

Important Dates in Early Christianity

Given the recent interest in the Da Vinci Code and similar works detailing a supposed conspiracy by the Roman Catholic Church to suppress certain accounts of Jesus' life, I thought it might be helpful to set forth some relevant historical facts.

First, there was no central authority in the early church to suppress certain books and advance other books for reading and acceptance within the church. Rather, each bishop of each church oversaw the theology of that church. The truth or falsity of the written accounts was debated openly among the bishops and others. At no time during this process was there a central authority within the church that prescribed rules for all of the church. The first ecumenical council was not until 325 A.D.

Second, there is near unanimous consent in the early church, long before 325 A.D., over what historical accounts of Jesus' life were accurate and accepted. Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John were accepted early and widely. The so-called gnostic "gospels" were not. Even the gnostic Tatian, in the later half of the second century, included only the four gospels in his Diatessaron. The New Testament's gospels survived because they had all the evidence of historical accuracy and were accepted widely, even by the gnostics. The so-called gnostic "gospels" did not survive because they lacked all of the evidence of historical accuracy, being written late in time by those who had no reason to know the true facts. Besides, they are very strange works, as anyone who has read them will attest.

Third, while some have attempted to state that the gnostic "gospels" were written around the same time as the New Testament gospels, such position has little support from historical documents. The first and foremost means of dating any book should be actual historical markers within the book and external historical markers in other writings. For instance, if the book describes an historical event, it should be dated after that event. Likewise, if another author cites the book, then the book must have been written before it was so cited. Further, if another author, with reason to know, gives us a date for the book's writing, that evidence should not be lightly discarded. When there are no such internal or external markers, the dates assigned are largely conjecture.

Fourth, to the extent that Dan Brown, the author of the Da Vinci Code, seems to indicate that these gnostic gospels portray Christ as merely a man, Mr. Brown has confused gnostic teaching with Arian teaching. The gnostics taught that Jesus was divine and that He could not have been human. In contrast, Arius, who lived from 256-336 A.D., taught that Jesus was not divine. Arius gained a considerable following in his lifetime. It was this doctrine of Arianism that was addressed and rejected by the Nicene Council in 325 A.D., which Council was called by Constantine. While the gnostics produced several so-called "gospels," the Arians produced no such gospel accounts.

The conclusion is this: the New Testament accounts we have today were written early (within the life-time of those who knew Jesus, those who walked with Jesus, listened to his words, and became his disciples). These accounts were accepted early and widely within the church. The accounts now being promoted (The Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, and others), were written later and were never mentioned by the early church or other early writings. They first appear on the scene in the middle of the second century, when they were carefully analyzed and soundly rejected by various bishops of various churches. One only needs to read them to understand why they were rejected. They bear no indicia of authenticity and what they state, frankly, is often strange (e.g., Mary Magdalene must become male to be saved, etc.).

Below is a chronology of the dates for the life of Christ and the early church through the second century, together with reasons for assigning such dates. Some may disagree with the dates. The biggest differences will be in the dates of the New Testament books, where some will say that the gospel accounts were not written until the second century. The evidence for such late dates is very weak, ignores the statements of the early church, and is based mostly on someone's view of how theology developed (i.e., a book must be dated later because its theology is more complex). However, one has only to read Clement of Rome or Ignatius to understand that the early church had a very complex and developed theology. And to date the gospels into the second century runs into problems because early church writers, before then, quote passages from these gospel accounts.

The attached chronology does not include every book written and known today. Included are the more significant events and works dealing with the New Testament books as well as the more significant gnostic works that have gained new visibility with the Da Vinci Code and the recently released "Gospel of Judas."

Finally, for those who somehow link Constantine to the books we presently accept, I note that Constantine does not appear on the scene until the early fourth century, long after the events cited below. The Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., called by Constantine, did not address what books should be included in Scripture, although Constantine later ordered the works of Arius and the gnostics to be burned, a decree never carried out.

The chronology follows:

Chronology of Significant Events and Works in the First Two Centuries of the Church

6/5 Birth of Jesus
Herod died in 4 B.C. and apparently Jesus was less than 2 years of age (see Matthew 2).

BC↑

AD↓

28/29 Baptism of Jesus - 15th year of Tiberius (Luke 3:1)

33 Crucifixion of Jesus - John indicates there may have been at least 4 Passovers during Jesus' ministry and the dates of Daniel, if taken literally, according to the accounting of some, bring us to March 30, 33 A.D. for the date of Palm Sunday.

33 or 36 Conversion of Saul (Paul) - Either 14 or 17 years before Jerusalem Council (see Galatians 1:18 and 2:1).

