

The New Testament Documents: their Date and Attestation

by F.F Bruce

The New Testament documents are 27 short Greek writings that provide a wealth of evidence for the early existence and authenticity of the Christian faith.

Scripture: Luke 1:1, John 20:30, 1 Corinthians 15:3, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:16

Topics: "New Testament", "Manuscript Attestation"

Description

F.F. Bruce delves into the New Testament documents, highlighting the historical nature of the first five books, including the Gospels and Acts, which narrate the good news of Jesus Christ's redemption. He discusses the dates of these documents, suggesting the completion of the New Testament around AD 100, with the Gospels possibly written earlier than commonly believed. Bruce emphasizes the early existence of the New Testament through manuscript attestation, comparing it to classical works and noting the wealth of evidence supporting its authenticity.

Transcript

1. What are the New Testament documents?

THE New Testament as we know it consists of twenty seven short Greek writings, commonly called 'books', the first five of which are historical in character, and are thus of more immediate concern for our present study. Four of these we call the Gospels, because each of them narrates the gospel—the good news that God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ for the redemption of mankind. All four relate sayings and doings of Christ, but can scarcely be called biographies in our modern sense of the word, as they deal almost exclusively with the last two or three years of His life, and devote what might seem a disproportionate space to the week immediately preceding His death. They are not intended to be 'Lives' of Christ, but rather to present from distinctive points of view, and originally for different publics, the good news concerning Him. The first three Gospels (those according to Matthew, Mark and Luke), because of certain features which link them together, are commonly called the 'Synoptic Gospels'.

The fifth historical writing, the Acts of the Apostles, is actually a continuation of the third Gospel, written by the same author, Luke the physician and companion of the apostle Paul. It gives us an account of the rise of Christianity after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and of its extension in a westerly direction from Palestine to Rome, within about thirty years of the crucifixion. Of the other writings twentyone are

letters. Thirteen of these bear the name of Paul, nine of them being addressed to churches and four to individuals.

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Another letter, the Epistle to the Hebrews, is anonymous, but was at an early date bound up with the Pauline Epistles, and came to be frequently ascribed to Paul. It was probably written shortly before AD 70 to a community of Jewish Christians in Italy. Of the remaining letters one bears the name of James, probably the brother of our Lord; one of Jude, who calls himself the brother of James; two of Peter; and there are three which bear no name, but because of their obvious affinities with the fourth Gospel have been known from early days as the Epistles of John. The remaining book is the Apocalypse, or book of the Revelation. It belongs to a literary genre which, though strange to our minds, was well known in Jewish and Christian circles in those days, the apocalyptic.' The Revelation is introduced by seven covering letters, addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia. The author, John by name, was at the time exiled on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, and reports a series of visions which symbolically portray the triumph of Christ both in His own passion and in the sufferings of His people at the hand of His enemies and theirs. The book was written in the days of the Flavian emperors (AD 69-96) to encourage hard-pressed Christians with the assurance that, notwithstanding the apparent odds against which they had to contend, their victory was not in doubt; Jesus, not Caesar, had been invested by the Almighty with the sovereignty of the world.

Of these twenty seven books, then, we are chiefly concerned at present with the first five, which are cast in narrative form, though the others, and especially the letters of Paul, are important for our purpose in so far as they contain historical allusions or otherwise throw light on the Gospels and Acts.

2. What are the dates of these documents?

The crucifixion of Christ took place, it is generally agreed, about AD 30. According to Luke iii. 1, the activity of John the Baptist, which immediately preceded the commencement of our Lord's public ministry, is dated in 'the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar'. Now, Tiberius became emperor in August, AD 14, and according to the method of computation current in Syria, which Luke would have followed, his fifteenth year commenced in September or October, AD 29. The fourth Gospel mentions three Passovers after this time; the third Passover from that date would be the Passover of AD 30, at which it is probable on other grounds that the crucifixion took place. At this time, too, we know from other sources that Pilate was Roman governor of Judaea, Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee, and Caiaphas was Jewish high priest.

The New Testament was complete, or substantially complete, about AD 100, the majority of the writings being in existence twenty to forty years before this. In this country a majority of modern scholars fix the dates of the four Gospels as follows: Matthew, c. 85-90; Mark, c. 65; Luke, c. 80-85; John, c. 90-100. I should be inclined to date the first three Gospels rather earlier: Mark shortly after AD 60, Luke between 60 and 70, and Matthew shortly after 70. One criterion which has special weight with me is the relation which these writings appear to bear to the destruction of the city and temple of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70. My view of the matter is that Mark and Luke were written before this event, and Matthew not long afterwards.

