THE CHRONOLOGY OF JESUS: "ABOUT 30 YEARS OF AGE" (LUKE 3:23)

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It could almost be said that there is nothing new under the sun with regard to establishing any fact relating to the chronology of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every morsel of evidence has been chewed over and over again. Every facet of His chronology has been analysed with the utmost diligence and thoroughness for centuries, and still we have not discovered a single fact about His chronology that is beyond dispute.

The current consensus is that Jesus was born in 6 B.C. due to the death of King Herod the Great in 4 B.C., and Jesus' death is almost unanimously dated to April 3, A.D. 33 when He was thirty-eight years of age. The three-year ministry that John's chronology gives Jesus means that He must have commenced His mission when He was thirty-four or thirty-five years of age. Is this age consistent with Luke's statement that when Jesus began His ministry He was "about thirty years of age" (Lk 3:23)? Luke expresses the information in the words, καὶ αὐτὸς ἦν ὅ ἰησοῦς ὡσεὶ ἐτῶν τριακοντα ἀρχόμενος, "And Jesus himself was about thirty years commencing [to preach]."

The one glaring obstacle that prevents the convergence of time and fulfilment coinciding with the thirtieth year of Jesus' life is the little word $\dot{\omega}_{S}$ 'about.' We have seen that if Jesus died at thirty-eight years of age, then the word $\dot{\omega}_{S}$ is an extremely elastic term, and in this instance means 30 ± 4 years. That is quite a latitude of years either side of thirty years.

There are a number of factors that have allowed scholars to take ω_S in Luke 3:23 a very general sense. First, scientific investigations into the convergence of a number of events surrounding the day on which Jesus died, meant that it was impossible to take Luke's statement literally. The two crucial factors were, (a) Jesus died on a Friday, and (b) He died on the 14 Nisan. The only dates where these two requirements come together are in AD 30 or AD 33. Science determined the meaning that must be given to the word ω_S in Luke 3:23.

Second, thirty is a nice round number. If Luke has stated that Jesus was entering His thirtyfirst year, then this would have been too specific to ignore, and astronomical scientists would have been forced to conclude that Luke had got his facts wrong. They would have pointed to another fact that he got wrong, namely, the date of the first census under Quirinius, in Luke 2:2.¹ They could also point to the fact that Luke was not an eyewitness, but relied on sources. Third, thirty has a strong association with maturity. A Levite was not allowed to perform priestly duties until he reached thirty years of age. Fourth, David began to reign as king over all Israel when he was exactly thirty years of age.

Jesus was a High Priest in His own right, after the Order of Melchisedek, and an Aaronic high priest had to be between thirty and fifty years of age to be eligible for the office. Jesus was fully aware that He was the focus of all the prophecies in Scripture, and that they all pointed to Him. The high priest was the mediator between God and man throughout the Old Covenant period. Jesus was anointed to His office of mediator and High Priest at His baptism by John the Baptist. It would be fitting if, in the fulness of time, Jesus was exactly thirty years of age when He entered into His three offices of Prophet, Priest and King. But, alas! science and chronology has ruled out this possibility. It is an established fact that King Herod the Great died just before Passover in 4 B.C. He slaughtered all the infants of Bethlehem who were two years and under after he interviewed the astrologers who had come to his palace seeking for a new-born king, under the assumption that a son had been born to King Herod who would be the next king. The latitude that Herod gave himself to wipe out a possible pretender to his throne suggests that the infant was about a year old, so in order to be sure of exterminating his rival he drew the line at two years of age. This was the age when Jewish children were weaned and could walk. Now, since Herod's health problems developed some considerable time before his death, it is likely that he sough to kill Jesus in 5 B.C., which meant that the net enclosed all infants born from 7 B.C. onwards.

Luke was a careful historian as his two volumes illustrate. The clue to the meaning of the age formula ($\omega_S \epsilon \tau \omega_v xx$) that he used to mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry is contained in Luke 2:37 and 8:42. Luke tells us that the prophetess Anna was a widow "of about 84 years" ($\omega_S \epsilon \tau \omega_v \delta \gamma \delta \circ \eta \kappa \circ v \tau \sigma \tau \epsilon \sigma \sigma \sigma \omega v$). This is a very specific number. If he had stated that her age was 80, then it could have been viewed as a round number, and on a par with Jesus' age "of about 30 years," with the same margin of elasticity of ±4 years. In Luke 8:42 he informs us that the girl whom Jesus raised

¹ The Edict of Vibius Maximus from AD 104 ordered the Egyptians to leave Alexandria to register. This has a striking parallel to Lk 2:3. It reads: "The house-to-house census having started, it is essential that all persons who for any reason whatsoever are absent from their nomes [administrative districts] be summoned to return to their own hearths, in order that they may perform the customary business of registration . . ." See Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 14 (quote); and S. R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 6 (Macquarie University, 1992), pp. 112-132.

