



Jesus at Age 30: Further Evidence for Luke's Portrait of a Priestly Jesus?

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Abstract

This study examines Luke's identification of Jesus' age at the beginning of his ministry as "about thirty years of age" in Luke 3:23. Why did Luke include this detail, and why did he round off the age to the number thirty? This study argues that the age of thirty takes on significance when it is read against historical parallels and Israel's destiny to be a kingdom of priests, and against Jewish ideas about priesthood. Jesus' age provides prophetic evidence that he will eclipse and fulfill all of God's demands upon Israel.

Key words: Jesus, Luke, priest, king, age, thirty

Did Luke portray Jesus as a priest or priestly figure? Ancient commentators were quick to answer this in the affirmative. Saint Bede (673–735 CE) concludes that Jesus' physical origin through Mary provided the basis for "the roles of both priest and king" (Just: 19). Other commentators leave the question open. Luke places this fact before Jesus' genealogy to indicate he had "attained the age of public service" (Green: 188). But what kind of service exactly? There are several points of exegetical data to consider when seeking to answer this broader question. For our purposes, we will focus only on the fact that Luke portrays Jesus presenting himself to Israel and beginning his ministry at "about age thirty" (ὥσεὶ ἐτῶν τριάκοντα) (Lk 3:23).

When considering Luke's comment here, some have cautioned that Jesus' age has no significance. Robert H. Stein argues that "Luke may simply not have been able to be more specific about Jesus' age" (142). That conclusion is plausible but it does not take into account Luke's penchant for providing accurate historical details. Furthermore, as our study will indicate, there are too many historical parallels to first-

century Jewish thought to relegate this detail to the inconsequential. By looking at this particular Lukan text (3:23) in light of historical data about Jewish perceptions of age, we see that this age was distinctly related to the qualifications for the priesthood.

Our study proceeds through three parts. The first part briefly examines references to the age of thirty in Hellenistic and Jewish literature around the first century. The

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second part is parenthetical and seeks to describe the current scholarship that supports viewing Luke's portrait of Jesus as having some priestly coloring. The third part presents the core of our argument. This is where we seek to tie some of the data together. Within this section are three lines of argumentation: the argument from scriptural expectations, the argument from silence, and the argument from Jesus' embodiment of Israel and her destiny to be a kingdom of priests.

The Age of Thirty

Broadly speaking, in the Hebrew Scriptures and Septuagint the age thirty reflects the full expression of a man or a fully grown human. Luke Timothy Johnson finds a "note of universality" in the reference to Adam (72). This may be related to the connotation of fullness and abundance in Jewish tradition and scripture (Davis: 115-119; Roth: 89). One writer of proverbs argues that he has provided sufficient knowledge for what is right and true by pointing to the fact that he wrote *thirty* sayings (Prov 22:20). David had *thirty* mighty men of valor (2 Sam 23) and Jair the Gileadite judge had *thirty* sons who rode on *thirty* donkeys, and they had *thirty* cities (Judg 10:3).

With respect to extra-biblical literature, we find that the western Gnostic literature from Nag Hammadi most often espouses the Pleroma or fount of all emanations, as a "system of *thirty* aeons" (Meyer: 793). The pseudepigraphal "Books of Adam and Eve" have Adam bearing "*thirty* sons and *thirty* daughters" (Jonge & Tromp 1997: 18). Josephus might have intentionally written *thirty* volumes (Mason 2008: xi). Josephus seems to use the age of *thirty* in a rhetorical statement about his own restraint in the face of temptations (*Life* 80 in Mason 2001: 66). The Mishnah (m. Pirke Abot 5:21 A) notes that the age of *thirty* is "fullness of strength" (Neusner: 689). Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Roman historian, also states that age thirty is the peak of bodily strength (*Rom. Ant.* 4.31.1) (Dionysius: 59). To be clear, this use of the number thirty differs from the numerological Cabalistic technique of *gematria* because we are not considering that letters or phrases have a secret numeral value (Bohak: 661; Varner: 47–59). Rather, there is good evidence that first-century Jews saw the number thirty as communicating completeness, fullness, abundance, and perhaps perfection.