But even with the later dates, the situation' encouraging from the historian's point of view, for the first three Gospels were written at a time when man, were alive who could remember the things that Jesus said and

did, and some at least would still be alive when the fourth Gospel was written. If it could be determined that the writers of the Gospels used sources of information belonging to an earlier date, then the situation would be still more encouraging. But a more detailed examination of the Gospels will come in a later chapter.

The date of the writing of Acts will depend on the date we affix to the third Gospel, for both are parts of one historical work, and the second part appears to have been written soon after the first. There are strong arguments for dating the twofold work not long after Paul's two years' detention in Rome (AD 60-62) Some scholars, however, consider that the 'former treatise' to which Acts originally formed the sequel was not our present Gospel of Luke but an earlier draft, sometimes called 'ProtoLuke'; this enables them to date Acts in the sixties, while holding that the Gospel of Luke in its final form was rather later.

The dates of the thirteen Pauline Epistles can be fixed partly by internal and partly by external evidence. The day has gone by when the authenticity of these letters could be denied wholesale. There are some writers today who would reject Ephesians; fewer would reject 2 Thessalonians; more would deny that the Pastoral Epistles (I and ~ Timothy and Titus) came in their present form from the hand of Paul.' I accept them all as Pauline, but the remaining eight letters would by themselves be sufficient for our purpose, and it is from these that the main arguments are drawn in our later chapter on 'The Importance of Paul's Evidence'.

Ten of the letters which bear Paul's name belong to the period before the end of his Roman imprisonment.

These ten, in order of writing, may be dated as follows: Galatians, 48; I and 2 Thessalonians, 50; Philippians, 54; I and 2 Corinthians, 54-56; Romans, 57; Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians, c. 60. The Pastoral Epistles, in their diction and historical atmosphere, contain signs of later date than the other Pauline Epistles, but this presents less difficulty to those who believe in a second imprisonment of Paul at Rome about the year 64, which was ended by his execution.' The Pastoral Epistle can then be dated c. 63-64, and the changed state of affairs in the Pauline churches to which they bear witness will have been due in part to the opportunity which Paul's earlier Roman imprisonment afforded to his opponents in these churches.

At any rate, the time elapsing between the evangelic events and the writing of most of the New Testament books was, from the standpoint of historical research, satisfactorily short. For in assessing the trustworthiness of ancient historical writings, one of the most important questions is: How soon after the events took place were they recorded ?

3. What is the evidence for their early existence? |

About the middle of the last century it was confidently asserted by a very influential school of thought that some of the most important books of the New Testament, including the Gospels and the Acts, did not exist before the thirties of the second century AD. This conclusion was the result not so much of historical evidence as of philosophical presuppositions. Even then there was sufficient historical evidence to show how unfounded these theories were, as Lightfoot, Tischendorf, Tregelles and others demonstrated in their writings; but the amount of such evidence available in our own day is so much greater and more conclusive that a first-century date for most of the New Testament writings cannot reasonably be denied, no matter what our philosophical presuppositions may be.

The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. It is a curious fact that historians have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians. Somehow or other, there are people who regard a 'sacred book' as ipso facto under suspicion, and demand much more corroborative evidence for such a work than they would for an ordinary secular or pagan writing. From the viewpoint of the historian, the same standards must be applied to both. But we do not quarrel with those who want more evidence for the New Testament than for other writings; firstly, because the universal claims which the New Testament makes upon mankind are so absolute, and the character and works of its chief Figure so unparalleled, that we want to be as sure of its truth as we possibly can; and secondly, because in point of fact there is much more evidence for the New Testament than for other ancient writings of comparable date.

There are in existence about 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part. The best and most important of these go back to somewhere about AD 350, the two most important being the Codex Vaticanus, the chief treasure of the Vatican Library in Rome, and the well-known Codex Sinaiticus, which the British Government purchased from the Soviet Government for £100,000 on Christmas Day, 1933, and which is now the chief treasure of the British Museum. Two other important early MSS in this country are the Codex Alexandrinus, also in the British Museum, written in the fifth century, and the Codex Bezae, in Cambridge University Library, written in the fifth or sixth century, and containing the Gospels and Acts in both Greek and Latin.

Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works. For Caesar's Gallic War (composed between 58 and 50 BC) there are several extant MSS, but only nine or ten are good, and the oldest is some 600 years later than Caesar's day. Of the 142 books of the Roman History of Livy (59 BC-AD 17) only thirty-five survive; these are known to us from not more than twenty MSS of any consequence, only one of which, and that containing fragments of Books iii-vi, is as old as the fourth century. Of the fourteen books of the Histories of Tacitus (c. AD 100) only four and a half survive; of the sixteen books of his Annals, ten survive in full and two in part. The text of these extant portions of two great historical works depends entirely on two MSS, one of the ninth century and one of the eleventh. The extant MSS of his minor works (Dialogue de Oratoribus, Agricola, Germania) all descend from a codex of the tenth century. The History of Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC) is known to us from eight MSS, the earliest belonging to c. AD 900, and a few papyrus scraps, belonging to about the beginning of the Christian era. The same is true of the History of Herodotus (c. 488-428 BC). Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.

