



# RETHINKING THE DATES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Evidence for Early Composition



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# Contents

Acknowledgments xi

Abbreviations xv

Introduction 1

## **PART 1 The Synoptic Gospels and Acts**

1. Synchronization 35
2. Contextualization and Authorial Biography 69

## **PART 2 The Johannine Tradition**

3. The Gospel of John 87
4. The Epistles of John and Revelation 113

## **PART 3 The Pauline Corpus**

5. Critical Matters in Dating the Pauline Corpus 133
6. The Compositional Dates of the Pauline Corpus 145

## **PART 4 Hebrews and the Letters of James, Peter, and Jude**

7. Hebrews and James 185
8. 1 and 2 Peter and Jude 213

**PART 5 Early Extracanonial Writings**

9. 1 Clement and the Didache 239
10. The Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd  
of Hermas 261
- Conclusion 277
- Bibliography 281
- Author Index 299
- Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 303
- Subject Index 311

# Introduction

This study asks when each of the twenty-seven books that are now collected in the corpus known as the New Testament were written. It will additionally ask when four extracanonical texts (1 Clement, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, and Shepherd of Hermas) were written. It will conclude that, with the notable exception of the undisputed Pauline Epistles, the majority of the texts that were eventually incorporated into the New Testament corpus were likely written twenty to thirty years earlier than is typically supposed by contemporary biblical scholars. If chronology is the proverbial backbone of history, then the study of Christian origins has developed a scoliosis.

Only a synthetic treatment will be fully adequate to the task of investigating the dates of the New Testament texts. A synthetic treatment considers judgments on a disparate range of distinct yet densely interconnected matters and seeks to integrate them into a complex but unified synthesis. Concretely, such synthetic treatment is necessary because truly serious consideration of the date of any given New Testament text will tend to spiderweb into a need to treat one or more of the other twenty-six. The instance of 1 Timothy 5:18 can readily illustrate this spiderwebbing effect and consequent need for synthesis. First Timothy 5:18 reads as follows: “For the scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves to be paid.’” Here 1 Timothy 5:18 cites first a passage from Deuteronomy (namely, 25:4), followed by a passage found verbatim in Luke 10:7 (with a close parallel in Matt. 10:10). One’s judgment regarding the literary relationship between 1 Timothy 5:18 and Luke 10:7 will have significant implications for how one dates these texts, and vice versa. If one judges that 1 Timothy 5:18 is quoting Luke’s Gospel, then one must also judge that 1 Timothy postdates Luke’s

Gospel. Alternatively, if one judges Luke's Gospel to be later than 1 Timothy 5:18, then one must judge that the latter does not quote Luke 10:7. Yet this does not begin to consider other possibilities—for instance, that 1 Timothy is quoting hypothetical source material such as Q or oral tradition.<sup>1</sup> The relationship between Luke's Gospel and 1 Timothy 5:18 will moreover relate to questions about the Pauline authorship of the epistle. If 1 Timothy 5:18 is judged to be Pauline, then we know that this piece of Jesus tradition existed in its specifically Lukan form by no later than Paul's death, which more likely than not occurred sometime between 62 and 68. Conversely, if one judges that Luke's Gospel must be a post-70 composition and that 1 Timothy 5:18 does indeed quote Luke 10:7, then unless one decides that Paul died later than 68, one must judge that 1 Timothy 5:18 is pseudo-Pauline. Further, questions about the date of Luke's Gospel inevitably intersect with questions about those of Mark's, Matthew's, and Acts. As such, the judgments one makes regarding 1 Timothy 5:18 are mutually entailed with judgments regarding the authenticity of the letter and not only Luke's Gospel but also the broader synoptic tradition. "Disturb the position of one major piece and the pattern starts disconcertingly to dissolve," wrote John A. T. Robinson when he considered the density and interrelationship of the judgments necessary in studying the dates of the New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> If anything, Robinson was guilty of understatement. Only a synthetic treatment allows us to organize the relevant material in such a way as to fully appreciate its empirical significance for determining when the books of the New Testament corpus were written.

A synthetic treatment of the dates of the New Testament texts, if done properly, will inevitably be of monograph length. We have discussed the limitations that judgments about 1 Timothy 5:18 place upon judgments about the synoptic tradition, and vice versa. When we multiply such examples across the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and other potentially relevant early Christian texts, we begin to get a sense of the task's complexity. Such complexity cannot be adequately managed in an article-length contribution, or even in a series of such contributions. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) this complexity, we have remarkably few monograph-length critical studies completed by professional biblical scholars and dedicated to establishing the compositional dates of the entire New Testament corpus. Indeed, John

1. "Q" is the name frequently given to a hypothetical text that the majority of New Testament scholars considers to have been a common source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

2. Robinson, *Redating*, 9.

Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* was the only one to appear in the twentieth century, and the present study represents the first in the twenty-first. This dearth of adequate-length monographs should not be taken as evidence that the dates of the New Testament are so solidly established as to be immune to significant revision but rather as reason to suspect that the dates so frequently affirmed have not been quite so solidly established as we might want to think. Indeed, for such a basic historical matter, there is a somewhat disconcerting multiplicity of irreconcilable views.

## The History of Scholarship

The current state of academic discourse regarding the compositional dates of the New Testament texts can be summarized much as follows. We might heuristically distinguish between three broad chronological frameworks, which may be designated “lower,” “middle,” and “higher” chronologies. All three of these frameworks agree that the undisputed Pauline Epistles should be dated to around the 50s of the first century.<sup>3</sup> Lower chronologies date much of the balance of the New Testament corpus prior to 70; middle chronologies date much of the balance to the period between 70 and 100; and higher chronologies date much of the balance of the New Testament to the second century. Comparable tripartite divisions often use the terms “early,” “middle,” or “late,” for what I here call “lower,” “middle,” and “higher,” respectively. The respective terms can be used more or less interchangeably and are largely a matter of personal taste. Most New Testament scholars would today affirm the middle chronology as most probable, such that it can also be described as the “majority” chronology.

A comparative representation of these three frameworks might look something as follows:

Book	Lower*	Middle (Majority) <sup>†</sup>	Higher <sup>‡</sup>
Matthew	50	70–75	130
Mark	45	65–73	80
Luke	60	80–95	110
John	65	80–110	140
Acts	62	80–95	130

3. As almost all dates given in this study are CE, I will only note when they are BCE. As such, a year without a CE or BCE notation should be read as CE.

Book	Lower*	Middle (Majority) <sup>†</sup>	Higher <sup>‡</sup>
Romans	57	56–57	50
1 Corinthians	55	56	50
2 Corinthians	56	56	50
Galatians	56	53	50
Ephesians	58	57–59	100
Philippians	58	57–59	50
Colossians	58	57–59	80
1 Thessalonians	50	48–49	40
2 Thessalonians	50–51	48–49	120
1 Timothy	55	90–110	140
2 Timothy	58	90–110	140
Titus	57	90–110	140
Philemon	58	57–62	50
Hebrews	67	81–96	110
James	47–48	70–90	130
1 Peter	65	81–96	110
2 Peter	61–62	110–120	150
1 John	60–65	80–110	140
2 John	60–65	80–110	140
3 John	60–65	80–110	140
Jude	61–62	100–130	130
Revelation	68	93–96	150
1 Clement	70	93–97	130
Didache	60	120	150
Epistle of Barnabas	75	130	140
Shepherd of Hermas	prior to 85	140	150

\*Following Robinson, *Redating*, 352, with some modification. Robinson is followed here since (apart from the present study) *Redating* represents the most recent monograph-length synthetic defense of a lower chronology. Modifications are made in interest of resolving ambiguities in Robinson's own summary of his position.

<sup>†</sup>Following Harnack, *Chronologie*, 717–22, with some modification. Harnack is followed here since his *Chronologie* represents the most recent monograph-length synthetic defense of something close to a middle chronology. Modifications are made in the interest of best representing the middle chronology as it stands ca. 2022. Unfortunately, to the best of this author's knowledge, Harnack's *Chronologie* has never been translated into English.