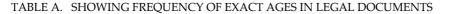
from the dead was "about 12 years" (ώς ἐτῶν δώδεκα). If Luke had stated that her age was "about 10," and from a parallel account in another Gospel we discovered that her exact age was 12 years, then we would have a strong, linguistic case for arguing that Luke used ώς as an English person would to mean "roughly 10 years of age." And so Jesus would have been "roughly 30 years of age." This looseness of expression would then allow the astronomical scholar, who had a high regard for the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, to absolve Luke of a chronological blunder.

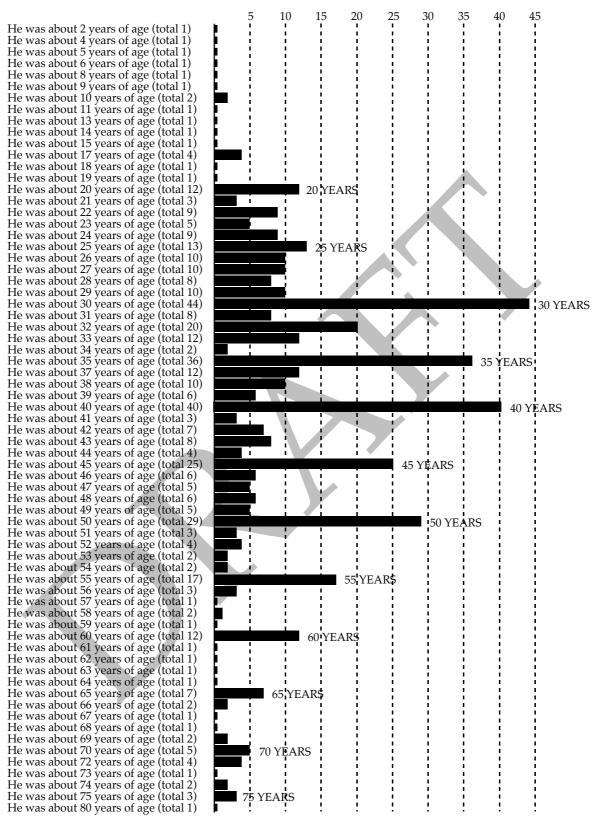
It is the paucity of the number of examples of the expression $\omega_s \,\dot{\epsilon} \tau \hat{\omega} v \, xx$ in the New Testament and in the Septuagint, plus the fact that ω_s is often used in connection with large numbers, where approximation is unavoidable, that lends credence to the impression of guesswork, and this sense of approximation is transferred to smaller numbers, such as the age of persons.

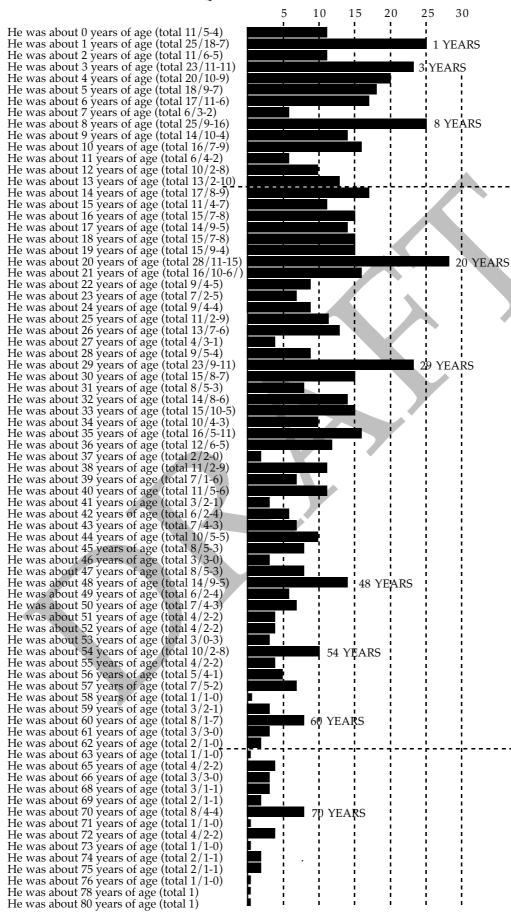
The purpose of this paper is to present evidence that strongly suggests that Jesus was exactly thirty years of age when He commenced His ministry. This finding, if substantiated, will provide scholars with their first, solid fact relating to the life of Jesus, and have some important knock-on effects for the overall chronology of Jesus' life.