41 Death of James, brother of John - Herod Agrippa I gained power over Judea in 41 A.D.

45-49? James (written by James, the brother of Jesus, to a Jewish church) - Because there is no hint of the problems brought on by the conversion of the Gentiles, and because of James's key role in resolving these problems at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the book most probably should be dated to a time before that Council. The absolute latest the book could have been written, if James, the brother of Jesus, is the author, would be 62 A.D., when James was martyred. Some doubt that James wrote the book, and date its writing to the second century. However, Clement of Rome, who died around 100 A.D., appears to have been familiar with the book. Compare the following passage from The First Epistle of Clement to James 1:8, 17.

"Wherefore let us not be double-minded; neither let our soul be lifted up on account of His exceedingly great and glorious gifts."

47-48 First Missionary Journey by Paul and Barnabas - This date can be established because of its relationship to the second missionary journey that is dated by the rule of Gallio.

49 Galatians - Galatians deals with a problem that seems to have been resolved by the Jerusalem Council, but Paul never mentions the Council, indicating that the letter predated the Council. Others will date the book into the 60s.

49 Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) - This date can be established because of its relationship to the second missionary journey that is dated by the rule of Gallio.

49-51 Second Missionary Journey by Paul and Silas - This time is relatively fixed because the edict of Claudius (Acts 18:2) is stated to be in 49 A.D. (Orosius in his *Historiae* vii.6.15) and Gallio was the proconsul in 51 A.D. when Paul had been in Corinth already a year and six months (Acts 18:11).

50 1 & 2 Thessalonians - Written from Corinth on Paul's second missionary journey (compare 1 Thess. 3:1-6; Acts 17:1-4, 16; 18:5). The epistle was written after Silas and Timothy arrived from Thessalonica with a good report; the second letter was apparently written within a few months of the first letter, in response to a spurious letter claiming to be from Paul that troubled the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:2).

51-54 Third Missionary Journey of Paul and Silas

52-53 1 Corinthians - Written from Ephesus (compare Acts 19 with 1 Corinthians 16:8).

54 2 Corinthians - Written while Paul is on his way to Corinth near the end of the 3rd missionary journey (compare 2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5; and 9:1-4).

- 54** **Romans** - Written from Corinth (compare Acts 20:1-3 with Romans 15:25-26, 1 Cor. 16:6 and 2 Corinthians 9:1-5).
- 54** **Arrest of Paul in Jerusalem**
- 54-56** **Paul's imprisonment in Ceasarea (Acts 24:27)**
- 57-59** **Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30)**
- 57-59?** **Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon** - Paul at this time expected to be released and early church documents state that Paul was released and traveled to Spain before being arrested again. Some have argued that Ephesians was written from Caesarea. It may also be possible that these letters were written in the early to mid-60s, prior to Paul's death in 67 A.D.
- 54-59** **Luke and Acts** - Luke is quoted by Paul as being part of Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18, demanding a date prior to the writing of 1 Timothy; it is possible that Luke took the time that Paul was in the Caesarea imprisonment to research the facts for his gospel (see Luke 1:1-3). Acts was apparently written in 59 A.D., as it ends with Paul's 2 years of imprisonment, with no account of what happened later, either of Paul's release and further journeys, or of his execution.
- 59-63** **1 Timothy and Titus** - These books are generally viewed together, as they contain similar instruction to two individuals dear to Paul. There is not a great deal of internal evidence as to the dates of these books, but they were after Luke was written (see note on Luke). And apparently things were looking well for Paul, as he indicates he was hoping to visit Timothy shortly (1 Tim. 3:14) and he was planning on wintering in Nicopolis (Titus 3:12). Accordingly, the book appears to be written at the end of Paul's first Roman imprisonment.
- 62-65** **Matthew** - Written while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, according to Irenaeus (175-195 A.D.).
- 62** **James, brother of Jesus and early church leader, is martyred in Jerusalem (Josephus)**
- 62-65** **1 and 2 Peter** - Written before Peter was put to death by Nero in 65 A.D. (most probable date of his death). Nero heavily persecuted Christians after the fire in 64 A.D. 2 Peter 3:15-16 states Paul's writings were viewed as sacred Scripture.
- 65** **Peter is martyred**
- 66-70** **Mark** - Irenaeus tells us that Mark wrote this book after Peter and possibly Paul were martyred, but apparently Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed, as Mark writes as if it is still there.
- 67** **2 Timothy** - Written shortly before Paul's death (see 2 Timothy 4:6-16).
- 67** **Paul is martyred** - Jerome puts the martyrdom of both Peter and Paul at this time, but many will hold that probably only Paul was martyred this late, after Nero made it unlawful to be a Christian.
- Before 70** **Hebrews** - The centrality of the argument of the new covenant replacing the sacrificial system makes the omission of the temple's destruction in 70 A.D. unfathomable, if it had happened before the letter.
- 67-70** **Jude** - Appears to have been written before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. but after the apostles were largely gone from the scene (Jude 17).
- 70** **Destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, the Roman**
- 80-95** **John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John** - Irenaeus states John published the gospel from Ephesus; there is no indication in these books of the great persecution that broke out under Domitian in 95 A.D.
- 93** **Josephus** - He wrote about both Jesus and James, the brother of Jesus. Of Jesus, he mentions His crucifixion and the fact that the followers of Jesus testified to His resurrection. He also states that Jesus was a person who may have been more than human.

