was still in power when Jesus was born (according to the Gospel of Matthew). Herod dies in 4 BCE. Therefore Jesus must have been born prior to 4 BCE. Since he ordered the slaughter of male children in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger, many scholars have surmised that Jesus was born in 7 or 6 BCE.

When did he die? Again, we do not know. However, the New Testament reports that Pontius Pilate (26-36 CE) was the governor in Judea and Caiaphas (18-36 CE) was the high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. The execution of Jesus took place between 26 and 26 CE. We also know that there was much revolutionary activity and many political executions between 32-34 CE and it is likely that Jesus' execution occurs during these years.

What is the length of Jesus' public ministry? We do not know for sure, but many scholars here in Israel have guessed that Jesus' public ministry lasts six to eight months. What about the three years we have heard about all of our lives? This is probably more mythical than factual. The key to this understanding is the arrest of John the Baptists.

In the lesson for today we find Jesus calling the disciples to begin their ministry together in Galilee. The pivotal point for the beginning is the arrest of John the Baptist (Mark 1:14). For the casual reader, Mark's account here might suggest that this is the first time Jesus has met the disciples. Jesus shows up and asks the fishermen to leave their families and jobs and come with

him. But this is not the case. Again, remember here that the arrest of John the Baptist is the critical event that will lead to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

The Gospel of John (3rd chapter) reports, "After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized. John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison." (Jn. 3: 22-24). This suggests that the events reported between John 1:1 and 3:24 happened before the official beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

It is likely that Jesus left his home in Nazareth a year or two before the arrest of John. This would allow enough time for Jesus to meet Peter, Andrew, James and John who were partners in a fishing business (Luke 5: 7, 10) and to establish a home in Capernaum.¹ John's Gospel certainly suggests this possibility.

John does not report Jesus' baptism or the testing in the Wilderness of Judea.² John picks up his witness in the area adjacent to the present day Golan Heights in "Bethany (Batanaea) beyond the Jordan."³ Apparently John went north through the Jordan Valley following the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus completes his testing in the Wilderness, he goes north in pursuit of John and finds him in Batanaea. Here Jesus meets Andrew and John, perhaps, and they travel together to Capernaum where Jesus establishes his residence.

All of this happens long before the arrest of John. By the time that John is arrested, Jesus and the fishing partners have an established relationship and they (the future disciples) have committed to assisting in his ministry as soon as he calls (Mark 1: 16-20).

What happened between the baptism of Jesus and the arrest of John? We know of two major events during this period. One is the wedding in Cana. A second is Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus in Jerusalem. But, we may also conclude that during this period Jesus was able to find a home with the fishing partners, enlist the partners to become his associates in his future mission, and to formulate plans to accomplish his goals.

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.” (Mark 1: 14-20). Following the arrest of John, Jesus and his associates begin their ministry.

What can we learn from all of this? We learn that even Jesus made plans and recruited dedicated people to work with him in his mission. Many churches and clergy are now making plans for the ministry of the Church in the twenty first century and beyond. Perhaps we can be inspired to follow through with our plans knowing that Jesus did likewise.

NOTES

1. In his new book, Bethsaida: Home of the Apostles, (Collegeville, MN” The Liturgical Press, 1998), P. 22, 24, Fred Strickert suggests that the disciples (Peter, Andrew, James, and John) might have permanently lived in Bethsaida and not Capernaum, as previously believed. He goes on to suggest that the only time the fishermen visited Capernaum was to allow Peter’s wife to visit her family and that Jesus accompanied them when they came for this purpose.
2. In the area around the Wadi Qelt.
3. See John 1: 28