

## *On Dating the New Testament*

**F.F. Bruce**

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*British New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce explains the methods used for dating the New Testament and stresses the importance of avoiding criteria that are too speculative and subjective.*

*Why are the dates of the books of the New Testament of such intense interest to Christians?*

*First of all, because the Christian faith, unlike other major religions, is not built merely on a set of religious or ethical ideals. Rather it is grounded in real historical events. The heart of the gospel is that God's Son came into the world, suffered, died and rose again for our eternal salvation. If it can be shown that the New Testament was not compiled until several generations after Christ, the door would be left open for serious garbling of the facts or even outright manipulation.*

*Secondly, because the central fact of the Christian faith, the Incarnation—which defies human comprehension—demands solid historical support if it is to win the allegiance of sober-minded people.*

*"We beheld His majesty," says the Apostle Peter. And we confess with him, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But again, if our records of this pivotal event in human history cannot be trusted, our faith is vulnerable indeed.*

*We have therefore asked Dr. F. F. Bruce, gratefully remembered by college students of the last two decades for his *New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Eerdmans, revised ed., 1965), to outline for *ETERNITY* readers the methods by which the books of the New Testament may be reliably dated. Eds.*

The dating of ancient texts has developed into a sophisticated science in the course of the last two centuries. Dr. José O'Callaghan's work on the fragments from cave 7 of the Qumran area recalls one of the criteria for dating documents: a work cannot be later in date than its earliest extant copy.

For the past century or so, New Testament critics have assumed a date of around A.D. 68 or later for Mark's Gospel. Many scholars have also postulated a long-lost oral or written source for some of Mark's basic material. But if O'Callaghan's work holds up—and it really is too early to predict one way or the other—we will have strong evidence that Mark was in circulation in Palestine a whole generation earlier than anyone had imagined, and the suggestion of an earlier source would be pointless. The Gospel would be close enough to the events it records to stand on its own merits.

If O'Callaghan's findings lead to a major revision of New Testament critical views, it will not be the first time that uncovered ancient texts or fragments have jolted the scholars. For example, when one of the first manuscript discoveries at Qumran in 1947 proved to be a copy of the book of Isaiah written in the first half of the second century B.C., that discovery conclusively demolished a theory that the portrayal of the Suffering Servant in Isa. 52:13-53:12 was based on the sufferings of Jewish martyrs in the days of the Maccabees. It also destroyed another theory which dated chapters 24-27 of Isaiah in the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.).

## **RYLANDS FRAGMENT OF JOHN DISPROVES LATE DATE**

Again, when the Rylands fragment of John 18 was dated on paleographical grounds in the first half of the second century A.D., that proved at least that the Gospel of John could not have been composed in the second half of that century, as many scholars had insisted.

But, for the most part, the traditional view that the New Testament books were written in the first century by their purported authors (rather than "ghost-written" a century later by propagandists of the church) is not supported by such sensational finds. Texts and scraps of texts that have survived 2,000 years of weather and war are simply too far and few between. So we have to look for other criteria by which to date the New Testament.

One of the most useful is: a work must be dated sometime after the latest historical event to which it refers. Acts, for example, ends with a reference to Paul's two years under house-arrest in Rome. Acts, therefore, was written after that period, not before it. Revelation refers to five "kings" who have fallen and to one who "is" at the time of speaking (Rev. 17:10). If, then, we can identify these "kings"—a big "if" but not, I think, an impossible one—we will have a criterion for dating at least this part of the book.

Paul's Letters to the Corinthians were written after his evangelization of Corinth, and his evangelization of Corinth can be dated rather precisely; we have inscriptional evidence for the time of Gallio's governorship of Achaia, which began while Paul was in Corinth. The Letters to the Corinthians, then, were written not earlier than A.D. 52.

Of course, an exception to this rule occurs in the case of prophetic material, which points to events which are still future at the time of writing. But even though genuine prophecy is earlier than the events it predicts, we can say

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that it will not be earlier than the events which it presupposes as its historical background.

Two major events of the second half of the first century, which help us date some of the New Testament books, are: the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the first outright attack by the Roman Empire on Christians in A.D. 64. As for the latter, it is easy to see that some New Testament documents reflect the period when the imperial representatives could be counted upon to protect the preachers of the gospel, while others reflect the period when the imperial power had become a mortal menace to the church. We have only to compare Romans 13 with Revelation 13 to realize that the former is as clearly before A.D. 64 as the latter is clearly after that date.

In one New Testament document we see the change from the earlier situation taking place before our eyes. In I Pet. 3:13-14, the question is asked: "Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right?"—the implied answer being "No one." But then the Apostle adds: "But even if you were to suffer for righteousness' sake"—expressing this as a remote contingency. In the next chapter, however, what was a remote contingency has become an imminent certainty: the readers are prepared to meet a "fiery trial" in which they will "share Christ's sufferings," and the conditional clause "if one suffers as a Christian" is not expressed as something conceivable yet unlikely, but as something to be expected (1 Pet. 4:12-16). The date of I Peter is therefore, in my judgment, pin-pointed with unusual precision.

## **DATING FROM REFERENCES IN OTHER WORKS**

Another criterion for dating a work is found in the earliest references to its existence in other works which can be dated. If, for example, we had no other means of dating 1 Corinthians, we should know that it was in existence by the time Clement of Rome's letter to the Corinthians was written (i.e. about A.D. 96), for Clement quotes it. If we had no other means of dating the Gospel of John, we should know that it was in existence by the time Basilides quoted it about A.D. 130; or, if we lacked that, we would have Heracleon's commentary on it a generation later. Indeed, Heracleon's teacher, Valentinus, is credibly reported by Tertullian to have made reference to all the books in the New Testament canon, which would indicate that they were all in existence by A.D. 140.

A much more precarious criterion is the stage of the development of Christian doctrine and practice which the various documents presuppose. For example, some contemporary scholars recognize in certain New Testament documents a stage which they call "primitive catholicism," marked by an increasing organization of church life and teaching, inimical to the apostolic emphasis on justification by faith and spiritual liberty. A document such as Ephesians, in which this tendency is detected, is on that score alone denied apostolic authorship by one influential school of thought.

We will avoid such dubious conclusions if we rely as far as possible on more objective criteria for dating the New Testament books. When this is done, it does not seem to make much difference whether the scholars engaged in the exercise are evangelical or not. For example, while many evangelical scholars continue quite happily to date the Gospel of John in the 90s of the first century A.D., others, who have no particular evangelical reputation, are moved by its affinities with the Qumran texts to date it a few decades earlier.

As for the earliest of our Gospels, Mark, if it is a Roman Gospel (as I think), the crisis of A.D. 64 might have provided a suitable occasion for its publication. But my Manchester predecessor, T. W. Manson, was willing to push it back into the 50s, considering that a suitable occasion for its publication might have been the reconstitution of the church in Rome about A.D. 55, after its dispersion when Claudius banished the Roman Jews about A.D. 49.

This is getting quite close to Dr. O'Callaghan's suggested date for this fragment. If I could agree with him in identifying the fragment as a piece of Mark's Gospel, I should then be tempted to give my imagination free rein and suggest that this and other manuscripts in cave 7 were, somehow and some time, brought from Rome to Palestine in the jar found in that cave on which the Hebrew or Aramaic word for "Rome" is written twice.

But that admittedly would be both speculative and subjective—a far cry from the objective criteria I have advocated in this article!

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