

New Testament Chronology

by

Thomas D. Ross

Introduction

The chronological sequence of the New Testament books provides valuable background information which influences their interpretation. Each was a concrete unit of revelation given by inspiration of God within a particular historical and temporal setting. A brief examination of the dates of the canonical New Testament books is given below, in the order in which they appear in the English Bible. Analysis will touch on instances where believing men come to divergent conclusions, but paper will not be spent on extended refutations of modernistic speculations.

General Synopsis of Dates

Matthew c. 35-55

Mark c. 63-68

Luke c. 56-60

John c. 80-100

Acts c. 59-62

Romans c. 56-58

1 Corinthians c. 55-57

2 Corinthians c. 55-58

Galatians c. 47-49

Ephesians c. 59-62

Philippians c. 60-62

Colossians c. 59-62

1 Thessalonians c. 50-51

2 Thessalonians c. 51

1 Timothy c. 62-66

2 Timothy c. 64-67

Titus c. 63-66

Philemon c. 59-62

Hebrews c. 59-62

James c. 42-49
1 Peter c. 62-66
2 Peter c. 63-68
1 John c. 80-95
2 John c. 80-95
3 John c. 80-95
Jude c. 63-80
Revelation c. 94-96

Matthew

Early church history informs us that Matthew was the first gospel chronologically, given by inspiration through the apostle Matthew, and followed later by Luke and last by Mark. Matthew first wrote in Hebrew, probably very early, and later penned his canonical gospel in Greek; in Matthew's gospel itself, as well as the general time of composition of the other inspired records of Christ's life, the gospel went to the Jew first, then to the Greek. Scripture and history testify to the independence of the gospel narratives; it is likely that none of the writers had access to a canonical composition of another. This tends to push the date of the composition of Matthew closer to that of Luke, since the churches would doubtless begin to circulate inspired writings immediately, which we will see was composed in the fifties. Contrariwise, the necessity of an apologetic for Christ, which demonstrated the continuity of the new and old covenants, in the land of Palestine, would appear quickly under pressure from Jews who remained unconverted, although the presence of the apostles would reduce this need somewhat (Ac 8:1). It seems reasonable to conclude that Matthew's gospel was composed c. 35-55, with the Hebrew version of the gospel composed earlier in that period and the inspired Greek version later in it.

Mark

Mark's gospel was probably the last of the three synoptics written. He was spiritually immature during the childhood years of church history, evidenced in his shirking of the duties of the ministry (Ac 13:13, 15:38); this demonstrates that he was not suitable early on for membership in the number of those holy men of God who spake as they were moved by the Holy

Ghost. Paul does not say a positive word about him until his final epistle (2 Tim 4:11; but cf. Col 4:10), written shortly before his martyrdom— however, he cites Luke’s gospel as Scripture in the earlier epistle of 1 Timothy (Lu 10:7, 1 Tim 5:18) which proves it was already in circulation at that point of time. Luke consequently wrote before Mark. Furthermore, it seems likely that Irenaeus seems to state that Mark wrote his gospel after the death of Peter and Paul; however, some take his statement to refer to their exodus to other localities, rather than his death. The absence of any (non-prophetic) reference to the destruction of the temple in A. D. 70, just as in Matthew and Luke, affirm that the gospel was composed before that date. It was likely composed c. 63-68. However, if Irenaeus does not place its composition after the death of Peter and Paul, it could be placed earlier.

Luke

Luke’s gospel must be dated before Acts, for the gospel is the “former treatise” (Ac 1:1, cf. Lu 1:1-4) of which the book of the Acts is the later. Since Acts was composed c. A. D. 61, Luke’s gospel must date to an earlier period. Furthermore, it must pre-date 1 Timothy, since Paul quotes it as Scripture in that book (1 Tim 5:18, Lu 10:7). It was likely written c. A. D. 56-60, perhaps while Paul was in prison at Caesarea (Ac 27:1), when the beloved physician may have had extra time to conduct the researches he mentions in Lu 1:1-4.

John

The apostle John’s gospel was the last of the four to be composed. Clement of Alexandria states that he wrote his gospel aware of the contents of the other three. Furthermore, the absence of emphasis upon the destruction of Jerusalem makes it likely that the gospel was composed some time separated from that event, when furor over it had decreased. It appears to have been written at Ephesus, and so could not have been composed before A. D. 70, because the apostle John did not arrive there until after that date. John the apostle also lived for a long time; Irenaeus testifies that he lived until the time of Trajan, who began to reign in A. D. 98. However, the gospel must, as John’s epistles, be dated before the Revelation, the final book of the canon, which was written before A. D. 97. It seems safe to date the gospel c. 80-95.

Acts

Since the book of Acts ends abruptly with Paul's first Roman imprisonment, it is best to date the book shortly after that time, namely, c. A. D. 59-62. It is reasonable to assume that Paul's deliverance from prison and subsequent adventures would have been recounted if they had yet taken place, although an argument that the purpose of Acts is completed with the spread of the gospel to Rome has some merit, and would then make this argument for an early date invalid.

