



The History of the Bible
Session 05: Topic 2.1
The Origin of the New Testament

Study by
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Overview of Session

2.1 Who wrote the New Testament? And when?

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Detailed Study

2.1 Composition: Who wrote the New Testament? And when?

Charting of First Christian Century: the Apostolic Era

4 BCE¹-----27²-----30³-----33⁴-----47⁵-----61⁶-----64⁷-----70⁸-----100⁹

|--Jesus--|-----|---Jewish-era---|---Gentile-Domination of Christianity----->
|-----|-----Paul's ministry-----|

Period covered by the four gospels:

Matthew & Luke:

|---4 BCE-30 AD---

Mark & John:

|-27-30-|

Period covered by Acts:

|-----33-61-----|

Period of the writing of the four gospels and Acts:

|-Mk--Mt---Lk-&-Acts--Jn-|

Observations:

The above chart of the approximate time spans of Jesus and the apostles represents a fairly common projection by the majority of New Testament scholars world wide. To be sure, variations of dating will surface from scholar to scholar. The question then arises as to how such dating of the ministries of Jesus and the apostles can be made.

The answer to that question is both simple and complex at the same time. First, we are dealing with historical investigation of a scripture text or texts. In my Lecture Notes *"Interpreting the New Testament Documents"* at cranfordville.com, I lay out in fair detail the implications of this for Bible understanding. This material was used in the undergraduate freshman *Introduction to the New Testament* course at Gardner-Webb University, and thus is not overly technical. From that more detailed discussion, let me highlight a few relevant points to our concern here.

First comes the issue of transitioning time and dates from the ancient world on to the western calendar. The ancient world did not keep a calendar anything like the one commonly used in western society today. Thus the challenge is to determine time frames for events and the lives of people living in the ancient world, and then assign approximate dates to this material from a modern calendar. Western society today generally uses the Gregorian calendar, a solar based calendar developed on mathematical calculation of days by grouping them into a year of 365 or 366 days. The official calendar of the Roman Empire was the Roman calendar, or 'pre-Julian calendar.' Thus an early step in the dating process is to assign dates to the Roman calendar and then convert them into the Gregorian calendar system. One of the additional challenges is that much of the dating of early Christian material grows out of an ancient Hebrew calendar, which was very different from the ancient Roman calendar.

With these calendaring issues then, one seeks to find connecting links of individuals and/or events in the

Footnotes to the Chart:

¹Jesus birth (4 BCE); ²Jesus public ministry (27-30); ³Pentecost and church's beginning (30); ⁴Paul's conversion (33); ⁵Jerusalem Council (47); ⁶End of the book of Acts (61); ⁷Martyrdom of Paul and Peter in Rome (64-68); ⁸Destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (70); ⁹Approximate close of the apostolic age.

pages of the New Testament that can be firmly linked to the Roman calendar. From there converting them to the Gregorian calendar is not overly complex most of the time. A few examples of this can serve to illustrate the process. The mentioning of Caesar Tiberius in Luke 3:1-2¹ provides a helpful link because the dates of Tiberius' reign can be firmly established as AD 14 - 37. Another important connecting link is the mentioning in Acts 18:12² of Gallio who was governor (proconsul) of the Roman province of Achaia where Corinth was located. As the Wikipedia article on Junius Annaeus Gallio indicates,

Gallio's tenure can be fairly accurately dated to between 51-52 AD or 52-53 AD. The events of Acts 18 can therefore be dated to this period. This is significant because it is the most accurately known date in the life of Paul.

This process of converting over to the Roman and then to the Gregorian calendars is not without difficulties, but represents the only legitimate way of projecting a time frame for individuals and events in the New Testament.

The other stage of this dating process is the careful observing of time markers inside the text of the New Testament. References such as "in the fifteen year of..." like in Luke 3:1 become critical to this process. This is often the most difficult aspect of the dating process. The ancient world did not concern itself with precise dating of issues like is typical in the modern western world. Thus most of the specific dates given have to be taken as approximations, and not as precise designations in a modern sense. Not until the late Middle Ages did western society invent a clock and begin calculating time in terms of seconds, minutes and hours. The ancient world thus had little concern for precise dating of events, and this was especially true in ancient Jewish society even more so than in the Greco-Roman society of the first Christian century.

Once a general structure of a person's life and/or ministry is developed from the text of the New Testament then it must be plugged into the Gregorian calendar in order to have dates assigned so that modern readers can have some sense of the historical flow of events in the first century.