<sup>‡</sup>Following Sturdy, *Redrawing the Boundaries*, 83–86. Sturdy is followed here since *Redrawing* (though incomplete at the time of his passing) represents the most recent effort to mount a monograph-length synthetic defense of a higher chronology.



Of course, in practice each framework will acknowledge variations among actual working biblical scholars, and the boundaries between them will at times be quite porous. Nonetheless, this threefold heuristic typology allows us to begin talking meaningfully about the history of dating the New Testament texts.

For most of Christian history, it was generally supposed that the New Testament texts were written by the authors to which they were traditionally attributed. These traditional authors were contemporaries of Jesus and Paul (in some cases, such as with Mark and perhaps Luke, younger contemporaries). As such, most scholars supposed that the New Testament had been written within just a few decades of Jesus's crucifixion. In the terms articulated above, the traditional time line for the composition of the New Testament was a lower chronology. With the emergence of modern biblical criticism over the course of the nineteenth century, scholars queried whether a traditional time line is consistent with the relevant data. The first major chronological scheme of the modern era was formulated in the mid-nineteenth century by Ferdinand Christian Baur. Baur's chronological framework is the highest that has attracted wide support among New Testament scholars. Baur argued that the latest New Testament text written was John's Gospel, which he dated to the time of the Quartodeciman controversy in the last third of the second century.<sup>4</sup> He allowed that Paul wrote only Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians, judging that the rest of the Pauline corpus were post-Pauline compositions.<sup>5</sup>

New Testament scholarship was right to question the traditional time line. Our convictions regarding the origins of the New Testament should be grounded in historical investigation, not unquestioned acceptance of tradition. The fact that the traditional chronology assigns earlier dates is not sufficient reason to affirm a lower chronology. Conversely, the fact that an early pioneer such as Baur argued for later years of composition is not sufficient reason to affirm a higher chronology. As such, it was also right for scholars to question the Baurian chronology. This occurred at length in the generation following Baur. J. B. Lightfoot argued that John's Gospel could not have been written much later than 100, approximately three-quarters of a century earlier than Baur had dated the text.<sup>6</sup> Subsequent papyrological discoveries

4. Cf. esp. Baur, *First Three Centuries*, 131–32. For this and the following discussion, cf. also Robinson's treatment of the history of the study of the compositional dates of the New Testament in *Redating*, 4–9.

5. Baur, *Paul, the Apostle*, 1:255–381, 2:1–105.

6. Cf. Lightfoot, *Gospel of St. John*, 41–78, 205–325. Although the core of this volume is Lightfoot's once-lost commentary on John's Gospel, discovered by Ben Witherington in 2013,

appeared to confirm Lightfoot's conclusion, although this confirmation has been contested.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as John's Gospel was still considered to be the latest written among the canonical Gospels, Lightfoot's work contributed to a tendency to date the Synoptic Gospels earlier than 100. Moving to the balance of the New Testament, Lightfoot held that Paul wrote all thirteen letters attributed to him, thus necessitating the judgment that none of these could postdate his death.<sup>8</sup> Although contemporary scholars would grant that only Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are indisputably Pauline, with Lightfoot we nonetheless see the emergence of a tendency to lower the overall dates of the New Testament texts from those proposed at the outset of modern historical-critical scholarship.

Standing near the turn of the twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack's *Die Chronologie der Litteratur bis Irenaeus*, published in 1897, followed this tendency to date the New Testament texts substantially earlier than did Baur. In many but not all cases, Harnack opted for dates not far from those of Lightfoot. Harnack would later come to date Luke's Gospel and Acts prior to 70, such that by the end of his career he came to straddle the line between a lower and a middle chronology.<sup>9</sup> The inter- and postwar years saw a shift away from a focus upon basic historical matters such as chronology and toward the concerns of form and redaction criticism. As such, Harnack's *Chronologie* constituted the last synthetic, monograph-length study of the dates of the New Testament completed by a professional biblical scholar until Robinson published his *Redating the New Testament* almost exactly eighty years later. Robinson in turn continued the "Lightfootian" tendency toward lowering the dates of the New Testament, (in)famously arguing that the entirety of the corpus was written prior to 70. The present volume constitutes the first such study since Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*, which is itself now the better part of fifty years old.

At the time of his death, J. V. M. Sturdy was working on a monograph-length response to Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*, which would have constituted a synthetic argument for a higher chronology. Unfortunately, Sturdy

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the pages cited here contain material Lightfoot previously published in Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays*, 1–198.

7. Cf. the discussion of these matters in chap. 3.

8. Cf. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays*, 213–33, 397–418; Lightfoot, *2 Corinthians and 1 Peter*, 1–21.

9. Cf. Harnack, *Date of the Acts*, 99–133.

was unable to complete the volume before his death. What he did manage to produce has now been made available posthumously as *Redrawing the Boundaries*. Certainly, it is better to have access to this material than it would be to not have access. Nonetheless, the arguments contained therein are in many instances significantly underdeveloped. Indeed, Jonathan Knight, in his preface to *Redrawing the Boundaries*, suggests that it “should be regarded as the outline of an argument and not a finished text in itself.”<sup>10</sup> Presumably Sturdy intended to develop his arguments more fully, but we do not know how he would have elected to do so. We also do not know where the work of developing those arguments might have led him to revise or even abandon positions adopted in the incomplete work, and whether such revision would have resulted in lower or higher estimates for any given date of composition. As such, through no fault of its author, Sturdy’s *Redrawing the Boundaries* does not stand as an adequate reply to Robinson’s *Redating the New Testament*.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, given the incomplete state of *Redrawing the Boundaries*, it would be uncharitable to consider it the best possible argument for a higher chronology. There has been no comparable synthetic effort to articulate and defend a middle chronology in response to Robinson, perhaps because as the majority position it is not seen as something requiring defense. Cumulatively, although Robinson’s chronology has not been widely adopted, neither has it been systematically refuted. Rather, it has suffered what we might describe as benign neglect.

Given the current state of the question, three volumes seem to be necessary at this juncture. One would be a rearticulated argument for a lower chronology, comparable in depth and breadth of research and quality of argumentation to Robinson’s. This study aims to be that volume. A second volume would argue for a middle chronology, and a third for a higher one. With all three volumes produced, we could let the individual reader decide which presents the strongest overall case. I am not the scholar to produce all three volumes. The discipline of New Testament studies deserves for each of these volumes to be argued as effectively as possible, and that is best achieved when they are written by persons firmly and enthusiastically convinced that their preferred chronological framework best accounts for the data. I only believe that to be the case with lower chronology and thus lack the requisite qualifications to argue most effectively for middle and higher chronologies. Nonetheless, I would be most

10. Knight, preface to Sturdy, *Redrawing the Boundaries*, vii.

11. But see also Sturdy, review of *Redating*. Sturdy’s review is remarkably balanced and fair, especially given that he fundamentally disagrees with Robinson’s conclusion.

gratified if this volume serves as impetus and aid for the necessary, comparable volumes arguing for middle and higher chronologies. Until such volumes are produced, lower chronology will occupy an intellectually privileged position, insofar as it will remain the only broad framework for the dates of the New Testament texts to have received the requisite, monograph-length, synthetic defense since the Victorian era. Indeed, it will have received two such defenses during that time, while middle and higher chronologies will have received none.

### On Going beyond Robinson

As discussed above, this study seeks to present a renewed case for a lower chronology of the New Testament compositions. As such, it will frequently suggest dates for the composition of the New Testament texts that are in many (but far from all) cases similar to those advanced in Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*. Given that Robinson made the requisite monograph-length case for a lower chronology, the reader might legitimately wonder why a renewed case is necessary at all. This is best explicated by identifying certain limitations in Robinson's work.

Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* attracted a great deal of attention from his fellow biblical scholars as well as church historians. This is hardly surprising. Robinson was already a well-established name within New Testament studies and the broader theological world. His 1963 monograph, *Honest to God*, had previously been a deeply influential work. And since *Redating the New Testament* was the first work of its sort since Harnack's *Chronologie* eighty years earlier, New Testament scholars could ill afford to ignore its arguments. But it was probably the central thesis—namely, that all the New Testament was written prior to 70—that attracted most attention. Some responses were positive.<sup>12</sup> Many were fair.<sup>13</sup> A few were neither.<sup>14</sup> Here, I identify what I consider to be the three most significant problems with Robinson's argumentation in *Redating the New Testament*: Robinson's tendency to approach the events of 70 through arguments from silence; what I term his

12. In this category we include Ellis, "Dating the New Testament"; Moody, review of *Redating*. Ellis describes his own *Making of the New Testament* (xv–xvi) as a "supplement to Robinson's investigations."

13. In this category we include reviews of Robinson's *Redating* by the following: Donahue, Hardy, Murphy, Sloyan, Snyder, and Sturdy.

14. In this category we include Fitzmyer, "Two Views"; Grant, review of *Redating*.

“Neronian error”; and his less-than-adequate attention to the method and organization of his study.

### ***The Events of 70 and Arguing from Silence***

From 66 through 73, Jewish rebel groups within the land of Israel engaged in open revolt against Roman rule. Particularly crucial for purposes of this study are the events of 70. In that year, the Romans besieged and eventually razed Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed. Here, Josephus’s account may help us understand the extent of the destruction.

The army now having no victims either for slaughter or plunder, through lack of all objects on which to vent their rage—for they would assuredly never have desisted through a desire to spare anything so long as there was work to be done—Caesar ordered the whole city and the temple to be razed to the ground, leaving only the loftiest of the towers, Phasael, Hippicus, and Mariamme, and the portion of the wall enclosing the city on the west: the latter as an encampment for the garrison that was to remain, and the towers to indicate to posterity the nature of the city and of the strong defences which had yet yielded to Roman prowess. All the rest of the wall encompassing the city was so completely levelled to the ground as to leave future visitors to the spot no ground for believing that it had ever been inhabited. Such was the end to which the frenzy of revolutionaries brought Jerusalem, that splendid city of world-wide renown.<sup>15</sup>

Of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, Robinson writes,

One of the oddest facts about the New Testament is that what on any showing appears to be the single most datable and climatic event of the period—the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and with it the collapse of institutional Judaism based on the temple—is never once mentioned as a past fact. It is, of course, predicted; and these predictions are, in some cases at least, assumed to be written (or written up) after the event. But the silence is nevertheless as significant as the silence for Sherlock Holmes of the dog that did not bark.<sup>16</sup>

Since Robinson’s writing, scholars have challenged whether the events of 70 were as traumatic a turning point for Jewish life and religion as he seems to

15. Josephus, *J.W.* 7.1.1 §§1–4 (Thackeray).

16. Robinson, *Redating*, 13.

suppose.<sup>17</sup> Although such challenges are relevant to Robinson's observation, of greater immediate interest is his invocation of the argument from silence. It is of course quite true that the New Testament never refers to the fall of Jerusalem as a past fact. It does not necessarily follow, however, that this silence in and of itself is particularly significant for establishing the dates of the New Testament. Indeed, I argue that in most cases it is not.

John Lange has considered the historiographical issues surrounding arguments from silence at length.<sup>18</sup> He identifies two conditions for affirming arguments from silence that seem particularly relevant for our work: (1) "There is a document, D, extant, in which the event, E, is not mentioned"; and (2) "E must be such that, if it had occurred, the author of D could not have overlooked it."<sup>19</sup> These are not the only conditions that Lange discusses, but they are the most relevant for our present purposes. In order to more fully account for the probabilistic nature of historiography, I would soften the second of these conditions, such that it reads, "E must be such that, if it had occurred, the author of D is not likely to have overlooked it." Even granted this softer articulation, it is far from evident that the above conditions are both met in the case of the New Testament's treatment of events of 70. Regarding the first condition, it is indeed the case that the New Testament corpus fails to mention the destruction of the temple as a past event. Nonetheless, regarding the second condition, it is not self-evident to me that we should expect the New Testament authors to have done so if writing after 70.

The matter of 70, however, cannot be ignored since a writing's knowledge of either the current state of the temple or of its eventual fate can constitute crucial data. Concretely, when considering the matter of 70 regarding any given New Testament book, we must ask two questions: (1) Is there material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70? (2) Is there material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if written after 70? If there is material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if it was written prior to 70, *and* other material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if it was written after 70, then the book likely postdates 70 but preserves pre-70 material. If there is material that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70, and if there is no material in the book that is most fully intelligible only

17. Cf. the discussions in Schwartz and Weiss, *Was 70 CE a Watershed?*

18. Lange, "Argument from Silence." Lange is engaging the work of Langlois and Seignobos, *Study of History*.

19. Lange, "Argument from Silence," 290.

if written subsequent to 70, then the book most likely predates 70. If there is no material that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70, and no material that is most fully intelligible only if written subsequent to 70, then the probability that the book predates 70 is equal to the probability that it postdates it. If there is no material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70, and if there is material that is most fully intelligible only if written subsequent to 70, then the book most likely postdates 70 (although one cannot exclude the possibility that it contains material which predates 70). The above possibilities might well be summarized in the following diagram:

		Is there material that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70?	
		Yes	No
Is there material that is most fully intelligible only if written after 70?	Yes	The book most likely postdates 70, while preserving material that predates 70.	The book most likely postdates 70, although it might also preserve material that predates 70.
	No	The book most likely predates 70.	There is equal probability that the book predates or postdates 70.

It is the contention of this study that while there are New Testament books that contain material most fully intelligible only if written prior to 70, there are no New Testament books that contain material most fully intelligible only if written after 70. By focusing on what the texts say rather than on what they do not say, we can come to this conclusion without falling into a fallacious argument from silence.

### ***The Domitianic and Neronian Errors***

Robinson is deeply and rightly skeptical about what we might call the “Domitianic Error.”<sup>20</sup> Said error has two limbs: first, that in his later years the emperor Domitian (r. 81–96) actively and significantly persecuted the early Christians; second, that many of the unspecified references to persecution scattered throughout the New Testament are references to this putative Domitianic persecution. From these limbs, scholars often conclude that

20. Cf. esp. Robinson, *Redating*, 230–33.

a given New Testament text must postdate the beginning of the supposed Domitianic persecution. The difficulty with the first limb is that Domitian might not have actively and significantly persecuted the early Christians. The problem with the second limb is that even if he did, many if not most of the references to persecution throughout the New Testament might refer instead to another persecution. As noted above, Robinson rightly rejects this Domitianic error, but then in turn he adopts what we might call a “Neronian error,” which replicates both limbs noted above but with regard to the emperor Nero (r. 54–68).

In modern scholarship, the first of the limbs enumerated above is closely associated with no less a name than Lightfoot.<sup>21</sup> In the ancient world, the first notice of a possible Domitianic persecution appears in the late second century, when Melito of Sardis singles out Nero and Domitian as active persecutors of the Christian faith.<sup>22</sup> Melito’s testimony at least raises the possibility that Christians suffered as a result of actions associated with Domitian. Yet already a century ago, the classicist E. T. Merrill argued that this Domitianic persecution never happened.<sup>23</sup> Only careful attention to the data can resolve the matter.