The fact that Luke uses the adverbial comparative *about*

(ὥσει) thirty years old may indicate that Jesus was not exactly thirty years old—but he was close enough. Howard Marshall finds that the use of ὥσει points to Luke's desire to use a round number (162). This may indicate that Luke himself wants the reader (or auditor) to see something significant about this age. And the fact that this occurs immediately before the genealogy suggests that it should be understood in light of historical matters. What these "historical matters" are is not totally clear, but genealogies are pregnant with latent and layered meaning. That much should be clear based on the presence of figures such as David, Boaz, Judah, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Shem, Noah, Enoch, and Adam. In spite of his miraculous conception, Jesus was still born through Israel (Bock 1994: 348–49). The genealogy context of Luke 3:23 points toward a reading that considers Jesus and his approximate age in light of the history of Israel and indeed, the history of humanity back through Adam. Justo González notes: "Luke offered a genealogy linking Jesus to the history of Israel and of all humankind since the times of Adam" (277). It is clear from the context of Luke and the wider literature that Jesus is a fully grown complete man who is qualified for his task. But how might this age relate to that task?

Jesus the Priest in Luke's Gospel

Before considering Jesus' age, we will survey the evidence for Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a priest. Indeed, various authors have argued that the Gospel of Luke presents Jesus as a priest or fulfilling a priestly role. There are three specific areas that point to Jesus' priestly role in Luke's Gospel:

- the Lukan Christology of cleansing and healing,
- the references to the new covenant blood, and
- the portrayal of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

First, the Lukan Christology of cleansing and healing casts shadows that point to Jesus' priesthood. Gerald O'Collins and Michael K. Jones conclude that Luke's Gospel "contains shadows along with lights" that point to his own high-priesthood (9). In support of this argument is the fact that Jesus makes a judgment call about cases of leprosy (Luke 5:12-16 & 17:14-15 // Lev 13-15) (O'Collins & Jones: 9). O'Collins and Jones highlight Jesus' ministry of healing and liberation of the sick as a priestly task. What is particularly interesting about this argument is that Leviticus 14 requires that the healing of diseased skin or an infection be followed by the priestly act of offering a sacrifice:

Then, if the case of leprous disease is healed in the leprous person, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two live clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet yarn and hyssop. And the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthenware vessel over fresh water. He shall take the live bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, and dip them and the live bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the leprous disease. Then he shall pronounce him clean and shall let the living bird go into the open field [Lev 14:3–7].

In this pericope one thing must be highlighted: *blood sacrifice to the Lord must follow purification*. Leviticus 14:20 goes on to explain that “the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be clean.” When the pattern in Leviticus (impurity, cleaning, sacrifice) is applied to Luke, the effect is anticipatory. Thus, when Jesus heals those with leprosy and sends them away and has the priest pronounce them clean, the only act left is sacrifice; an act which Jesus himself fulfills by pouring out “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). While Jesus’ act of cleansing the leper acknowledges the necessity of the established Levitical priesthood, the act of atonement through blood is specifically identified by Jesus as that which he will do in himself. When Leviticus is read through the lens of Jesus’ claim to offer himself as the atoning blood of the New Covenant, it is clear that Jesus’ acts of healing supersede even the Levitical task of healing and declaring that one is clean before God.

The second piece of evidence for Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as priest is based on his references to the blood of the New Covenant. The strongest evidence for Luke’s perspective of Jesus as priest comes from Luke 22:20 where Jesus equates himself with the atoning lamb by instituting “the new covenant in my blood” (O’Collins & Jones: 16). Of course the symbolism at the Last Supper is multi-faceted. Jesus is both the *sacrifice* and the *priest* who shows the disciples how to offer up new sacrifices in the new covenant community. One might ask: how does one move from being the sacrifice to being the one who offers it? Again, the answer lies in Jesus’ transformation of the Passover into a meal about himself. Even if the passive Greek verb for “to give” as it occurs in the statement “this is my body, which is *given* for you” (Luke 22:19), reflects the action of the Father, Jesus is accepting this fate and mission. In the New Covenant that

Jesus is inaugurating at this meal, he is the priest who offers up himself as the sacrifice. Not surprisingly, N. T. Wright comes to the same conclusion from the wider lens of “biblical theology” when he states, “God sent his own Son to be both *priest* and *sacrifice*” (2004: 10).