- 95-96** **Revelation** - Irenaeus, in around 175-195 A.D., states that John the Apostle wrote the book somewhere near the end of the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.).
- 97** **First Epistle of Clement, bishop of Rome, to the Corinthians** - Apparently he died around 100 A.D. (it is an intriguing mystery whether this Clement, a later bishop of Rome, was the Clement mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3). This epistle quotes passages from Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, Titus, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter and Revelation.
- 97-100** **John, the Apostle, dies a natural death**
- 100?** **Epistle of Barnabas** - In 16:3-4 of this epistle, there is a clear reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and confidence that the Romans will rebuild it, leading to the conclusion that the epistle was written after 70 A.D. but before 134 A.D. when the Romans wiped out the city during the Bar Kochba revolt. Most interestingly, the epistle quotes Matthew 20:16 (or 22:14) as being Scripture, stating:
- “ . . . let us give heed, lest haply we be found, as the scripture saith,
'many are called but few are chosen.'”
- Before 107** **The seven epistles of Ignatius** - Ignatius was the 3rd bishop of Antioch, who lived from 30 to 107 A.D. and personally knew several of the apostles, (more than seven epistles are attributed to Ignatius, but the others appear to be spurious; these seven are generally agreed to have been written by Ignatius. He quotes passages from Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation. That Ignatius thought Jesus was divine cannot be doubted. Listen to his own words:
- There is one Physician who is possessed both of flesh and spirit; both made and not made; God existing in flesh; true life in death; both of Mary and of God; first possible and then impossible, even Jesus Christ our Lord.
(Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians, chapter 7)
- 108** **Polycarp's letter to the Philippians** - He was the bishop of Smyrna, who personally knew the Apostle John. He quotes statements from Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude.
- 111-112** **Pliny the Younger** - He was governor of Pontus and Bithynia from 111-113 A.D. and writes to Trajan, the emperor, asking for advice on dealing with Christians.
- 70-120** **Egerton Gospel** - The fragments of the copy we have are dated to the first half of the second century, but the fragments are brief (only 4 very short sections) and seem to recount mostly what we know from John and the other gospels, we know nothing else about this “gospel” and it is not quoted in early church literature. It is very orthodox and does not support gnosticism.
- 125-135** **p52** - This is the earliest copy of a New Testament book we presently have - it is a fragment of the gospel of John.
- 130** **Papias** - He was the bishop of Hierapolis (across the valley from Colossae), who may have known the Apostle John. He tells us that Matthew wrote his gospel in the Hebrew language and that Mark was the interpreter of Peter and wrote down what he remembered from Peter.
- 100-150** **Apocalypse of Peter** - Clement of Alexandria (180-211 A.D.) viewed this book as being part of scripture and the Muratorian fragment states that some do not accept the book as scripture, leading scholars to believe that the most likely date is in the first half of the second century. The book is largely a graphic description of torment.
- Before 150** **Gospel of the Egyptians** - We know very little about this gospel, except what is quoted in Clement of Alexandria (180-211 A.D.). This “gospel” some see as the source of certain of the sayings found in other gnostic texts.

- 120-140 Gospel of Thomas** - Hyppolytus of Rome, writing between 222 and 235 A.D., links this writing to a sect existing in 120-140 A.D.; the earliest copy we have is a 4th century document. This is not a gospel like the four in our New Testament, but rather is simply a list of sayings. It is a gnostic text.
- 120-170? Sophia of Jesus Christ** - A gnostic text composed of 13 questions and answers, it is only a guess as to when it was written; the earliest copy we have is a 4th century document with some fragments from the 3rd century.
- Before 165 Justin Martyr** - Lived from around 110 to 165 A.D. He quotes from Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, and Revelation.
- Before 165 Gospel of the Hebrews** - We only have fragments of this gospel contained in other writings. However, it is quoted by Hegesippus who wrote between 165 and 175 A.D. Some would date this gospel to the mid-point of the 1st century, but there is little evidence in the writings we have to give any precise date.
- 160-180 Gospel of Judas** - There is only one copy of this "gospel," recently discovered, whose translation was completed in 2006. The document is dated to between 220 and 340 A.D. Whether this work is a translation from the Gospel of Judas mentioned by Irenaeus is not known. If it is, then the date of original writing would be somewhere around 160-180 A.D. According to Irenaeus, the document was a product of a gnostic sect called Cainites, who exalted Cain as a hero. In line with many of the other gnostic writings, its claim is the revelation of "secret" knowledge. And its "secret" knowledge is quite strange. You will undoubtedly agree with Irenaeus that simply exposing what the Cainites taught is enough to show the spurious nature of their writings. Against Heresies, bk 1, chap. 31, sect. 3. Here is a direct quote from the recent translation of the Gospel of Judas.