Suetonius reports that Domitian had Flavius Clemens put to death in 95 and describes the latter as lacking energy.<sup>24</sup> Lightfoot interprets Flavius Clemens’s supposed lack of energy as the consequence of the equivocal situation in which a Christian holding high office would have found himself.<sup>25</sup> At best we can say of Lightfoot’s reading that it is not impossible, but it hardly rises to the level of probability. Writing somewhat later than Suetonius, Dio Cassius also reports that “Domitian slew, along with many others, Flavius Clemens the consul, although he was a cousin and had to wife Flavia Domitilla, who was also a relative of the emperor’s. The charge brought against them both was that of atheism, a charge on which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned. Some of these were put to death, and the rest were at least deprived of their property. Domitilla was merely banished to Pandateria.”<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot argues that this combination of “atheism” and “Jewish practices” renders it virtually certain that Flavius Clemens and

21. Cf. the discussion in Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, pt. 1, 1:33–42.

22. According to Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.8–9.

23. Merrill, *Essays in Early Christian History*, 148–73.

24. Suetonius, *Dom.* 15.

25. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, pt. 1, 1:35.

26. Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 67.14.1–2 (Cary).



Flavia Domitilla were Christians.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Peter Lampe has argued that Flavius Clemens was not a Christian but that Flavia Domitilla was.<sup>28</sup> For our purposes, even if Flavius Clemens or Flavia Domitilla was Christian, the execution of one member of the imperial family and the banishment of another hardly suffice to demonstrate any wider anti-Christian activity during Domitian's reign.

In his discussion of such supposed wider anti-Christian activity, Eusebius reports that Domitian banished many Christians, singling out by name John the Evangelist and Flavia Domitilla.<sup>29</sup> Eusebius then reports that Domitian ordered the execution of the family of David, which led to the grandsons of Jude, brother of Jesus, being brought before the emperor.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as Eusebius himself relates the incident, Domitian had Jude's grandsons released without any punishment and then ordered that the persecution of Christians cease.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, leaving aside questions regarding the veracity of Eusebius's account, whether Domitian's purported interrogation of the family of David was motivated by anti-Christian sentiment or policy is not clear. The incident is at least equally if not more intelligible as resulting from measures aimed at preventing messianic uprisings in the decades following the first revolt. While there is some reason to think that Domitian's reign was not a high-water mark in Christian-imperial relations, there is little evidence for widespread persecution.

We have not yet addressed the second limb of the Domitianic error—namely, that many of the unspecified references to persecution in the New Testament are to the supposed Domitianic persecution. Let us grant for the sake of argument that the occurrence of a Domitianic persecution was more widespread than the evidence necessarily warrants. Certainly, many of the references to persecution in the New Testament might be to this supposed Domitianic persecution. In many cases, however, they could potentially be references to other persecutions, ones that have nothing to do with Domitian. They need to be determined on a case-by-case basis. The relevant passages will be considered throughout this study.

Although Robinson recognizes the dangers of the Domitianic error, he unfortunately tends to lapse into a comparable “Neronian error.” This Neronian

27. As argued by Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, pt. 1, 1:34.

28. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 198–205.

29. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.17–18.

30. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.19.1–3.20.7.

31. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.20.5.

error shares limbs quite similar to those of the Domitianic error: first, that Nero actively and significantly persecuted the church; second, that many of the unspecified references to persecution scattered throughout the New Testament are references to this putative Neronian persecution. Admittedly, the first limb of the Neronian error holds up to empirical scrutiny better than its Domitianic counterpart, in that we have greater reason to suppose that Christians experienced what they considered to be persecution under Nero rather than under Domitian. Suetonius and Tacitus both report such measures, with Tacitus identifying these anti-Christian measures as a response to the Great Fire of Rome in July 64.<sup>32</sup> Yet Brent Shaw has recently called into question whether there was ever such a Neronian persecution.<sup>33</sup> Though Shaw judges it improbable that Nero arrested persons already known as Christians in connection with the fire, he also leaves open the possibility that “some persons labelled *Chrestiani* were caught up in the dragnet of 64 and suffered punishment, [and] Christians later (mistakenly or deliberately) interpreted these actions as the Roman state having persecuted them *as Christians*.”<sup>34</sup> This latter possibility would suffice for us to at least consider that certain unspecified references to persecution in the New Testament literature might refer in retrospect to these events. Such persons need not have already been labeled “Christians” at this time but rather merely belonged to groups that Tacitus knew by this term in retrospect.

It is on its second limb, however, that Robinson’s Neronian error is most evident. While it is altogether possible that certain unspecified references to persecution within the New Testament corpus do indeed have the events of the 60s in mind, most such references are sufficiently vague that they could refer to any persecutory experience over the first few Christian decades. In some cases, these need not even reference any specific or actual experience of persecution. Just as New Testament scholarship tends to see Domitian’s presence more frequently than the data permit, Robinson tends to do the same with Nero’s rule. A sterling example of this is the treatment of 1 Clement. A tradition going back to Lightfoot associates the references to hardships within 1 Clement 1–7 with Domitian.<sup>35</sup> Robinson instead associates these references

32. Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44.

33. Shaw, “Myth of the Neronian Persecution.” Cf. also Jones, “Historicity of the Neronian Persecution”; Shaw, “Response to Christopher Jones.”

34. Shaw, “Response to Christopher Jones,” 241–42 (emphasis original).

35. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, pt. 1, 1:350–52.

with the Neronian persecution.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, as we will see in chapter 9, these references could very well be to any other persecution. Alternatively, they might be to persecution in general rather than to a specific event. This study thus aims to bring much the same skepticism that Robinson quite appropriately brought to Domitianic explanations and apply it to Neronian ones as well. Indeed, it will conclude that only one New Testament book—namely, Revelation—betrays likely knowledge of the Neronian persecution.

### ***Method and Organization***

We earlier saw Robinson quote Sherlock Holmes. Personally, I prefer Hercule Poirot, who regularly lectures those around him on the need for method in any investigation. The typical New Testament scholar working today would fully agree with Poirot. Indeed, from the perspective of current New Testament studies, one of the significant limitations of Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* is a failure to explicitly address the matter of method. Such lack of explicit attention to method allows Robinson's critics to misunderstand or misrepresent his historical methods. By way of example, Robert Grant writes, "Robinson's arguments are based essentially on authority, sometimes that of 19th-century English scholars (Zahn and Harnack)."<sup>37</sup> This is not altogether accurate. Certainly, Robinson cites secondary scholarship, as is de rigeur in New Testament studies, and since it is difficult to please everyone, Donald J. Murphy criticizes him for not citing enough sources.<sup>38</sup> With Grant, I certainly acknowledge that Robinson too quickly affirms the rather problematic argumentation at times put forward in George Edmundson's *The Church in Rome in the First Century*.<sup>39</sup> But Robinson consistently surveys the relevant data from the ancient world carefully, and it is this data, not appeal to authority, that is the basis of his judgments. Indeed, Grant demonstrates very well how Robinson is appealing to data, not to authority. Grant argues that "another authority, not really any more weighty, is Eusebius, whose comments Robinson uses from the *Chronicles* and the *Church History* when they please him; often they do not."<sup>40</sup> Then Grant goes on to note that "Robinson himself does a fine job of demolishing

36. Cf. Robinson, *Redating*, 144, 330.

37. Grant, review of *Redating*, 295.

38. Murphy, review of *Redating*, 564.

39. Grant, review of *Redating*, 295.

40. Grant, review of *Redating*, 295.

a Eusebian date when he wants to.”<sup>41</sup> Grant also notes correctly that Robinson rejects Irenaeus’s statement that Revelation was written under Domitian and cites the various ancient sources that Robinson uses in making his decision.<sup>42</sup> Yet Grant’s criticism fails to distinguish between three distinct operations: citing the secondary literature with which a scholar has interacted; the work of determining the relevance of ancient data to the task of historical reconstruction; and the fallacious appeal to authority. Robinson does the first and second of these at length, but rarely, if ever, the third.