Thus **Jesus' life** revolves around his birth / childhood and then his public ministry. The four gospels recount only the first few years after his birth, then skip over his growing up years, and plug back in when Jesus began public ministry at age 30.³ But only two of the gospel accounts touch on the beginning years: Matthew and Luke. Matthew only recorded select events from the first couple of years. Luke pretty much follows the same pattern, but does carry us through the visit to the temple at age twelve. Mark and John only detail the public ministry of Jesus. The duration of Jesus' public ministry is understood generally to have lasted from about three to three and one half years. This is derived from the time and place markers inside the four gospel texts. Although some variation exists, generally this is assigned the time frame of appx. 27 to 30 AD. Most of this time was spent by Jesus in the northern Roman province of Galilee, with only occasional trips to Judea and Jerusalem in the south. Jesus' death took place then in connection with the Jewish Passover celebration in the spring of AD 30.

The book of Acts covers the period from Jesus ascension to Heaven, some 40 days after His resurrection, to the Roman house arrest of the apostle Paul in chapter twenty eight in the early 60s. Thus Luke tells the story of the beginning of Christianity only for the first three decades of that history. We have only scattered bits of information from the different letters to supplement that information and to extend it beyond the final chapter of Acts. One of the early church historians, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 263 - 339), attempts to fill in some of the gaps with his writing *Ecclesiastical History*. The plan of the book is as follows:

He grouped his material according to the reigns of the emperors, presenting it as he found it in his sources. The contents are as follows:

Book i: detailed introduction on Jesus Christ

Book ii: The history of the apostolic time to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus

Book iii: The following time to Trajan

Books iv and v: the second century

Book vi: The time from Septimius Severus to Decius

Book vii: extends to the outbreak of the persecution under Diocletian

Book viii: more of this persecution

Book ix: history to Constantine's victory over Maxentius in the West and over Maximinus in the East

Book x: The reestablishment of the churches and the rebellion and conquest of Licinius.

¹NRSV: "1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

²NRSV: "But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal."

³Luke 3:23a, NRSV: "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work."

Thus the first three 'books' are of major interest to a study of the first Christian century.

The life of Paul presents another major historical reconstruction effort in modern biblical scholarship. From data inside his writings and from Acts one can determine that he was converted to Christ about three years after Jesus' ascension; began his missionary journeys in the middle to late 40s; and suffered execution at the hands of the Roman emperor Nero in the mid 60s of the first century. His writing ministry was limited to the second and third missionary journeys and a few years subsequent to his arrest in Jerusalem. Thus all eleven of the letters preserved in the New Testament fall within the time frame of about 50 AD to 65 AD. From all indication, he was born approximately at the same time as Jesus, just shortly before the beginning of the first Christian century on the Gregorian calendar.

The other apostles mostly drop out of the picture in terms of the written documents of the New Testament except for Peter and John. Dating their writings is challenging and thus much variation of understanding surfaces in the New Testament.

Next we will take a look at the dating of the documents of the New Testament. Some important observations from this should be made:

1. Jesus lived and ministered in the first half of the century, but the story of that wasn't composed until the second half of the first century. The period from the early 30s to the 60s is typically labeled the era of oral tradition, in which much of the materials incorporated by the gospel writers was being shaped and shared in oral form more than in written form, as Luke hints at in the Prologue of his gospel (Luke 1:1-4, NRSV).

1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

2. The dating of the written documents of the New Testament plays off a somewhat complex process of comparing the 'internal' and 'external' histories of the composition of each NT writing. From the church fathers comes a profile or profiles of the one responsible for the writing of each document. Although this material seldom is unified in its viewpoint, it none the less stands as a critical source of information about who wrote, when he wrote, where he wrote from, to whom he wrote to, and why he wrote. Then the careful scholar must make a detailed assessment of an internal profile of the composer of each document. This involves careful assessment of theological themes, historical slant on recording events, writing style and traits along with many other aspects. Modern techniques of Narrative Criticism are employed for much of this work. When a detailed profile of the writer is developed from this 'internal' analysis of the text, it then must be compared with the 'external' profile largely derived from the church fathers. Sometimes severe differences between those two profiles surface. In such cases, most scholars then suggest that serious questions about the accuracy of the church father traditions must be concluded. But where basic compatibility exists between these two profiles, then fundamental confidence in the church father 'external' tradition regarding composition can be concluded. Quite naturally one would expect different assessments of these two compositional profiles and of the comparisons between them. Thus, different dating systems will emerge.