Romans

The book of Romans was written shortly before Paul departed to Jerusalem with the collection for the saints there (Rom 15:25, cf. Ac 20:3), probably from Corinth, on his third missionary journey. The date for this is placed between A. D. 56-58.

1 Corinthians

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians c. A. D. 55-57 from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) during his three year sojourn there (Ac 19:10, 20:31) on his third missionary journey, probably close to the conclusion of his stay around Pentecost (1 Cor 16:8). He had planted the church on his previous journey (1 Cor 3:6, Ac 18:1).

2 Corinthians

Paul likely wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (2 Cor 2:12-13, 7:5-7, 8:1, 9:2-4) probably several months after his composition of 1 Corinthians, probably at Philippi, or perhaps Thessalonica. This would place it c. A. D. 55-58. However, it was written before Romans.

Galatians

The date of the epistle of Paul to the Galatians is the subject of a good deal of controversy; it is debated whether Paul wrote to churches in southern Galatia established on his

first missionary journey, or to churches in northern Galatia started at a later time, and it is also questioned whether he wrote before or after the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. It appears best to hold to a southern Galatian view, and the lack of definite mention of the Acts 15 meeting in the Jerusalem church would favor a date before that time, since it seems reasonable to conclude that Paul would have used it to buttress his argument had this event taken place. Northern Galatian views lead to dates c. 53-56, and others who hold to southern Galatia view date it after the Jerusalem council nevertheless, but an early, pre-Acts 15 date seems best.

Ephesians

The epistle to the Ephesians was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (Ac 28:16, Eph 3:1, 4:1, 6:20), and carried to the church there by Tychicus (Eph 6:21-22), who also carried the letter to the Colossians, which was consequently written in the same time period (Col 4:7-9), as was Philemon (Col 4:9, Philem 10-12). This would place it between A. D. 59-62.

Philippians

The epistle of Paul to the Philippians was inspired during Paul's first Roman imprisonment (1:13, 4:22). It was probably written close to the conclusion of his two year (Ac 28:30-31) stay there, since it contains various intimations that a decision on his case was near at hand (1:12, 13, 23-26, 2:23-24). Furthermore, a historical sequence of news of Paul's arrival at Rome reaching Philippi, Epaphroditus' travel from thence with contributions for Paul, news of his illness at Rome returning to Philippi, and news of concern for Epaphroditus reaching Rome again, necessitates a period somewhat removed from Paul's initial arrival in Rome. Consequently, depending on the exact period the Roman imprisonment is assigned to, Philippians was probably written after Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon in the period c. 60-62.

Colossians

Colossians was inspired in the same time period as Ephesians, namely, Paul's first Roman imprisonment. There seems no way to determine definitely which of the two was written

first. The epistle is consequently dated c. 59-62.

1 Thessalonians

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians from Corinth on his second missionary journey. Archeological research demonstrates that Gallio (Ac 18:12) became procounsel of Achaia in the summer of A. D. 51 and remained in that post for about a year. It appears that the unconverted Jews sought to bring Paul before him early in his procounselate, and Ac 18:11 appears to indicate that Paul had already spent a year and a half at Corinth at that time. This would place the date of the composition of the epistle in 50-51.

2 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians was written shortly after Paul's first epistle to the church at Thessalonica. Silvanus and Timothy were still with Paul (1 Thess 1:1, 2 Thess 1:1). The state of the church appears almost exactly the same, apart from the development of aberrant eschatological teaching and an increase in persecution (2 Thess 1:4-5). The problem with individuals neglecting ordinary employment continues (1 Thess 2:9, 4:10-12, 2 Thess 3:6-14). Consequently the epistle was written c. A. D. 51.

1 Timothy

Paul's first epistle to Timothy, whom he had left to oversee the church at Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3), was composed in the interval between his first and second Roman imprisonments. Within the confines of that period of time we have no solid information which can give us a precise date; it was written c. 62-66, perhaps with a greater tendency toward the latter end of that time span, to allow for ministry in various locations, including Philippi (Phil 2:24) and Spain (Rom 15:24, 28).

2 Timothy

The epistle of 2 Timothy, Paul's last, was composed during his second Roman imprisonment and shortly before his death (2 Tim 4:6) under Neronian persecution. Nero died

on June 8, A. D. 68, so it was probably composed not all that long before that time; assuming the “winter” of 2 Tim 4:21 was not that of A. D. 68, it was likely written either in or before A. D. 67.

Titus

Paul penned the epistle to Titus in the interim between his two Roman imprisonments, possibly from the Achaian city of Nicopolis (Tit 3:12). He had evidently earlier ministered in Crete during an earlier post-1st imprisonment period (Tit 1:5). It was likely written after 1 Timothy. This would give it a date of c. A. D. 63-66.

Philemon

Philemon was written during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment, in the same period as Colossians (Col 4:7-9), with which it was sent to the church at Colossae, where Philemon was a member. It is consequently dated c. A. D. 59-62.