The evidence comes in the form of hundreds of papyri discovered in Egypt toward the end of the nineteenth century, which turned out to be the archives of record-offices, dealing with local, legal matters covering the first three centuries after the birth of Jesus. The first discoveries were made in 1877 and from that date onwards, more and more similar finds were made, including the finds in Oxyrhnchus, of which 78 volumes have been published so far (1898–2012).

Unfortunately, the indexing of the published finds is not precise enough to locate the papyri in which the expression $\omega_s \epsilon \tau \omega v xx$ is found. However, with a little perseverance I located 439 instances of Luke's formula. These are tabulated in the following chart and the precise location of the evidence is contained in an appendix.







POLL-TAX FOR MALES BETWEEN 14 AND 62 YEARS OF AGE

In Table A there are no records for anyone aged 12, 16, 36 and 71, and in Table B there are no records for anyone aged 64, 77 and 79. In Table B the totals for each age are give followed by a slash, followed by a breakdown of that total in male (first) and female (second).

The overwhelming conclusion that this data has revealed is that $\dot{\omega}_5$ is used to identify a person's age to the nearest whole digit. Of the 439 cases collected for this study there was not a single case where the number of months was given in excess of the whole year figure, neither did I find any fractions of years, such as 12 and one-half years. All of the data involved legal documents covering a wide variety of subjects, such as census returns, contracts of various sorts, wills, leases of land, rent agreements, purchase and selling of slaves, divorces, and marriages, etc. (See the appendix.)

The impression given by the persons named in these documents was that they were giving their exact ages. We shall see later on that there is sufficient data, even in this small sample, to question the integrity of many of these declarations of ages. It should be pointed out that the Census Returns were carried out by travelling officials outside the cities, and they took particular care to note the ages of everyone: "It should be said, however, that the scribes went to great pains to write ages clearly, often in larger numerals readily distinguishable from the ordinary handwriting."²

In lieu of the fact that no legal document, examined in the course of this research, records the exact age of any person in terms of years *and months*, and gives no fractions of a year, it would appear that the scribe drawing up the legal document enquired of the birth date of the signatories or other persons named in the body of the document, and he made the judgment to round up the months to the nearest whole digit (if more than six months), or round down the months (if less than six) to the nearest whole digit, so that what we have are approximations to the nearest whole digit. The sheer volume of examples substantiates this conclusion, given that, in this small sample, the only ages not represented between 10 and 75 are 12, 16, 36 and 71. The evidence is too overwhelming to claim that ω_S in any one of these 439 cases means "roughly" or ± 2 or more years. The use of ω_S before the numeral refers to the stated digit itself, as in, for example, "about 12." It means 12 and not 11 or 13. It does not indicate a guess on the part of the scribe, as to the age of the person standing before him, who was likely illiterate.

In the course of this research 24 out of the approximately 300 Census Returns ('house-by-house') were examined. However, only 11 of the 24 contributed to the 144 documents represented in the above table, because in a sizeable proportion of them the age was stated without prefixing $\dot{\omega}_S$ to the numeral. There did not appear to be any difference whether $\dot{\omega}_S$ was present or not, which is not surprising seeing that the point of the exercise was to record only complete years.

Table B represents the work of Roger Bagnall and Bruce Frier. They focussed solely on the 300 Census Return documents discovered in Egypt.³ It should be borne in mind that the surviving census returns are very unevenly distributed among the administrative districts of Egypt. There are no returns from Alexandria (500,000 citizens). Almost half the returns (149 out of 300) come from the metropoleis, with Arsinoe (86) and Oxyrhynchus (38) predominant; the rest come from five other metropoleis

Unfortunately, the authors have not indicated if ω_s appears before the stated age, so that their data could not be used in this study, except to locate the exact source where each Census Return could be found. Extant Census Returns run from AD 11/12 down to the last known census in AD 257/8, and were conducted on a regular 14-year cycle, the earliest of which we have is dated AD 33/4.