Grant’s criticism, however, does lead us to ask two important questions: What constitutes evidence, and how should the historical work handle it? Robinson’s method is quite close to that developed by the British philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood.<sup>43</sup> Such method is defined broadly as “inferential.” Any or all statements by ancient writers, along with any or all artifacts or features uncovered by archaeologists, can be theoretically integrated into what Collingwood terms the historian’s “web of imaginative construction.”<sup>44</sup> When evaluating any given argument regarding what happened in the past, it is the quality of this “web” that is evaluated. Such a conception of the historian’s work leads Collingwood to write,

The web of imaginative construction is something far more solid and powerful than we have hitherto realized. So far from relying for its validity upon the support of given facts, it actually serves as the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine. Suetonius tells me that Nero at one time intended to evacuate Britain. I reject his statement, not because any better authority flatly contradicts it, for of course none does; but because my reconstruction of Nero’s policy based on Tacitus will not allow me to think that Suetonius is right. And if I am told that this is merely to say I prefer Tacitus to Suetonius, I confess that I do: but I do so just because I find myself able to incorporate what Tacitus tells me into a coherent and continuous picture of my own, and cannot do this for Suetonius.<sup>45</sup>

Robinson is engaged in much the same sort of procedure when he concludes that Eusebius (or Irenaeus) is more or less accurate on this point but

41. Grant, review of *Redating*, 295.

42. Grant, review of *Redating*, 295.

43. Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*.

44. Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 242–44.

45. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 244.

must be rejected on another. This is really unobjectionable, as far as it goes. Where Robinson gets into difficulties is that he never explicates how he goes about building his web of imaginative construction. This leads not only to a lack of clarity but also to positions that at times border on the fantastic.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps most problematic, having failed to attend carefully to the matter of method, Robinson ends up presenting the relevant data and argumentation in a somewhat haphazard fashion. Why this datum is presented before that one, why a certain datum receives greater significance than another one, and so on, is often less than clear. At times *Redating the New Testament* reads like a stream of consciousness that has something to do with the compositional dates of the New Testament. This poses some difficulty for navigating *Redating the New Testament* and for evaluating the quality of its argumentation. By way of concrete example, while writing of Robinson's argumentation regarding the date of Luke-Acts, Joseph Fitzmyer wryly states that "it is difficult to respond to a writer who likes to shift the burden of proof to others and characterizes as 'dogmatic' (an adjective very dear to Robinson) any view that he opposes."<sup>47</sup> Although I might quibble with Fitzmyer's characterization of Robinson's argumentation, it is certainly true that Robinson's language is at times infelicitous. *Redating the New Testament* would be easier to follow and thus frankly more persuasive had Robinson taken care to be more systematic in presenting his argumentation. This study thus aims to be much more explicit about how it arrives at its conclusions, why a given argument is important, and where it fits into the larger structure of the work. We turn to this explicatory task in the next section.

## Defining the Question

Much like Robinson, my own methodological inclinations can be described as inferential, drawing heavily upon the work of Collingwood but also the mediating work of Bernard Lonergan and Ben F. Meyer.<sup>48</sup> In my understanding,

46. Cf., for instance, his argument that the author of Hebrews knew and was responding to the *Quo Vadis?* myth, and that this supports a pre-70 date for the letter—even though the *Quo Vadis?* myth itself is unattested prior to the second century (Robinson, *Redating*, 214). Cf. more on this matter in chap. 7 below.

47. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1:55.

48. For my fuller engagement with the thought of Lonergan and Meyer as it relates to NT historiography, cf. Bernier, *Quest*, esp. 1–70. For examples of Collingwood's influence on Lonergan and Meyer, cf. esp. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 164–219; Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, 81–92;

historical method consists of three fundamental steps: identify and *define* the research question, *generate* hypotheses that might answer the question, and *adjudicate* between competing hypotheses in order to determine the best answer. This and the following sections discuss each of these steps in turn. In this section, we identify and define our research question. This study seeks to answer a single overarching question: When were those texts that were later collected into the Christian New Testament composed? What follows will explicate the significant terms in this carefully formulated question.

### ***Date of Composition***

By “when were . . . composed,” or what we might more grammatically designate “the date of composition,” I refer to the time at which the author or authors *completed* the text in question. I emphasize completion because Robinson recurrently fails to make clear whether he is interested primarily in when the works in question were more or less finished or the time span over which they were being written. This recurrent failure leads to ambiguities in his discussion of the data and his own argumentation. That having been said, it goes without saying that many of the texts under discussion in this work were surely the product of extended compositional processes. Moreover, all the texts under discussion evince some degree of variation after the date of completion suggested here.

My aim is always for absolute rather than relative dates, although relative dates will often be indispensable in the effort to define absolute ones. Absolute dates, in the context of this study, are those defined by reference to the Gregorian calendar for months and days, and the BCE/CE system for years. Relative dates are those defined by reference to other events, usually by defining the order in which they occurred and, if possible, the temporal interval between their occurrences. For instance, to state that Paul set out for Rome in 59 is to state an absolute date, but to state that this occurred two years after he was arrested in Jerusalem is to state a relative date. Although I aim to define absolute dates with as much precision as possible, in most cases a difference of a couple years or sometimes more in either direction would not substantially alter the framework being developed.

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Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 157–72. Cf. also the recent discussion of Collingwood’s relevance for NT scholarship in Ryan, “Jesus at the Crossroads.” Meyer’s own project was in large part an effort to mediate Lonergan’s thought for NT studies; cf. esp. Meyer, *Critical Realism*; and Meyer, *Reality and Illusion*.

## Texts

By the term “texts” I mean objects that we would recognize as versions of the biblical books under discussion. In seeking to determine more precisely the content of these texts, I depend upon the work of the editors of the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th edition (typically abbreviated as NA<sup>28</sup>). For the purposes of this study, textual criticism of the New Testament is sufficiently developed that unless one can demonstrate positively that a passage found in NA<sup>28</sup> and adduced as evidence for a text’s date of composition is a secondary addition, one should assume that it is of relevance for our purposes. Any other procedure risks descent into an unworkable morass wherein one must demonstrate that every single word in a text, perhaps even every single letter, is coeval with every other. Such a tedious procedure forecloses any real possibility for historical inquiry. In truth, there are relatively few instances in which a given chronological argument is affected by a significantly contested textual tradition. These instances will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The fact and development of early Christian textuality have often been studied as objects in their own rights. This has potential implications for establishing the compositional dates of the New Testament texts. It has been fashionable throughout the modern period to suppose that it took some time for early Christians to have either the capacity or the inclination to write texts, especially extended narratives such as the Gospels.<sup>49</sup> If indeed we can establish that there was a date before which Christians either were unable or unwilling to write texts, then we would be forced to conclude that all extant Christian texts postdate that time. Such a date would be altogether welcome: it would serve to narrow the chronological range within which our texts might have been produced. Let us then examine the evidence for this putative early Christian inability or reluctance to write.

We begin with the question of ability.<sup>50</sup> Unless we suppose that the entirety of the Pauline corpus is spurious and late, we know that early Christians were writing as early as 50. Indeed, the most recently proposed significant revision of Pauline chronology—that of Douglas Campbell—argues that 1 and 2 Thessalonians were written sometime in 40 through 42, almost a decade

49. Cf. the relatively recent overview of this supposition and related issues in Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, 15–158.

50. Cf. the earlier treatment of this matter in Bernier, *Quest*, 136–37. On the *status quaestionis* regarding Jewish literacy in the mid-first century, cf. the succinct overview of “Scribal Culture in the Time of Jesus” provided by Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy*, 71–123.

earlier than most other chronologies place the earliest Pauline texts.<sup>51</sup> We will see in chapter 6 that there is reason not to date 1 and 2 Thessalonians as early as 40. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable insight operative within Douglas Campbell's work; namely, that if—as virtually no New Testament scholar would dispute—Paul could have been writing as early as 50, then there is little reason to doubt that he could have been writing ca. 40. And if Paul could have been writing ca. 40, then there is little reason to doubt that there were other Christians who could have been doing the same. Moreover, if Paul could have composed texts such as Romans by the end of the 50s, then it is unclear why other Christians could not have composed texts such as the canonical Gospels just as early.