At the Last Supper, the new covenant ritual of offering the bread and the fruit of the vine are instituted. This new covenant priesthood has an offering to give. The answer to the question posed above is clear: Jesus is offering himself; his own body and blood are going establish this new covenant (see Jeremiah 31). The perspective is now transformed and focused on offering a community meal for a new exodus that will remember Jesus. Although Jesus refers to himself as “the teacher” (Luke 22:11) before the Last Supper, it is clear that this identification does not preclude the simultaneous attribution of other titles, such as “Son of Man” (Luke 22:22). He is much more than a teacher; he is the sacrifice that will provide the grounds for a whole new way to approach the God of Israel. While some modern commentators have denied that there is even a theology of atonement in Luke, this extreme view in New Testament studies has led some like N. T. Wright to argue that the conclusion that Luke has “no real atonement theology” is absurd (2012: 234).

Third, the end of Luke’s Gospel provides another clue that Luke views Jesus as a priest (Twelftree: 126). The last vignette that Luke wants to leave with the reader is that of the post-resurrection Jesus lifting up his hands and blessing the disciples: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried into heaven” (Luke 24:50–51). Whether or not this blessing reflects Jesus’ status as a priest has been a matter of debate (Baigent: 36). Even some who deny that Luke gives Jesus a priestly function are willing to concede that Luke 24:50–51 at least gives Jesus a “priestly colouring” (Chance: 63). There is an interesting parallel with this scene: “Then Simon came down and raised his hands over the whole congregation of the Israelites, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord with his lips, and to glory in his name” (Sirach 50:20, NRSV). In spite of this parallel and another in 2 Enoch 56:1; 57:2; 64:4, Marshall is adamant that the “idea of Jesus as priest does not seem to play any role” in Luke (909). Marshall suggests that a better parallel to Luke 24:50–51 is the scene where Jesus breathed on the disciples to impart the Holy Spirit as found in John 20:22 (Marshall: 909). But

this also strains credulity because the actions of breathing upon others (John) and lifting arms (Luke) are so different. A direct link with Sirach 50 is unlikely, but it remains an important witness to the pattern of verbal blessings that came from patriarchs such as Abraham (Genesis 49) and Moses (Deuteronomy 33) (Nolland: 1227).

If Luke intends to portray the Jesus as a priest, then what kind of priesthood is he talking about? This is no small difficulty. It is difficult to draw parallels between Luke's Gospel and the book of Hebrews because Luke says nothing about Melchizedek, let alone age requirements for the priesthood of Melchizedek (Bock 2013: 443). The only way to draw direct parallels between Luke's picture of Jesus the priest and the Melchizedek priesthood in Hebrews is to work from a canonical perspective. Leon Morris makes an interesting proposal that connects John the Baptist with priesthood. Morris states, "It may be better to see John as having a unique position, neither Nazirite nor priest, *though with points of connection with both*" (77). Morris is willing to grant that John has a point of connection with an unspecified priesthood. This fits nicely with our contention that John is the forerunner of Jesus, who is the consummate priest-king embodying all of these in one. It is only natural that there are elements of continuity *and* elements of discontinuity. In the end, we must rely on the fact that Luke understood Jesus' priesthood to relate to a "new covenant" (Luke 22:20). We might say that for Luke the writer, Jesus was a consummate "new covenant priest." In sum, there is sufficient evidence to state that the pre-crucifixion and post-resurrection Lukan portrayals of Jesus reflect priestly qualities.

The Argument

At this point we have established two key facts.

- the age of thirty in Luke 3:23 is evocative of the Jewish idea that a man of thirty years was fully grown.
- there are good reasons to see Luke's portrait of Jesus as a priest or priestly figure related to the new covenant.

In this section we will present the argument that draws from these conclusions: *Jesus' age of thirty provides another reason to view him as a priest.* Our argument for this relationship is three-fold.

- there is the argument from scriptural expectations. A Levitical priest, in the Hebrew Scriptures, is thirty years of age.

- there is the argument from silence. Jesus' opponents never attack him as being too young for his claims.
- there is the argument from Israel's destiny as a nation of priests. Jesus' age is related to his task as the one who fulfills all of Yahweh's expectations for Israel.