But how different is the situation of the New Testament in this respect! In addition to the two excellent MSS of the fourth century mentioned above, which are the earliest of some thousands known to us, considerable fragments remain of papyrus copies of books of the New Testament dated from 100 to 200 years earlier still. The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri, the existence of which was made public in 1931, consist of portions of eleven papyrus codices, three of which contained most of the New Testament writings. One of these, containing the four Gospels with Acts, belongs to the first half of the third century; another, containing Paul's letters to churches and the Epistle to the Hebrews, was copied at the beginning of the third century; the third, containing Revelation, belongs to the second half of the same century.

A more recent discovery consists of some papyrus fragments dated by papyrological experts not later than AD 150, published in *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel and other Early Christian Papyri*, by H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat (1935). These fragments contain what has been thought by some to be portions of a fifth Gospel having strong affinities with the canonical four; but much more probable is the view expressed in *The Times Literary Supplement* for 25 April 1935, 'that these fragments were written by someone who had the four Gospels before him and knew them well; that they did not profess to be an independent Gospel; but were paraphrases of the stories and other matter in the Gospels designed for explanation and instruction, a manual to teach people the Gospel stories'.

Earlier still is a fragment of a papyrus codex containing John xviii. 31-33, 37 f, now in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, dated on palaeographical grounds around AD 130, showing that the latest of the four Gospels, which was written, according to tradition, at Ephesus between AD 90 and 100, was circulating in Egypt within about forty years of its composition (if, as is most likely, this papyrus originated in Egypt, where it was acquired in 1917). It must be regarded as being, by half a century, the earliest extant fragment of the New Testament.

A more recently discovered papyrus manuscript of the same Gospel, while not so early as the Rylands papyrus, is incomparably better preserved; this is the Papyrus Bodmer II, whose discovery was announced by the Bodmer Library of Geneva in 1956; it was written about AD 200, and contains the first fourteen chapters of the Gospel of John with but one lacuna (of twenty two verses), and considerable portions of the last seven chapters.'

Attestation of another kind is provided by allusions to and quotations from the New Testament books in other early writings. The authors known as the Apostolic Fathers wrote chiefly between AD 90 and 160, and in their works we find evidence for their acquaintance with most of the books of the New Testament. In three works whose date is probably round about AD100-the 'Epistle of Barnabas', written perhaps in Alexandria; the *Didache*, or 'Teaching of the Twelve Apostles', produced somewhere in Syria or Palestine; and the letter sent to the Corinthian church by Clement, bishop of Rome, about AD 96-- find fairly certain quotations from the common tradition of the Synoptic Gospels, from Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and possible quotations from other books of the New Testament. In the letters written by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, as he journeyed to his martyrdom in Rome in AD 115, there are reasonably identifiable quotations from Matthew, John, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and Timothy, Titus, and possible allusions to Mark, Luke, Acts, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, Hebrews, and 1 Peter. His younger contemporary, Polycarp, in a letter to the Philippians (c. 120) quotes from the common tradition of the Synoptic Gospels, from Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and 1 John. And so we might go on through the writers of the second century, amassing increasing evidence of their familiarity with and recognition of the authority of the New Testament writings. So far as the Apostolic Fathers are concerned, the evidence is collected and weighed in a work called *The New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, recording the findings of a committee of the Oxford Society of Historical Theology in 1905.

Nor is it only in orthodox Christian writers that we find evidence of this sort. It is evident from the recently discovered writings of the Gnostic school of Valentinus that before the middle of the second century most of the New Testament books were as well known and as fully venerated in that heretical circle as they were in the Catholic Church.'

The study of the kind of attestation found in MSS and quotations in later writer' is connected with the approach known as Textual Criticism.' This is a most important and fascinating branch of study, its object being to determine as exactly as possible from the available evidence the original words of the documents in question. It is easily proved by experiment that it is difficult to copy out a passage of any considerable length without making one or two slips at least. When we have documents like our New Testament writings copied and recopied thousands of times, the scope for copyists' errors is so enormously increased that it is surprising there are no more than there actually are. Fortunately, if the great number of MSS increases the number of scribal errors, it increases proportionately the means of correcting such errors, so that the margin of doubt left in the process of recovering the exact original wording is not so large as might be feared; it is in truth remarkably small. The variant readings about which any doubt remain' among textual critics of the New Testament affect no material question of historic fact or of Christian faith and practice

To sum up, we may quote the verdict of the late Sir Frederic Kenyon, a scholar whose authority to make pronouncements on ancient MSS was second to none:

'The interval then between the data of original. composition and the earliest extant evidence become so small to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scripture have come down tous substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.'

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