The multitude of those immortals is called the cosmos— that is, perdition—by the Father and the seventy-two luminaries who are with the Self-Generated and his seventy-two aeons. In him the first human appeared with his incorruptible powers. And the aeon that appeared with his generation, the aeon in whom are the cloud of knowledge and the angel, is called [51] El.

The gnostics generally rejected monotheism, viewed the God of the Old Testament as being a lesser deity, and embraced whole panoplies of gods. Irenaeus, in 175- 185 A.D., states of the Gospel of Judas:

"They [the Cainites] declare that Judas the traitor was thoroughly acquainted with these things, and that he alone, knowing the truth as no others did, accomplished the mystery of the betrayal; by him all things, both earthly and heavenly, were thus thrown into confusion. They produce a fictitious history of this kind, which they style the Gospel of Judas."
(Against Heresies, bk 1, chap. 31, sect. 1)

- 165-172 Tatian** - An Assyrian who was a disciple of Justin Martyr, later fell into a branch of gnosticism (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, bk. 1, ch. 28. para. 1), but also wrote a harmony of the four gospels in Syriac (the Diatessaron). This is important because, being a gnostic writer, he does not include any of the gnostic "gospels" in his harmony, indicating that only these four were accepted as authoritative at his time.
- 130-180 Gospel of Peter** - A text stated by Serapion (the eighth bishop of Antioch around 200 A.D.) to have been spurious. The text is unremarkable with the fragment we have dealing only with the account of the crucifixion and resurrection. The only notable discrepancy with our gospels is that it has Joseph asking for the body of Jesus before the crucifixion. This is not a gnostic text.

175-185 Irenaeus (120-202 A.D.) - He was the bishop of Lyons (present day France). As a child he remembered listening to Polycarp. He states:

Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.
(Against Heresies, bk 3, ch 1, para. 1)

It is of note that Irenaeus references every New Testament book except for Philemon and 3 John. That Irenaeus thought that Jesus was divine cannot be doubted. Here are his words:

"[T]hey showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshipped: myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold, because He was a King, "of whose kingdom is no end;" and frankincense, because He was God."
(Against Heresies, bk. 3, chap. 9, para. 2)

For inasmuch as the Word of God was man from the root of Jesse, the son of Abraham, in this respect did the Spirit of God rest upon Him, and anoint Him to preach the Gospel to the lowly, But inasmuch as He was God, He did not judge according to glory, nor reprove after the manner of speech." (Against Heresies, bk. 3, chap. 9, para. 3)

But in every respect, too, He is man, the formation of God; and thus He took up man into Himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassible becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in Himself. (Against Heresies, bk. 3, chap. 16, para. 6)

180 The Muratorian fragment - In this writing there is a list of accepted books that includes all of the New Testament except for Matthew and Mark (clearly missing simply because of the fragmentary nature of the document as Luke is called the third gospel), Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1 John.

Note: All of these works were quoted and used by earlier church writers.

180-250? Gospel of Philip - A gnostic anthology of 143 statements.

197-220 Tertullian, Bishop of Carthage in North African - It is of note that he quotes every book of the New Testament except Philemon, 2nd and 3rd John, and Jude.

That Tertullian thought Jesus was divine cannot be doubted. Here are his words:

In this way also, as He is Spirit of Spirit and God of God, He is made a second in manner of existence—in position, not in nature; and He did not withdraw from the original source, but went forth. This ray of God, then, as it was always foretold in ancient times, descending into a certain virgin, and made flesh in her womb, is in His both God and man united. . . . Surely Christ, then, had a right to reveal Deity, which was in fact His own essential possession . . .
(Apology, chap. 21)

150-312? The Apocryphon of James - The dating of this book is difficult. Our earliest text is from the 4th century, but some would date it as early as 150 A.D. It is gnostic in its orientation.

After these events and writings, there is another century of events and writings, the third century A.D., before we come to the the time of Constantine and the first unified church authority.

325 Council of Nicea

Constantine summoned the Council of Nicea which addressed the issue of the relationship of the Son to the Father. They concluded overwhelmingly that they were of the same substance. The Council was composed of 318 bishops, with the Latin (Roman) church having only 4 or 5 bishops present.