The Argument from Scriptural Expectations

The literature of first-century Judaism provides a strong foundation for requiring priests to be thirty years old. We begin by observing that there is a very strong antecedent theology from Numbers that requires the sons of Levi to be thirty years old when they begin their service. The strength of this age-requirement theme is evident from the repetition. This age requirement (from age thirty to fifty) is repeated for the Kohathites (Num 4:3), Gershonites (Num 4:23) and the sons of Merari (Num 4:30). It is repeated again for summary statements in four further passages (Num 4:35, 38, 43, 47). This element of strong repetition in Numbers 4 establishes the age of thirty as a clear requirement for Levitical priesthood in Israel. The argument here is analogous because we are not claiming that Luke viewed Jesus as a Levitical priest. Rather, Luke portrays Jesus' priesthood as analogous to the Levitical priesthood. The strong expectation for Levitical priests would have influenced those who would claim a different type of priesthood. This is demonstrated by the argument from historical expectations in the Qumran community.

This age requirement for priests was followed by various sects of Judaism as evidenced in historical sources. For example, in the Qumran Damascus Document (CD, XII) we find a significant parallel that bolsters our thesis that Jesus' age is relevant to his qualifications as a priest:

And the Priest who enrolls the Congregation shall be from *thirty* to sixty years old, learned in the Book of Meditation and in all the judgments of the Law so as to pronounce them correctly. The Guardian of all the camps shall be from *thirty* to fifty years old, one who has mastered all the secrets of men and the languages of all their clans [Vermes: 112].

This short quotation from the "statutes" section of the Damascus Document (c. 100 BCE) from the Qumran caves provides evidence that the preacher or guardian as well as the priest of the community was expected to be at least thirty years old. A parallel appears in The Messianic Rule or The

Rule of the Congregation (IQSa). This Qumran document lays down similar requirements for priestly service:

At the age of *thirty* years he may approach to participate in lawsuits and judgments, and may take his place among the chiefs of the Thousands of Israel, the chiefs of the Hundreds, Fifties, and Tens, the Judges and the officers of their tribes, in all their families, [under the authority] of the sons of [Aar]on the Priests [Vermes: 120].

These references highlight the significance of age and maturity as a requirement for priestly service and for leadership in general. Although the value of these parallel passages is speculative, they demonstrate that a man's age was a significant and well-known matter for both sectarian and Hellenistic Jews.

The Argument from Silence

We may also note the silence of Jesus' enemies with respect to his age. The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees would have been familiar with the covenantal curse in which Israel was judged with young rulers: "And I will make boys their princes and infants shall rule over them" (Isa 3:4). Jesus' age provides evidence that he is qualified to be a blessing and not a curse because he is a fully grown man. Jesus' age does not in itself fully or completely qualify him to be a priest. In fact, it is not even clear that there was a clear list of qualifications at all. But because Jesus waited till the age of thirty to bring his ministry to Israel, he anticipated and eliminated a potential objection to his ministry. It is significant that Luke and the other Gospels are completely silent about any charges against Jesus having to do with his age. Although arguments from silence should be held lightly, we must keep in mind the wide range of charges against Jesus: from gluttony and drunkenness, to associating with sinners, to being possessed by Satan, to speaking against the temple, to insurrection against Caesar, to blasphemy; but never for being a *young* foolish upstart. A possible parallel to our point may be the admonition: "let no one despise your youth" (1 Tim 4:12).

Luke's Gospel provides the key piece of information that allows us to understand why this was never an issue: Jesus' age qualified him for all of his messianic tasks. The baptism of Jesus that takes place prior to the Lukan genealogy provides significant points of contact with the Mediterranean world of

honor and shame. The submission of Jesus to John's baptism has been considered a point of potential embarrassment or difficulty, thus proving that the early church would not have simply invented an eye-witness account such as this (Meier: 13). On the other hand, the fact that Jesus was anointed as the "beloved Son" (Luke 3:21) by the heavenly voice with a dove descending upon him is directly tied to his age. It would have been shameful to anoint Jesus before this point. This act of anointing upon the messiah after the age of thirty can be considered age-appropriate and honorable.

The Argument from Israel's Destiny

Last, we want to consider Jesus' relationship to the nation of Israel and its destiny as a kingdom of priests. If Luke views Jesus as the embodiment of the hopes of Israel, then Jesus must fulfill the role of a priest in some manner. This is because that was Yahweh's purpose for electing Israel from the beginning:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a *kingdom of priests* and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel [Exod 19:5–6].

If Israel was to be a priest-nation to the world, how will this be fulfilled? The answer is given in large part by the priest Simeon at Jesus' purification. Simeon prophesizes that Jesus will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). More evidence is found in Zechariah's hymn. One scholar concludes that in this hymn, "Luke's portrayal of Jesus as the embodiment of God's visitation is explicit" (Jipp: 221). Jesus fulfills this priestly responsibility for the whole nation by revealing YHWH to the nations and by glorifying Israel as the instrument of redemption.

Luke's description of Jesus' age has led others to suggest that typological concerns played a role in the word choice. These conclusions often point to Jesus' age being related to Davidic kingship. I. H. Marshall states: "the age of thirty . . . may suggest that David is here seen as a type of Jesus" (162). Origen of Alexandria also suggested that the age of thirty was related to Jesus' Davidic kingship (Just: 68–69). What is significant about these suggestions is that the historical data about Jewish perceptions of age points to priest-

hood. One solution to this problem is to acknowledge that there were attempts to combine offices so that Jesus would be understood as a priestly king.

The historical justification for joining the anointed offices of prophet, priest, and king together is found in the expectations developed during the Hasmonean dynasty and the claims of John Hyrcanus (Yohanan Girhan). The pro-Hasmonean *Testament of Levi* puts the three offices together through a command to Levi: "Arise, put on the robe of priesthood, and the crown of righteousness . . . and the ephod of prophecy" (8:2–3) (Stronstad: 33). We are not suggesting that Luke was directly influenced by *Testament of Levi*; rather, this text indicates that there was some awareness of the combination of such offices. Any connection between Jesus' age and the kingship motif poses no threat to our conclusions, as others have observed canonical connections and developments between Luke-Acts and Hebrews vis-à-vis the Davidic hope and Psalm 110 (Bock 2013: 443).

We are not arguing that Jesus' age of thirty *completely* fulfills any pattern—priestly, kingly, or otherwise—only that his age is a *part* of a matrix. Thus, Jesus' age is more than a mere incidental fact of history; in fact, it is a key facet of Jesus' identity: his priesthood as the Israelite par-excellence who fulfills YHWH's plan for Israel as established from the Exodus. Jesus is the consummate anointed priest who follows the pattern of Israel's history by entering official service at age thirty.

The conclusion we have drawn about the significance and anticipatory nature of the identification of Jesus' age stands in contrast with the assertion that Luke portrays the pre-resurrection Jesus as prophetic and not royal; *only* finding the actualization of messiahship in the resurrected Jesus. Mark L. Strauss also argues that the division between prophetic and royal characteristics of Jesus is artificial (196). Our findings corroborate the work of Strauss, who finds the Lukan use of royal-messianic titles of the pre-resurrection Jesus to be "proleptic and anticipatory" (197). We may add to Strauss's comments by stating that the identification of Jesus' age is proleptic and anticipatory of Jesus, the consummate Israelite who fulfills the priestly requirements placed on the whole nation of Israel.

Conclusion

At the very least, Jesus has a priestly coloring in Luke's Gospel because he is the embodiment of Israel and the one

who fulfills Yahweh's demand that his people be a nation of priests. What this study has sought to analyze is the prospect for understanding Luke's note about Jesus age. To begin with, we observed that the number thirty in Jewish literature suggested that a person has reached full adulthood and this comports with the Lukan genealogy that roots itself in Adam. It is clear that Jesus is qualified for something—but what is it? Before answering this question, the second part of our study sought to provide the data in Luke that portrayed Jesus as a priest or priestly figure related to the new covenant. The third part of our study argued that Jesus' age of thirty was one part of a matrix of qualifications that proved and demonstrated his priestly ministry. This age requirement both provided positive justification for his ministry and possibly prevented some negative attacks, such as those associated with youth. There are enough textual hints that Luke wants us to view Jesus in light of Israel's history. This connection to all of Israel's history (going back to Adam) is justified by its placement next to the Lukan genealogy. By asserting that his age was around thirty, Luke gives one more piece of evidence that places Jesus positively within the pattern of Israel's salvation-history as the anointed Messiah who embodies *all* of the hope of Israel.

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