

AN APOLOGY FOR THE THREE-AND-A-HALF- YEAR-OLD SHEEP

A Defence of the Surprisingly Mature Paschal Lamb

*"Age is merely
a number."*

— ANCIENT
SHEPHERD'S PROVERB

*"Who are we to
judge a sheep
by appearances?"*

— IRENAEUS
(PROBABLY)

*"With sufficient
ingenuity, almost
anything can be
made to fit
Daniel 9."*

— MODERN
INTERPRETER

*"He remained
theologically
one year old."*

— ANONYMOUS
COMMENTATOR



WARNING — THIS BOOKLET MAY SERIOUSLY DEFEND YOUR TRADITION!

EXTREMELY UNOFFICIAL EDITION

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SCRIPTURE • HISTORY • REASON • TRADITION

AN APOLOGY FOR THE THREE-AND-A-HALF-YEAR-OLD SHEEP

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A parody in good humour. The historical details behind the joke are real; the sheep is not. If the three-and-a-half-year ministry of Jesus is as firmly established as we are usually told, where exactly is the evidence?

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

We shall let you know if we find any.



There is no explicit biblical statement that the public ministry of Jesus lasted three and a half years, which is unfortunate for a chapter entitled The Biblical Evidence. Matthew does not say it, Mark does not say it, Luke does not say it, John does not say it, Jesus does not say it, and none of the apostles later remembers to mention it. We shall keep looking and will notify the reader immediately if such a verse turns up. For the moment the Biblical Evidence Department has no actual statement of three and a half years to report.

There is, however, interpretation of Scripture, and here Daniel 9 comes to our aid. Daniel contains a prophetic week; half of seven is three and a half; and at last our number has appeared. Eusebius will later identify that half-week with the ministry of Jesus, so we present Daniel 9 as our first - and at present only - biblical passage capable of supplying the required figure. Daniel himself never actually says, “Jesus will minister for three and a half years,” but it would be unreasonable to expect everything to be written down.

There is one administrative difficulty. Scripture knows perfectly well how to describe three and a half years - “time, times and half a time”, forty-two months, 1,260 days - but never uses any of those wonderfully precise expressions for the ministry of Jesus. Worse still, many commentators have already allocated Daniel’s half-week to the Antichrist and the end-time crisis. This seems rather greedy. We need it for Jesus. For now we have written “MINISTRY?” beside Daniel 9 in pencil and moved on.

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SUPPLEMENTARY EVIDENCE

FURTHER EXPLICIT BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE THREE-AND-A- HALF-YEAR MINISTRY



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Editors' note: This space is reserved for the verse. We asked artificial intelligence to search Scripture, searchable libraries, digitised Fathers, ancient fragments, modern scholarship and the darker corners of the internet. It returned Daniel 9, Eusebius and a great many people confidently quoting one another. We asked again. It returned Eusebius. The page remains available.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EARLY WITNESSES

If you know any, please let us know.



If Scripture will not state our chronology, surely the earliest Christians will. We therefore searched the first three centuries for a writer who plainly says that Jesus ministered for three and a half years. Not “more than a year”, not “about three years”, not a chronology from which somebody today might construct three and a half, but the actual familiar claim. We do not have one. If you do, please send the exact words and the exact source. We have left room.

Eventually matters improve. Eusebius, writing roughly three hundred years after Jesus, says that His teaching and miracles lasted “three-and-a-half years, which is half a week.” Three hundred years may sound slightly late when searching for an early witness, but it was still a very long time ago, and Eusebius was no lightweight: Bishop of Caesarea, prominent in Constantine’s imperial world, and commissioned by the emperor to arrange fifty copies of the Scriptures. So Eusebius carries considerable weight; in our present case, all of it actually.

The only awkward question is where Eusebius gets the figure. He takes us straight back to Daniel 9. Thus our biblical evidence is the interpretation of Daniel made explicit by Eusebius, while our first explicit historical witness is Eusebius making that interpretation. Admirably economical. We have now searched for the earlier witness to whom he might have appealed. If he is out there, he is keeping remarkably quiet.

EARLIER WITNESSES EXPLICITLY TEACHING THE FAMILIAR THREE- AND-A-HALF-YEAR MINISTRY



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Editors' note: Artificial intelligence has now been instructed, with machine-like patience and access to more searchable material than any exhausted editor could read in several lifetimes, to locate one explicit pre-Eusebian Christian witness who says that Jesus ministered for three and a half years. It keeps finding everything except the sentence we asked for. Then it finds Eusebius. We have told it to keep searching. It has found Eusebius again.