Ten of thousands of documentary papyri from Roman Egypt survived in the dry sands of Middle Egypt.⁴ About three-quarters of the census returns come from the Arsinoite and Oxyrhynchus administrative districts. The chief purpose of the census was to tax all males between the ages of 14 and 62, which may explain why the censuses were fourteen years apart. Women did not pay taxes. Given the role of age in both the beginning of tax liability and its termination, the correct recording of each man's age will have been very important in compiling tax lists. Obviously there was some incentive to underreport the age of boys younger than 14, in order to delay the onset of taxation, but

² Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 19.

³ For a full list (as of Nov. 1993) of the 300 Census Returns documented for Roman Egypt, see Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 320-29, and for their detailed analysis of these, see pp. 179-312.

⁴ For an inventory of the papyri and related works see J. F. Oates *et al.*, *Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri*, *Ostraca and Tablets*, 4th ed. (*BASP* Suppl. 7; 1992). Critical work on the papyri are recorded in the various volumes of the *Berichtigungsliste der griechischen Papyrusurkunden aus Ägypten* (=*BL*). Abbreviations for journals and standard works on the papyri can be found in *L'Année Philologique* and the *American Journal of Archaeology*.

this will have been of limited use, because anyone reported in the census at all, will, of necessity, be at least 14 by the time of the next census, no matter what age was reported in the previous census. Taxation lists were constantly maintained, so that inconsistent reporting of age on a subsequent declaration was likely to be caught. The important thing was that the authorities had records by which they could and did check census reports for consistency with birth declarations and previous census declarations, ensuring that statements of age did not rest simply either on the memory of the declarant or on the judgment of the census-taker.⁵ Several lists of tax-payers, dated to the first century AD, were compiled directly from census returns, and they display very little age-rounding.⁶

The observant reader will have noted an odd feature in Table A, which is not in Table B. Table B gives the expected Manhattan skyline chart, whereas Table A gives a porcupine chart. The 'spines' show peaks every five years. This is not normal or natural. There is clearly some rounding up or rounding down going on here, favouring increments of five years.

Bagnall and Frier noted that as far as the census records were concerned age exaggeration did not appear to be a factor, and this is borne out in Table B, where they compiled a database of 1084 persons and logged their ages, sex, and family relationships. The Whipple Index is the standard by which persons between the ages of 23 and 62 are assessed for the number of ages that are divisible by 5, sometimes called 'age heaping' in demographic studies.⁷ The Index ranges from 100 (= no tendency to age heaping) to 500 (= all ages exactly divisible by 5). Modern populations in less developed countries often have a very high index. For example, the Whipple Index for the Bangladesh census of 1974 was 316, meaning that 316 persons out of every 500 have ages divisible by 5.⁸

When Bagnall and Frier applied the Whittle Index test to the 322 persons who have reported ages between 23 and 62, out of their total of 1084 persons, the Index was 124.2, which is near the borderline between "approximate" (110–125) and "rough" (125–175). They concluded that this score indicated that we should place some trust in the reported ages. This Index score represents 76 persons out of 322 whose age is divisible by 5, or 23.6%. In Table A there are 216 persons out of a total of 382 whose age is divisible by 5, this represents 56.5%. It is clear from these percentages that a substantial proportion of the population in Table A do not care to give their exact age, but casually resort to a grid age that is a multiple of 5 (called age heaping, in demographic studies). It is rare to find a case where the same individual gives his true age and his notional age, but one such case does occur in the finds.

Slightly under 11 percent of the persons in Bagnall and Frier's data base were slaves (118 out of 1084).⁹

CENSUS FOR AD 187	CENSUS FOR AD 215	CENSUS FOR AD 229
	28 YEARS LATER	14 YEARS LATER
DECLARANT 47 YEARS	AGE LOST	
HIS WIFE 51 YEARS	AGE LOST	
HIS SON, HERMEINOS 21 YEARS	HERMEINOS 49 YEARS	NO RECORD
HIS SON, ISIDOROS 13 YEARS		

In one case we have three censuses for the same household, spanning 42 years.¹⁰

⁵ Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 28.

⁷Cf. Richard Duncan-Jones, "Age-Rounding in Greco-Roman Egypt," ZPE 33 (1979) 169-177; ibid, Structure and Scale in the Roman Economy (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 79-92.

⁸ Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP,1994), p. 45.

⁹ Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 48, 70.

