

## A Footnote On The Start Of Christ's Ministry

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Today I am going to borrow a page from the late Charles Whitaker. If you have read his articles, you know that he wielded footnotes with great skill and apparently delight. What you may not know is that Charles had footnotes even for his sermons and sermonettes as well. Sometimes one of his footnotes could be a complete message by itself. That's just how Charles' mind worked and how he organized his very precise thoughts.

Well, this sermonette is basically a footnote to the sermon Richard gave entitled, "Christ's Mission Statement," so please start turning to Luke 4. While that sermon was primarily about what Christ said as He began His ministry, Richard also brought up the question of what day that happened. It is traditionally thought that Christ's ministry began on Pentecost, but there are several reasons why the beginning of Christ's ministry fits better with the Day of Atonement, and Richard covered those things.

Well, a couple of other points have come to light that move the needle even further (as Richard put it) to point to the Day of Atonement as the beginning of Christ's ministry. So, this footnote will present those additional factors.

Here in Luke 4, we will begin in verse 16 to briefly review:

**Luke 4:16-17** So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

As a quick review, the main reason this event is thought to have taken place on Pentecost is that Isaiah 61, which is quoted here, is read on Pentecost as part of the Jews' Triennial Cycle of reading. However, we don't have proof that the same triennial cycle commonly used today was universally used

some 2,000 years ago. A second reason is that the Greek phrase translated “the Sabbath day,” is literally, “the day of Sabbath  $\xi$ ,” which could indicate Pentecost. However, the same phrase is used in other places, and it is far from clear that Pentecost is intended in those passages, so it really is ambiguous.

What’s more, Christ’s words do not come just from Isaiah 61. He also quoted Isaiah 58 and what looks like Isaiah 42. So, He did not just read what had been handed to Him—He created His own message from the scroll of Isaiah. And there is no scheduled reading that includes all three places in Isaiah. And on top of all that, if this took place on Pentecost, it would mean Christ’s ministry was nearly four years long, which throws a major wrench in our understanding of the Seventy Weeks prophecy, as well as end-time events.

On the other hand, Christ’s words are overwhelmingly consistent with the themes of the Jubilee year, which was proclaimed on the Day of Atonement. And a Day of Atonement beginning would give Christ’s ministry a length of 3 ½ years.

Now, please drop down to verse 24:

**Luke 4:24-29** Then He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff.

Back in verse 22, after Jesus read the portions of Isaiah, the people in the synagogue marveled at His words. They caught His Messianic references, but He also stopped short of what they were really waiting for in Isaiah 61,

which was the part about the day of God's vengeance. Plus, He brought in two other verses from Isaiah, which they also would have noted. Yet it also probably seemed incongruous because they knew His family was from this same town of Nazareth, and they knew Jesus didn't have a formal education. He was just the Son of Joseph the carpenter, they thought. So, He certainly had their attention.

But then He offended them. Verses 25-27 contain examples of Gentiles being blessed while Israelites—the chosen people—underwent hardship. The audience didn't like that. When you add in that He said Messianic prophecies were fulfilled that day in their hearing, it is no wonder the people got all excited and tried to throw Him off a cliff.

Now, it is the way that they tried to kill Him that day that is so curious and significant. Nazareth sits above the Jezreel Valley, and there are cliffs nearby. While we don't know exactly where this synagogue was located, we do know that Nazareth was not right on the cliffs. As it says, they thrust Him out of the city, and then led Him. Geographically, Nazareth was at least a mile from the cliffs, and it may have been closer to two. In other words, there was deliberate effort involved in what they tried. They were looking at a 20-, 30-, 40-minute hike to execute Him. On the other hand, they could have picked up stones to kill Him quickly, as people tried to do on other occasions. Stoning seemed to be their preferred method of dealing with things like blasphemy. But here, it wasn't enough just to kill Him. They had a specific method of death in mind for Him that relates to Jewish tradition.

Judaism's oral law was recorded in what is called the Mishnah. The recording took place between 200-100 BC, though the traditions had been in place before that. In the traditional practice for the Day of Atonement, as shown in the Mishnah, the leaders would accompany the man who led the azazel goat into the wilderness. But they didn't stop with that. The goat had to be pushed over a cliff backwards. I don't know why they said it must be backwards. That's just what the Rabbis came up with. Obviously, those aren't part of God's instructions. But this was their practice for the Day of Atonement at the time of Christ.