CHAPTER THREE

TRADITIONS OF MEN*At last - the evidence we can produce in abundance.*

At last! Having searched Scripture for an explicit statement and the first three centuries for somebody willing to say exactly what we need, we arrive at evidence in magnificent abundance: Tradition. Not a verse, not an apostolic recollection, not an early witness to the actual three-and-a-half-year claim, but well over fifteen centuries of repetition. Surely that must count for something, mustn't it? It has to. It really, really has to, because otherwise Daniel and Eusebius are left holding the entire sheep between them.

Tradition improves wonderfully with age. An interpretation begins, "I think this passage means..." Another writer repeats it, a commentator cites him, a chronology enters a study Bible, and eventually a preacher announces, "As we all know, Jesus ministered for three and a half years." Nobody remembers learning it because everybody remembers knowing it. At that point an interpretation has achieved the highest promotion available to human tradition: it has become something that "the Bible says", although the Bible remains strangely modest about claiming authorship.

If an awkward reader asks for the verse, we may point to Daniel, then Eusebius, and finally to fifteen centuries of people who were evidently satisfied with Daniel and Eusebius. A large pile of books can look remarkably like a foundation if nobody inspects the bottom. Tradition itself is not the problem; trouble begins when it borrows Scripture's name badge. Surely our fathers could not have inherited an error? Jeremiah says, "Surely our fathers have inherited lies, vanity..." (Jeremiah 16:19), but in another context, so there is no need for negativity now. Tradition is no longer merely a leg to stand on; it is the only leg touching the floor. Fortunately our sheep has four.

CONCLUSION

IN A NUTSHELL



In a nutshell, Scripture never states that Jesus ministered for three and a half years. Daniel 9 can be interpreted to supply the number, although Daniel never calls the half-week the length of His ministry and a great many interpreters have already assigned the period elsewhere. We searched the earlier Christian witnesses for the explicit familiar claim and came back empty-handed. Then Eusebius arrives in the fourth century and, at last, says it - by means of Daniel.

But we inherited Tradition from our fathers, and our fathers are infallible, aren't they? They must be, or we might have to distinguish Scripture from what later generations confidently said about Scripture. We therefore rest upon Tradition, our great cornerstone and immovable foundation; or, to borrow a more suitable biblical image, the sand upon which we stand.

BEHOLD THE THREE-AND-A-HALF-YEAR-OLD SHEEP

No verse. No early witness. Fifteen centuries of confidence.

A SERIOUS AND OPEN CHALLENGE

RESCUE THE TRADITION



The joke ends here, but the challenge is exact and sincere. If there is an explicit biblical statement that the public ministry of Jesus lasted three and a half years, bring it. If there is a Christian witness before Eusebius who explicitly teaches that familiar three-and-a-half-year ministry, bring the words, the source and the date. If Daniel 9 itself establishes that duration rather than being interpreted that way, show the case from the text.

This is not a request for evidence of a ministry longer than one year, for a chronology someone can reconstruct today, or for another chain of later commentaries repeating the traditional figure. The blank page asks one narrow question: where is the explicit three-and-a-half-year witness before Eusebius? If we have missed him, correct us. We would rather amend the booklet than preserve a joke by ignoring evidence. A true tradition has nothing to fear from being tested.

So the invitation is made in love: bring the witness, bring the text, and rescue the tradition if it can be rescued. If the evidence warrants it, this booklet will be amended publicly and gladly. “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” - 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Until then, the blank page stays blank.

FINAL EDITOR'S NOTE

We should perhaps end with an apology. We are genuinely sorry that this defence of the three-and-a-half-year tradition has proved so disappointingly light in weight. Some readers may be left wondering how tradition has managed to triumph over truth. Nevertheless, we shall not give up. The Editors will continue searching diligently for more tradition - sorry, truth - and should an explicit biblical statement or a pre-Eusebian witness finally come to light, we promise to get back to you as soon as we can. Until then, we can only apologise for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience.

Only now do we reveal the culprits: YOVEL PUBLICATIONS.

The parody is ours. The challenge is sincere. • yovelpublications.com • yovelpublications@gmail.com