¹⁰ See Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 41 (write up); pp. 324, 281, 296, 300 (sources); the census for AD 187 is 187-Hm-1 (= *P. Lond.* III 923 (6)); the census for AD 215 is 215-Hm-1/2 (= *P. Lond.* III 936); and the census for AD 229 is 229-Hm-2. (= *P. Lond.* III 946/947 I i descr.). *P. Lond.* = London, British Library, inv. 923 (6), etc.

⁶ For the sources, see Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 102 n. 32.. One list consists of 232 taxpayers, with ages for 129 (the rest are lacking). Another has 33, all with ages; another has 169 with ages for 101; another has 152 with ages for 120; lastly, another has 317 with ages for 264. It is not known how many of the ages are preceded by $\dot{\omega}_{s}$.

HIS SON, THEOGNOSTOS 8 YEARS	THEOGNOSTOS 36 YEARS	THEOGNOSTOS 50 YEARS
HIS DAUGHTER, ISIDORA 0 YEAR		
	DIOSKOROUS 30 YEARS	DIOSKOROUS 44 YEARS
	(described as full sister & wife	
	of Theognostos)	

If Diosorous was the full sister of Theognostos, whose alias was Isidorus, then she was just two years of age in AD 187 and may, for that reason, have been omitted in that census. It was not that unusual for boys to marry their sisters, or cousins.¹¹ It has been estimated that this practice accounted for 11% of all Egyptian marriages.

What the census returns show is that the age-formula: ($\dot{\omega}_S \epsilon \tau \hat{\omega} v xx$) was the most accurate way to express the exact age of an individual to the nearest whole digit (or year).

In another case we have three censuses for the same household, spanning 28 years.

CENSUS FOR AD 89	CENSUS FOR AD 103	CENSUS FOR AD 117
	14 YEARS LATER	14 YEARS LATER
PETEURIS 30 YEARS	PETEURIS 44 YEARS	NO RECORD
HIS WIFE TAPEINE 25 YEARS	NO RECORD	NO RECORD
HIS SON, HOROS 20 YEARS	HIS SON, HOROS 34 YEARS	HOROS 48 YEARS
		HIS WIFE, TAPELKYSIS 45 YRS
HIS SON, HORION 7 YEARS	HIS SON, HORION 21 YEARS	HIS SON, HORION 35 YEARS
	HORION'S WIFE 25 YEARS	HORION'S WIFE 39 YEARS
		HORION'S SON 1 YEAR

CENSUS FOR AD 117	CENSUS FOR AD 131
	14 YEARS LATER
PLOUTION (husband) NO RECORD	NO RECORD
HIS WIFE NO RECORD	NO RECORD
ZOIS 53 YEARS	NO RECORD
ZOIS'S SON SOKRATES 32 YEARS	ZOIS'S SON SOKRATES [46] YEARS
ZOIS'S 1ST DAUGHTER, APHRODOUS 33 YEARS	APHRODOUS — NO RECORD
ZOIS'S 2ND DAUGHTER, APHRODOUS 28 YEARS	APHRODOUS (wife of Sokrates) 42 YEARS
(wife of her brother Sokrates)	SON DIOSKOROS 12 YEARS
	SON ONESIMUS 10 YEARS
	SON ASKLAS 8 YEARS
	DAUGHTER ZOIDOUS 6 YEARS
PATERNAL AUNT 70 YEARS	DAUGHTER HERAIS 2

The ages for Sokrates and his wife, Aphrodous, are consistent cross the two censuses.

CENSUS FOR AD 131	CENSUS FOR AD 145
	14 YEARS LATER
PETESOUCHOS (husband) NO RECORD	PETESOUCHOS (husband) 42 YEARS
TAUSIRIS (wife of Petesouchos) 20 YEARS	TAUSIRIS (wife of Petesouchos) 34 YEARS
SON: PHEPHOROS 3 YEARS	SON: PHEPHOROS 17 YEARS

The ages for Tausiris and her son Phephoros, are consistent cross the two censuses.

The low incidence in the census returns of age-rounding suggests that those who were in charge of supplying the ages of their households were not guessing when they filled in the ages, and there are certainly some cases in which households clearly possessed copies of previous census returns.¹²

¹¹ Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 127. Thyeir date base shows that out of 121 marriages in which the degree of kinship between the spouses is ascertainable, more than a fifth of spouses are either full siblings, hald-siblings, or first cousins.

¹² Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, *The demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), p. 20.

APPENDIX

SIGLA

In the first, or AGE column, if a number is followed by 'e' it means that there the word $\epsilon \tau \hat{\omega} v$ is lacking (see No. 38). If it is followed by 'f' it means all the numbers are spelled out in full (see No. 40). In the third, or PAPYRUS column, the papyrus number is preceded by a capital letter in brackets, which identifies the source volume, where the papyrus entry can be found.

Where there is no letter accompanying the numeral then the format is: $\dot{\omega}_{S}$ ($\dot{\epsilon}\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$) $\lambda\alpha$ ("as about (of years) 31"). Editors have put 'years' in brackets because in the papyri documents a special, shorthand symbol replaces $\dot{\epsilon}\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$. This takes the form of a capital L with the vertical stroke sloping forward about 15^a.

'd' = $\dot{\epsilon}\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$ is lacking, and the numeral is written out in full

'e' = $\dot{\epsilon}\tau\omega\nu$ is lacking, and the numeral is written out in cipher letters

'f' = $\dot{\epsilon}\tau\hat{\omega}\nu$ spelled out, and the numeral is written out in full

'g' = ἑτῶν abbreviated to ε (as in ἐ[τῶν]), and the numeral is written out in cipher letters

 $\dot{h}' = \dot{\epsilon} \tau \hat{\omega} v$ alone is written out in full, and the numeral is written out in cipher letters

 $i' = \dot{\epsilon} \tau \hat{\omega} v$ alone is written out in full, and the unit numeral cipher is lacking (No. 111)

 $j' = \omega_S$ abbreviated to ω , έτ ω ν is not spelled out, and the numeral is written out in cipher letters

 $\mathbf{k} = \mathbf{\omega}$ s abbreviated to $\mathbf{\omega}$, ἑτ $\mathbf{\omega}$ ν is not spelled out, and the numeral is written out full

'n' = ω_S abbreviated to ω , $\epsilon \tau \hat{\omega} v$ is spelled out, and the numeral is written out in cipher letters 'x' = ω_S written as δ_S

'y' = the unit cipher number is lacking (No. 57)

z' = the unit is lacking which had been written out in full (No. 103)

SOURCE (A) = *Papyri from Tebtunis. Part I.* by Arthur E. R. Boak (2 vols. in one). Michigan Papyri, Vol. II. University of Michigan Studies: Humanistic Series, VOL. XXVIII (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1933). UL = A356.290.2

SOURCE (B) = John Garrett Winter, *Papyri in the University of Michigan Collection* University of Michigan Studies: Humanistic Series, VOL. XL. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1936). UL = A356.290.3

SOURCE (C) = *Papyri from Tebtunis. Part II.* by Elinor Mullett Husselman, Arthur E. R. Boak, William F. Edgerton (2 vols. in one). Michigan Papyri, Vol. V. University of Michigan Studies: Humanistic Series, VOL. XXIX. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1944). The documents in this volume cover AD 7–56 (p. 2). UL = A356.290.5.

SOURCE (D) = Elinor M. Husselman, *Papyri From Karanis*. Third Series (Michigan Papyri, Vol. IX). (Published for the American Philological Association by Case Western Reserve University, 1971). Most of the papyri are dated to the 2nd and 3rd cent. AD, but the earliest is Vespasian, 7 are in a year in Trajan, 12 in a year of Hadrian, one in Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, one in Caracalla, one in Gallienus. UL A356.290.9.

SOURCE (E) = B. P. Grenfell, A. S. Hunt, and D. G. Hogarth, *Fayûm Towns and Their Papyri* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1900). Known as P. Fay. UL: A356.158.

SOURCE (F) = Arthur E. R. Boak and Herbert Chayyim Youtie, *The Archive of Aurelius Isidorus in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, and the University of Michigan (P. Cair. Isidor.)* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960). UL: A356.132.

SOURCE (G) = Bernard P. Grenfell, and Arthur S. Hunt (eds.), *The Oxrhynchus Papyri* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trüber & Co. 1898). The series from 1898-2012, consists of 78 volumes. UL: A356.308.1–

SOURCE (H) = Cornelia E. Römer & Traianos Gagos (eds.), *P. Michigan Koenen* (= P. Mich. XVIII). Michigan Texts Published in Honor of Ludwig Koenen. (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996). UL= A356.290.18.

SOURCE (I) = Amphilochios Papathomas, *Fünfundzwanzig griechische Papyri aus den Sammlungen von Heidelberg, Wien und Kairo (P. Heid. VII)* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996). TYN 930.272 HWK

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