You might recall that within Jewish folklore, Azazel was the name of a lesser demon to whom all the sins of mankind were ascribed. In God's

instructions, however, the goat designated as the *azazel* was simply a substitute. It had the sins of the nation laid on it, but it was not blamed for sin—it was not the source of sin. But because of Jewish mythology, the *azazel* came to be seen as something that was evil from the beginning rather than a substitutionary sin-bearer. There is a subtle twist from what God's words show. But within Jewish culture at Christ's time, the *azazel* goat was the personification of evil.

So, to put this together, Jesus transgressed in multiple ways in the eyes of the people. He said He was anointed, and said that Messianic prophecies were being fulfilled. He referred to Himself as a prophet. And He recounted examples of prophets blessing Gentiles while the physical children of Abraham suffered. While the Jews certainly were looking for the Messiah, their expectation was that the Messiah would lead them to victory and vengeance over the Gentiles. Jesus didn't fit their concept. What He said filled them with wrath. They saw Him as something altogether iniquitous.

They could have stoned Him, but instead they escorted the One whom they perceived as evil and tried to push Him off a cliff. Their unique and deliberate method of attempted execution that day paralleled the *azazel* goat tradition at the time, which further supports that Sabbath being the Day of Atonement.

Now, there is also a reason why the Sabbath day in Luke 4 probably was not Pentecost. This one was brought forward to Richard by Levi, and it has to do with a requirement for Pentecost that the Day of Atonement does not have. We will see a three-fold witness in Scripture:

**Exodus 23:17** “Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD.”

**Exodus 34:23-24** “Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel. For I will cast out the nations before you and enlarge your borders; neither will any man covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

**Deuteronomy 16:16** “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Tabernacles; and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed.

Within Scripture, appearing before God always indicates going to where God’s presence is—specifically, the Tabernacle or later Temple. “Appearing before God” relates to the phrase, “in the place where He chooses.” Even though God is omnipresent because of His Spirit, He still ordained a specific place for His people to appear before Him.

God commanded that the whole nation to come together these three times, and they became known as pilgrimage feasts because the people would travel from their home areas to “go up” to where God chose. The historian Josephus records that the Jews were doing this at the time of Jesus. They would travel from all over to be at Jerusalem, not just for Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles, which the Bible clearly shows, but also for Pentecost.

Now, you might notice that not all the holy days are specified. For example, the Day of Atonement is missing. Atonement is still a holy convocation, but it is not a pilgrimage festival. God did not specify that the people had to be at His place for Atonement.

In practical application, this meant that people could convene on the Day of Atonement in a local synagogue rather than at Jerusalem. But for Pentecost, the men at least were required to go up to appear before God at the place He had chosen.

As an aside, Paul the apostle did his utmost to abide by this, even after the establishment of the New Covenant. We will see this in Acts 20:

**Acts 20:16** For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost.

So, in the course of evangelizing and doing the work God had given Paul to do, he still did all he could to abide by God’s intent.

Now, if you are catching the meaning of all this, the zealous ones in Nazareth would have been at the place God chose on Pentecost. The synagogue in Nazareth probably would not have been filled with healthy, zealous men who were overflowing with indignation and eager to march a mile or two and push a Man (in the prime of His strength) over a cliff. For that matter, the gospels show Jesus at Jerusalem for Unleavened Bread and Tabernacles. It was His practice to make the pilgrimage He had commanded. Thus, it would be highly unusual for Him to just skip the pilgrimage for Pentecost as well, even if some stragglers in Nazareth had. On the other hand, it was perfectly acceptable for them to be in their own synagogue for the Day of Atonement.

Now, the question of when Luke 4 took place is less important than the message that Jesus brought—His mission statement, as Richard called it. The timing is important in its own way, though, because of how it relates to the 70 Weeks Prophecy of Daniel, which says that “in the middle of the week [of years] He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering.” But it also affects the time of the end. If Christ’s ministry began on Pentecost, it lasted nearly 4 years, which means there would be only 2 years and 50 days (more or less) remaining of that final Sabbatical cycle of years. Yet we know from various prophecies that the last time is referred to as “a time, times, and half a time,” or 42 months, or 1260 days. In other words, there still remains half of a Sabbatical cycle of years—3 ½ years. If Christ’s ministry began on the Day of Atonement, the time elements of prophecy fit together consistently. Christ’s ministry fulfilled the first half of the week, and the last half lies ahead.