Further confidence regarding the existence of literate Christians prior to 50 is to be found in the limited statistical and demographical evidence available to us. It has become conventional wisdom to say that 5 to 15 percent of persons in the ancient world were literate.<sup>52</sup> More recent work has suggested that the range was more likely 2.5 to 5 percent for the adult population of Roman Judea.<sup>53</sup> Properly speaking, both the presence within early Christian communities of persons from the diaspora and the spread of the new movement into the broader eastern Mediterranean limits the propriety of utilizing statistics specific to Judea, but our argument is only strengthened if we use the numbers that are least favorable rather than those most favorable. For the sake of argument, let us suppose that 2.5 percent most closely approximates the literacy rate among early Christian communities. When we are told, then, that three thousand joined the church during the first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:41), we have reason to think that seventy-five of these were literate; when we are told that five hundred brothers and sisters saw the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:6), we have reason to think that twelve of these were literate; and when we are told that 120 persons were present when Matthias was chosen to succeed Judas (Acts 1:15), we have reason to think that three of these were literate. Even allowing for the possibilities that these demographics are exaggerated and that the early Christians likely came disproportionately from lower social classes and thus might have had a lower rate of literacy than the general population, there is good reason to think that already within the first decade of Christianity there were dozens if not hundreds of literate persons within the new movement. This is apart from the possibility

51. Cf. D. Campbell, *Framing Paul*, 190–253.

52. Cf. the classic study in Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 323–37.

53. Wise, *Language and Literacy*, 350.



that members of the movement could have potentially hired scribes to assist them in composing documents of various sorts.

On the matter of willingness to write, we should take note of early Christian respect for written texts, particularly those of the Jewish scriptural tradition.<sup>54</sup> Although certainly there was much in the Jewish religious tradition beyond its writings, nonetheless it is in no small part by reference to those writings that the earliest Christian literature articulates the movement's emerging understanding of itself and its world. Such a reality should hardly come as a surprise since the Judaism of the first century was very much a religion of the book. By ca. 30, it was well understood that the God of Israel communicated through written texts, even if there was not yet a definitive list of the texts through which that God communicated the most fully. The content of the New Testament books themselves show that early Christians were heavily invested in Jewish written texts and thus can be expected to have been not only reading but also writing.

It might be objected that the earliest Christians would not have written much because they expected this world to end soon. This, of course, is not an argument but a hypothesis, one that must be tested against the data. Once again, the undisputed Pauline Epistles put the lie to this hypothesis. Few New Testament writers anticipate an imminent eschaton as clearly as does Paul.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, this did not stop Paul from being one of the most prolific writers of whom we are aware from the first Christian century. We also find anticipations of a relatively swift end to this world throughout the balance of the New Testament corpus. Indeed, if this anticipated end had been a significant barrier to writing, then we would have few if any texts that evince such an anticipation. We would not even know that the eschaton was a widespread anticipation. Cumulatively, it does not seem that early Christian eschatology constituted a barrier to early Christian writing. This conclusion stands even without the example of Qumran, which scholars such as Earle Ellis and Harry Gamble have quite appropriately cited as another verifiable instance wherein the anticipated end of this world constituted not a barrier but arguably an impetus to writing.<sup>56</sup> The development of Christian literacy is nonprobative for purposes of establishing the date of any New Testament or other early Christian text.

54. Cf. the earlier treatment of this matter in Bernier, *Quest*, 141–42.

55. Cf. 1 Thess. 4:14, 17, where Paul speaks in the first-person plural when discussing those who are still alive when the Lord returns.

56. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 242–43; Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 19–20.

### ***The New Testament***

I am concerned not with any or all texts but specifically with those that were later collected into the Christian New Testament. The decision to limit the investigation to such texts is driven not by some sort of canonical bias but by a practical need to limit the scope of investigation combined with a recognition of my own expertise. On the one hand, the canon provides a ready delimitation; on the other, I am by primary training a New Testament scholar and thus most fully equipped to consider the texts grouped within that corpus. Nevertheless, this study considers the compositional dates of four early Christian texts in addition to those collected in the New Testament: 1 Clement, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas. In large part, these texts are selected because each of them might be reckoned as roughly coeval with the Christian New Testament. As such, any complete, synthetic work on the matter should address them. These are also the four extracanonical texts considered by Robinson in *Redating the New Testament*, so this present study would be woefully incomplete if they were not addressed.<sup>57</sup>

It should also be noted that I do not seek to define the date for hypothetical source-texts, such as Q. Matters related to such hypothetical sources will be addressed as they become incidentally relevant to the investigation, but the dates at which they might have been composed are not treated as objects of study in their own right. This is done primarily as a matter of economy. A study of this sort threatens to become unwieldy in dealing with just the extant texts, whose existence is beyond reasonable dispute, much less nonextant and contestable ones. No judgment regarding the existence of these texts is implied by this decision.

### **Generating Hypotheses**

The previous section defined this study's overarching research question. We must now consider how we will go about answering it. As discussed above, we can distinguish heuristically between a step in which we generate possible hypotheses, and another in which we determine which of these is most likely the correct answer. In this section we consider the former step, identifying three basic procedures designed to generate hypotheses regarding the dates

<sup>57</sup>. See *Redating*, 312–35.

of the New Testament texts: synchronization, contextualization, and authorial biography.

**Synchronization**

Synchronization encompasses the classic work of establishing the text’s temporal relationship to other events or situations, including the composition of other texts. We have already seen this in practice with the matter of 70. Here we can adapt that earlier discussion so that it is more widely applicable. The following chart, adapted and generalized from our earlier discussion of 70, helps summarize the above:

		<b>Is there material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if written prior to a given event or situation?</b>	
		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>Is there material in the book that is most fully intelligible only if written after a given event or situation?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	The book most likely postdates the given event or situation, while preserving material that predates it.	The book most likely postdates the given event or situation and might preserve material that predates it.
	<b>No</b>	The book most likely predates the given event or situation.	There is equal probability that the book predates or postdates a given event or situation.

The above rubric will function as our basic heuristic for thinking about synchronization.

In addition to synchronizing our texts with events such as the crucifixion or the destruction of the temple, we can potentially also synchronize by utilizing certain classic criticisms employed by New Testament scholars. Insofar as they are of relevance, insights from textual, reception, source, and redaction criticisms will tend to represent instances of synchronization. Unfortunately, such insights tend to be of limited relevance for establishing when the New Testament texts were composed. No doubt we can judge with a high degree of confidence that a text was composed before the earliest time that it is clearly attested in the data relevant for the work of textual or reception criticism. Most texts, however, were written sometime earlier than their earliest attestation,

often much earlier.  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ —the earliest extant manuscript of Paul’s Letters—is perhaps the classic cautionary tale here. Young Kyu Kim argues that  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$  dates prior to the beginning of Domitian’s reign in 81.<sup>58</sup> Even this would allow for dates notably later than those likely for at least the undisputed Pauline Epistles. Yet Philip Comfort and David Barrett—who are notorious for dating New Testament fragments earlier than most—reject this very early date and assign  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$  to the early second century.<sup>59</sup> Most textual critics would probably date  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$  later even than Comfort and Barrett, and as such, unless we were to affirm Kim’s quite early date, we are left with the earliest manuscript witness to the Pauline corpus dating up to a half century or more later than the texts contained therein were likely first written. For its part, reception criticism’s relevance for our work is likewise vitiated by the time between composition and attestation and also by uncertainties regarding what in fact constitutes evidence of reception. Nonetheless, these matters will be considered throughout this study, under the common heading of “external attestation.”

Source criticism can likewise at times yield helpful although typically imprecise data regarding the compositional dates of the New Testament texts. It is a given that if text A constitutes a source for text B, then A must predate B, and B must postdate A. This would yield a relative chronology for the texts in question. If we already have an absolute date for text A, then we know that text B was written later than said date; alternatively, if we already have an absolute date for text B, then we know that text A was written earlier than said date. Unfortunately, due primarily to the nature of the data, source-critical judgments tend to be more contestable than we prefer for purposes of establishing when a text was written. Only rarely will they permit a high degree of confidence in chronological decision-making. Nonetheless, source-critical data will at times allow us to favor certain relative chronologies over others.

For its part, redaction criticism is typically relevant only insofar as it grapples with the reality that some texts might well have been written over an extended period. For instance, most New Testament scholars likely agree that John 21 is a secondary addition to the Fourth Gospel, or at least was composed later than the rest of the text. If that is indeed the case, and if John 21:19 also indicates that Peter passed away before this chapter was written, then we must be open to the possibility that while the Fourth Gospel

58. Kim, “Dating of  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ .”

59. Cf. Comfort and Barrett, *Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts*, 1:183–87.

in toto postdates Peter's death, the majority of the text predates his death.<sup>60</sup> Instances wherein we must consider such matters will be discussed where appropriate.

Despite the above limitations, synchronization can narrow down the range of possible compositional dates to a century or less for almost every text considered in this study. This is not insignificant. By contrast, some texts in the Hebrew Bible have a range of possible compositional dates that are upward of a millennium. For instance, most biblical scholars hold that the Pentateuch took on its definitive shape only in the late preexilic or early postexilic periods. Yet just in the five years before this book was published, at least two projects have appeared that argue that the core of Deuteronomy should be dated several centuries earlier. In the first of these projects, Sandra Richter holds that the core of Deuteronomy likely dates from ca. 1000 BCE.<sup>61</sup> In the second, Josef Schubert argues that Deuteronomy must have been more or less complete by no later than the division of the United Monarchy, ca. 930 BCE.<sup>62</sup> In earlier but still relatively recent scholarship, Kenneth Kitchen has maintained that the forms of the various pentateuchal covenants find their strongest analogies in Late Bronze Age (ca. 1400–1200 BCE) treaties, and Pekka Pitkänen has argued that at least the core of Deuteronomy was in existence by ca. 1050 BCE.<sup>63</sup> My concern here is not to evaluate these claims.<sup>64</sup> Rather, I observe only that the data permit scholars to entertain a chronological range encompassing several centuries for much of the pentateuchal material. Given this reality faced by those in pentateuchal studies, we already have reason to celebrate our capacity to narrow down, via synchronization, the range of compositional dates for the New Testament texts to within a century or less.

As a procedural matter, it is assumed without argument that each of the texts we seek to date in this volume were written after Jesus's death. Against the older consensus, which dated the crucifixion to either 30 or 33, we must now reckon with the possibility that any year from 29 through 34 is a candidate.<sup>65</sup> As such, if I state that a given early Christian text was written before

60. Cf. the fuller discussion in chap. 3 below.

61. Richter, "Question of Provenance"; Richter, "Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods." Cf. the response by Berge et al., "Are Economics a Key?"

62. Schubert, *Dating Deuteronomy*.

63. Cf. Kitchen, *Reliability of the Old Testament*, 283–94; Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary and Centralization*.

64. But cf. the appendix to Bernier, "Re-visioning Social Values," 18–20.

65. Cf. Bond, "Dating the Death of Jesus"; Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper*, 251–373.

70 (for instance), then it should always be taken for granted that I mean no earlier than 29 and no later than 70. It seems unnecessarily pedantic to spell this out in every instance, however, and I avoid doing so.

### **Contextualization**

Alongside synchronization is the work of contextualization, which seeks to establish the text's probable relationship to the general course of early Christian development in areas such as ecclesiology, Christology, gentile inclusion, and so on. Baur's effort to situate the New Testament documents within his own understanding of early Christian development is an exemplar of contextualization.<sup>66</sup> In principle, form- and genre-critical data are of relevance for the work of contextualization. If it can be shown that a given literary form or genre flourished at a given time, then we have some warrant to argue that texts displaying that form or genre likely date to around that time. Likewise, the work of the history of religions schools could potentially be of use. Such work sought to situate the development of especially Christology in relation to broader patterns of religious imagery, thought, and practice.<sup>67</sup>

In studying the ancient world, however, contextualization tends to work on a temporal scale larger than the one with which we are concerned. This is perhaps best demonstrated by reference to recent work in Hebrew Bible studies. As already alluded to above, Richter argues that the historical core of Deuteronomy—the so-called *Urdeuteronomium*, which she defines as Deuteronomy 4:44–27:26—most fully reflects the economic realities present in Palestine ca. 1000 BCE; thus she concludes that it likely dates from around this time.<sup>68</sup> For their part, Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten have recently argued that the language of the Torah represents a form of Hebrew best attested from (but potentially in existence before) the eighth through the sixth centuries BCE.<sup>69</sup> Such arguments are of relevance only because the possible date range for the texts of the Pentateuch are measured in centuries. In a study such as this, where we are concerned with texts that can be dated to within a century or less, the utility of contextualization will tend to be limited.

66. Cf. esp. his grand synthesis in Baur, *First Three Centuries*, 41–137.

67. Cf. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*; Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*; Dunn, *Christology in the Making*; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*; Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

68. Richter, "Question of Provenance."

69. Hendel and Joosten, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?*, 60–72. Note that in 2020 Joosten pled guilty to possession of child pornography.

Further, arguments from contextualization need to be utilized with extreme care lest we fall into the trap of circular reasoning, in which a given developmental scheme is used to generate a chronological one, and then the chronological one is used to defend the original developmental scheme. In practice, the best we can usually say is that a probable developmental scheme will tend to favor a lower, middle, or higher range of dates permitted via synchronization. Often we cannot say even that.

### ***Authorial Biography***

By contrast to the relative vagaries of contextualization, no procedure in principle permits greater precision than that of authorial biography, which proceeds from what we know about the author and prompts us to ask when in her or his life a given text is best situated. For instance, in Galatians 1:18 Paul tells us that he went up to Jerusalem three years after his conversion, and in Galatians 2:1 that he went again after fourteen years. Thus Galatians can date no earlier than the second of these visits. But perhaps the single most effective use of authorial biography comes in the case of Romans. As will be argued in chapter 6, Romans was most likely written during the three months that Paul spent in Achaia, according to Acts 20:3a. These three months can be dated with confidence to the winter of 56/57. As intimated by these examples, authorial biography will be particularly useful with regard to the Pauline Epistles.

Authorial biography forces us to confront the unavoidable question of authenticity. To minimize space devoted to antecedent issues and instead focus upon determining compositional dates, I have opted not to dedicate significant space to rehashing the arguments for or against the authenticity of disputed texts. Those arguments exist, but they are simply not reproduced here at length. I do not ignore them, however. They will be considered as we move through the relevant texts. In four cases—1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter—this will lead us to propose two possible date ranges: one if they are authentic compositions, and a second if they are pseudonymous.

### ***Conclusion***

This section has identified a threefold rubric by which to generate hypotheses: *Synchronization* seeks to establish the text's temporal relationship to other events or situations, including the composition of other texts. *Contextualization* seeks to establish the text's probable relationship to the general

course of early Christian development. *Authorial biography* proceeds from what we know about the author and seeks to establish when in her or his life a given text is best situated.

This rubric serves largely to organize and coordinate the relevant data. In and of itself, it does not provide us with the means by which to adjudicate between hypotheses.

## **Adjudicating Answers**

Above we considered how to go about generating hypotheses regarding the compositional dates of New Testament (and other early Christian) texts. The work of hypothesis generation, however, frequently results in more than one possible answer to our questions. In such situations, we need a means by which to adjudicate between such possibilities. I suggest that, in any given case, the hypothesis to be preferred is the one that (1) employs the fewest number of logical fallacies, (2) can account for the greatest quantity of relevant data, and (3) can do so with the highest degree of parsimony.

### ***Freedom from Fallacy***

“Freedom from fallacy” represents the most significant advance beyond my earlier published discussions of historical method.<sup>70</sup> It is introduced in order to exercise greater control over hypotheses that might well explain a great deal of evidence in a parsimonious manner but that are clearly absurd. In principle, even one logical fallacy tends to be too many; freedom from fallacy becomes a desideratum. Of course, we must avoid the fallacy fallacy, which supposes that if an argument contains a fallacy, then its conclusion must be false. A hypothesis can be altogether true, even if the reasons given for its affirmation are utterly fallacious. Nonetheless, until the hypothesis can be articulated in such a way as to exclude fallacious argumentation, we should be wary of affirming it as true.

### ***Evidentiary Scope***

Compared to freedom from fallacies, we can be more forgiving in regard to the quantity of data—or what we might also call evidentiary scope—for which

70. Cf. esp. Bernier, *Quest*, 68–69.



the hypothesis can account. The world is a messy place, and our knowledge of it is always partial. Rarely can we expect to fully explain all the data relevant to a given matter. Still, all things being equal, a fallacy-free hypothesis that can account for 90 percent of the data is to be preferred over a fallacy-free hypothesis that can account for only 45 percent of the data. Of course, all things are not always equal. Certain data will be of greater relevance than others; a failure to account for these data will pose a greater barrier to affirming the hypothesis than a failure to account for other, less relevant data. Still, quantity of data explained is a helpful criterion.

### ***Parsimony***

For its part, parsimony tends to be a tiebreaker. It is what one considers when one has two or more hypotheses that are free of fallacies and that can account for a roughly comparable quantity of data. If our respective hypotheses are equally free of fallacies and can account for the same data but your account requires three entities whereas mine requires five, then your account is probably to be preferred. Again, the criterion of parsimony cannot be used slavishly, but it does tend to separate stronger hypotheses from weaker ones.

### ***Conclusion***

The above is a heuristic description of the work of adjudication. Adjudication aims to determine which among competing hypotheses employs the fewest number of logical fallacies while accounting for the greatest quantity of relevant data with the highest degree of parsimony.

Adjudication, of course, tends to be notably messier in practice than the above account suggests. It is not a calculus. It cannot be reduced to number grubbing. Moreover, the work is not as linear as the heuristic description suggests. Insights achieved through the process of hypothesis generation might lead one to redefine the question, and insights achieved through the process of adjudicating hypotheses might lead one to not only redefine the question but also generate new hypotheses or new articulations of old ones. Nonetheless, the heuristic description helps us to think about what we are doing when we formulate history; it also provides the reader with insight regarding how the author is making judgments throughout the study.

## Treatment of Primary and Secondary Literature

My previously published work is characterized by a style perhaps best exemplified by Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism*, which notoriously required a second volume just for endnotes and indexes. By comparison, the notations within this study are relatively light. This is not the result of failure or refusal to engage with the thoughts of other scholars but rather a conscious decision to limit the scope of a study that could easily become unwieldy. New Testament scholarship often ends up constituting tertiary literature written on secondary literature. There is, of course, a place for such work. Nonetheless, this study is meant to be secondary literature on primary literature. My central aim throughout is to show the reader how I have made use of the texts and other relevant data from the ancient world to build my arguments. More concretely, rather than glutting my text with constant references to the commentaries that have aided my work, I will, in a single footnote at the outset of each chapter, indicate those I have found the most useful for my purposes. The majority of these are from the Anchor Bible, Hermeneia, International Critical Commentary, and Word Biblical Commentary series; I find that judicious reading of the relevant commentaries in these series tends to bring most of the relevant critical issues to one's attention. More specific citations will typically be reserved for direct engagement with a given scholar's arguments. Not surprisingly, I engage with Robinson's *Redating the New Testament* more frequently than any other single work. This engagement will be the most intense when I register disagreements with Robinson. In recognition that many readers will likely not be professional biblical scholars, I cite works that are available in English whenever possible.

Regarding primary literature, it is my aim that even those who disagree with my conclusions will find that the way in which I organize and present the relevant evidence facilitates their own thinking about the dates at which the New Testament texts were composed. When presenting such evidence in this study, I will generally present biblical quotations first from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and then discuss the Greek text as needed. This is done to balance the needs of interested persons who might have little if any training in Greek with the needs of those who have a legitimate interest in seeing how I handle the Greek text. I follow a comparable practice when

quoting the Apostolic Fathers, except I will cite the English translation and Greek text as given in Michael Holmes's edition.<sup>71</sup>

One final word is required regarding what we might call the ethics of citation. There have been recent conversations among biblical scholars regarding how to best handle the scholarly legacy both of persons who belonged to the NSDAP (the Germany National Socialist Party; i.e., the Nazis), and of persons credibly accused of (and even more those who have confessed to or been convicted of) sexual assault, harassment, or exploitation. I have spent much time reflecting upon and conversing with colleagues over this matter and greatly appreciate their insights.<sup>72</sup> In recognition of the very real ethical questions raised through these conversations, I have decided to engage with the work of such persons as infrequently as possible. I have three primary aims in adopting this practice. The first is to stand in solidarity with victims and survivors. The second is to help foster practices and discourses that foreground the rights and well-being of persons minoritized by a discipline that has notably and unacceptably excluded persons of color and women, as well as to pursue a concrete zero tolerance policy toward racism, sexual abuse, harassment, and exploitation. The third is to concretely contribute, in even the smallest way, to the ongoing effort of coming to terms with a disciplinary history that includes persons of dubious character. There was one instance in which I considered it unavoidable to cite an individual whom I know to have been credibly accused (in this case convicted) of sexual misconduct; in my judgment, not to cite this person in this case would introduce an unacceptable lacuna into the present work. There is another instance (earlier in this introduction) in which I have cited a work coauthored by someone convicted of sexual misconduct. I decided that it was unfair to the other author to ignore this contribution. In both cases I report the respective convictions since I think it important to inform readers and allow them to make their own judgment on the matter of what to do with the work of such persons. I have cited no scholar whom I know to have been an NSDAP member. If I have inadvertently cited any NSDAP member or any other scholar credibly accused of sexual misconduct, then please accept my humblest apologies for the oversight.

71. Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*.

72. I express great gratitude to the organizers and members of the BRANE Collective: their work in facilitating such discourses has greatly enriched my own thinking on these matters. Eva Mroczek and Jacqueline Vayntrub are especially to be commended for their work in moving these conversations forward.

## Overview of This Study

This introduction aims to give the reader an initial orientation to this study. By this point she or he should have a sense of the central question being asked, the answer this study will offer to that question, and the method by which the answer will be generated. The central question is when the texts later collected into the Christian New Testament were composed. The answer is *primarily between the years 40 and 70 of the first century*. The method is inferential: through (1) defining the research questions; (2) generating hypotheses through the work of synchronization, contextualization, and authorial biography; and (3) adjudicating hypotheses by utilizing the criteria identified as freedom from fallacy, evidentiary scope, and parsimony. The balance of this study is taken up with elaborating this question, answer, and method through close engagement with the data.

The study overall is organized in loose adherence to the canonical ordering of the New Testament. That order, however, is broken as needed to best facilitate the presentation of the arguments. There are five parts to this study, each containing two chapters. Part 1 considers the compositional dates of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, with chapter 1 exploring the work of synchronization and chapter 2 the work of contextualization and authorial biography. Part 2 considers the compositional dates of the Johannine literature, with chapter 3 discussing the Gospel of John and chapter 4 the Letters of John and the book of Revelation. Part 3 considers the compositional dates of the canonical Pauline Epistles, with chapter 5 analyzing the role of Acts in the study of Pauline chronology and chapter 6 when the Letters were written. Part 4 considers the compositional date of Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles (less the Johannine Epistles, which were treated in part 2), with chapter 7 discussing Hebrews and the Epistle of James and chapter 8 discussing 1 and 2 Peter and Jude. Part 5 considers the compositional dates of select extracanonical writings, with chapter 9 focusing on 1 Clement and the Didache and chapter 10 the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. A conclusion will follow, summarizing—as any conclusion should—the arguments of the study.