Hebrews

It appears that Paul wrote the epistle to the Hebrews, so the date of its composition must be placed within his lifetime. Furthermore, it appears that references to the temple service and priesthood as still in continuance would give the book a date before A. D. 70 in any case. The readers have not yet suffered death for Christ’s sake, although it seems that such a prospect is in view (Heb 12:3-4), and they had in earlier days been the subject of persecution (Heb 10:32-34). It was written in the latter part of the apostolic era, nevertheless, because second-generation Christians who ought to be teachers are the recipients (Heb 5:12). It was written from Italy (Heb 13:24). It seems likely that Paul wrote it during his first Roman imprisonment, during which he had hopes of release (Heb 13:23, cf. 13:19). To date it during his second Roman imprisonment, when he was executed, requires an abandonment of inerrancy, for then 13:23 would contain an error: Paul says “I will see you,” which necessitates either deliverance from prison or errancy in the text. It should consequently be dated during Paul’s two-year first imprisonment in Rome, c. A. D. 59-62. Note that 2 Peter 3:15-16 refers to Paul’s epistle to the Jewish dispersion, Hebrews,

so the book was written before 2 Peter.

James

The epistle of James, since it was written by Christ's half-brother, must be dated before A. D. 62 or 63, since he was martyred at that time, according to Josephus. The lack of mention of Gentile-related issues suggests it was inspired considerably before this time, and the absence of reference to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 argues for a date before its time, but the fact that Christians are found "scattered abroad" necessitates a date after the stoning of Stephen and the related persecutions that led to the prosecution of the Great Commission beyond the local bounds of the Jerusalem church. It is reasonably dated c. A. D. 42-49.

1 Peter

Since Peter wrote this epistle, it must obviously have been composed during his lifetime, which appears to have ended c. A. D. 67-68 in the thirteenth year of Nero's reign, although it has been argued that he perished earlier in persecution around A. D. 64. Apparent familiarity with various of Paul's epistles would also prevent an especially early date for the letter. It seems wise to place it between c. 62-66.

2 Peter

2 Peter 1:14 indicates that Peter wrote this epistle shortly before his death. Other indications that forbid an exceptionally early date include the collection of Paul's epistles into a group (2 Pe 3:15-16) as inspired writings. Furthermore, 2 Pe 3:1 makes it clear that this epistle was written after 1 Peter. It is properly dated c. 63-68.

1 John

Various similarities in 1 John (and 2 and 3 John) to the gospel of John, and the incipient Gnosticism which seems to be becoming a difficulty at the time of the epistle's composition, make it reasonable to give a date for the epistle in the same range as that for John's gospel. There is no

conclusive method of determining whether the epistle or the gospel was composed first. It is placed c. A. D. 80-95.

2 John

This short epistle, also written by the apostle John, should be dated to the same time period as the other Johannine literature, c. 80-95. It was probably written after 1 John.

3 John

It seems likely that 3 John was composed after 1 and 2 John. Besides this, it is hard to locate a very specific time period for its inspiration. It is dated in the same range as the other Johannine writings, c. A. D. 80-95.

Jude

It appears that Jude was composed after 2 Peter, for it seems to quote 2 Pe 3:3 in v. 17-18. Furthermore, the coming of the false teachers, which was future in 2 Peter, is a present reality in Jude. There is very little on which one may build a case for a specific date. If it was written after 2 Peter, then it must be after A. D. 63; if it was composed before the destruction of Jerusalem, then A. D. 63-70. However, there is no conclusive reason to dogmatize that it was written before Jerusalem's fall, so the outer limit on the book depends upon the longevity of its author. It may be reasonably dated somewhere within the years c. 63-80.

Revelation

The book of the Revelation was the final book of the canon (Rev 22:18-19), and so was inspired last as a fitting capstone to the Bible. Testimony from early Christianity unanimously places the composition of the book near the end of the reign of Domitian (81-96). Consequently, it seems best to date it c. A. D. 94-96.

Bibliography

Aharoni, Yohanan; Avi-Yonah, Michael; Rainey, Anson F. & Safrai, Ze'ev, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3rd. ed., New York, NY: Macmillan, 1993.

Barnes, Albert, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament, Hebrews-Jude*, vol. 13, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998.

Carson, D. A.; Moo, Douglas J. & Morris, Leon, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992.

Gromacki, Robert G., *New Testament Survey*, Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1976.

Hamel, Ken, Online Bible for the Mac 3.0.1, Oakhurst, NJ, 2001, including KJV, *Textus Receptus*, Easton's Bible Dictionary, and Smith's Bible Dictionary modules.

MacArthur, John, *MacArthur's Quick Reference Guide to the Bible*, Nashville, TN: W Publishing, 2001.

Strouse, Thomas M., Lecture Notes for NT 501, 2001 class at Emmanuel Baptist Theological Seminary, Newington, CT.

Thiessen, Henry Clarence, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950.

Thomas, Robert L. & Farnell, David F., *The Jesus Crisis*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998.