3. Why then is this process of compositional history important for Bible study? Again, the answer is both simple and complex. The simple aspect is this. These documents were written at a specific time in history and were written to people living in that first century history. We, through the preservation of these documents, are permitted to 'look over their shoulders' to understand what they were writing about and why they were writing. Additionally, some of the writings of the New Testament are more historically dependent than others. This is particularly true of the two groups of letters in the New Testament. Paul's letters especially are 'occasional' letters. That means each letter was 'occasioned' by a particular historical circumstance during Paul's life time and ministry. Reading these letters is like 'listening to only one side of a telephone conversation.' We hear Paul speaking to his readers, but often he assumes things about his readers in the letters rather than spells out the details. Consequently, the more information we can gather about who it was that Paul wrote to, what time period he wrote in, the circumstance or circumstances that prompted the writing of the letter⁴ etc., the better and more

⁴For example, in the body of the first letter to the Corinthians, the circumstance that prompted the writing of this letter revolved around two sources of information brought to Paul from Corinth to Ephesus where he was when he wrote the letter (cf. 16:8): a letter sent to Paul by the Corinthians (cf. 7:1; 8:1; 12:1), and a report that came from members of the household of Chloe as they visited Ephesus from Corinth (cf. 1:11).

accurately we can understand what he was saying.

The 'complex' aspect of the answer probes the major interpretive method of understanding the Bible for the last three hundred years and is called Historical Criticism. Serious scholars across the theological spectrum employ aspects of Historical Criticism for understanding scripture. In its best expression, this way of coming at scripture simply examines the human aspects of the composition of the documents of the Bible as historically written materials. It stands neutral on issues of inspiration and the divine aspect of the composition of sacred scripture. Thus the 'theological' or divine aspects of scripture lay beyond the scope of probing by this method. Other starting points must be employed for treating this aspect of scripture. Historical Criticism is a product of the Enlightenment in western society and stands as a part of the so-called Scientific Method as applied to historical investigation.

Properly used, Historical Criticism stands as an essential tool for serious Bible study and constitutes an important foundation for biblical understanding. But it can be abused and misused -- and has often been so misused -- with tragic consequences. Much of the lack of trust in the Bible found in many Christian circles today has its roots in an abuse of this method of interpreting scripture. Thus a wholistic approach to Bible study represents the best method. The Bible unquestionably has both human and divine sides. It is an historical product. Thus this history cannot be ignored without creating twisted and false understandings. But the Bible is also God's Word, and that means His breath⁵ is permeating the words of sacred scripture with the power to bring spiritual life to those reading the Bible in faith commitment.

Listing By Groups:

Date:	Gospels:	Acts:	Paul's Letters:	General Letters:	Revelation:
20s					
30s					
40s			2nd miss journey (48-51) 1. Galatians (49) from Macedonia		
50s			2. 1 Thessalonians (50) from Athens 3. 2 Thessalonians (50) from Corinth 3rd miss journey (52-57) 4. 1 Corinthians (53) from Ephesus 5. 2 Corinthians (56) from Macedonia 6. Romans (57) from Corinth While imprisoned (late 50s to early 60s) 7a. Colossians (57-60) from Caesarea 7b. Philemon (57-60) from Caesarea 7c. Ephesians (57-60) from Caesarea	Hebrews (50s) James (late 50s) 1 Peter (late 50s)	

⁵2 Tim. 3:16-17 (NRSV): "All scripture is inspired by God and is F9 useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Date:	Gospels:	Acts:	Paul's Letters:	General Letters:	Revelation:
60s	Mark (late 60s)		8. Philippians (61-62) from Rome After 1st release from imprisonment (early 60s) 9. 1 Timothy (63-64) from Macedonia 10. Titus (63-64) from Nicopolis 11. 2 Timothy (64) from Rome	2 Peter (mid 60s) Jude (mid 60s)	
70s	Matthew (early 70s) Luke (middle 70s)	Acts (middle 70s)			
80s	John (late 80s)				
90s				1 John (early 90s) 2 John (early 90s) 3 John (early 90s)	Revelation (mid 90s)

Maps of the New Testament world

The World of Jesus:



The World of Early Christianity:

