

Dating the Books of the New Testament

-or-

The Emperor Has No Clothes

by Jim Seghers

The majority of modern scripture scholars attribute late dates to the composition of the New Testament books in the form that we now have them. This is particularly true of the four Gospels. It is usually claimed that Mark was the first gospel written around A.D. 70. Matthew's composition is dated in the 80's, followed by Luke in the late 80's. The Gospel of John is given a composition date in the 90's.

One may be inclined to think, "So what! After all, regardless of the dates attributed to their composition, each book remains the written word of God because the Holy Spirit is the principal author. What does it matter?" Actually, it matters a great deal.

One naturally assumes that the proponents of late composition dates, men with academic degrees, base their conclusions on sound scholarship that is rooted in recent discoveries in History, Archeology, Patristics, Papyrology and other related fields. This is especially true because these scholars pride themselves on their "scientific" approach to biblical interpretation. Certainly, it would seem that their arguments must be buttressed by the data coming from objective research. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those supporting late authorship base their statements solely on the wobbly foundation of their own fanciful imaginations. Why is this so?

Late authorship fits conveniently into their first principles, which rejects the possibility of any reality that is beyond the scope of their personal experience. They make the limits of their finite intellects and narrow experiences the measure of God's activity in the world he created out of nothing. Thus accounts of miracles, the resurrection, claims that Jesus is God, the definition of his mission, the founding of the Church with its hierarchical authority, and statements attributed to Jesus cannot be part of what is the actual inspired word of God. Rather these "beliefs" are explained away as a late editing which merely reflects the tenets of Christians far removed from eyewitnesses and the actual words of Jesus. These claims, of course, have no documented foundation in any historical sense of the word. In order to support this evolutionary flight of fancy it is necessary to claim that the gospels had late compositions.

Starting from this faithless, secular viewpoint it is easy to understand why Mark was selected as the first gospel written and the source of Matthew and Luke. This is expedient because Mark lacks many of the "embellishments" found in Matthew and Luke, for example, the institution of the Church on Peter, and the miracles surrounding Jesus birth. Support is drawn from another fashionable invention the Q document, so called from the German word *quelle*, "source." "Q" is a hypothetical source from which it is claimed the Synoptic Gospels drew common material. There is no historical evidence that Q ever existed except, of course, in the fertile imaginations of revisionist scholars. The result of this foolishness is a whole system of biblical interpretation

based on the myths fabricated by their creators who, themselves, have become the embodiment of the fable, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In the fable of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, it required the uninhibited innocence of a child to proclaim, "The king is Nude!"

The resulting interpretations of many modern biblical scholars are so methodologically flawed that they should be the subjects of derision not serious study. Unfortunately, just as in the fable there were many that gawkishly admired the Emperor's invisible attire, so today there are many who fawn over these illusionary conclusions based on invisible data. At the college and university levels these speculations are taught with indiscriminate dogmatism. Woe to the inquiring student who dares to challenge these pronouncements! One is left to wonder if St. Paul foresaw these times when he prophesied: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own liking, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Tim 4:4). Fortunately, amid this academic madness there are voices that are exposing the nudity of much in modern biblical studies.

As it relates to the dating of New Testament books, the pioneering labor of John A. T. Robinson in his scholarly work *Redating the New Testament* is of great importance. He argues persuasively that all the books of the New Testament were written before 70 A.D. Modernists have refused to seriously investigate his scholarship, choosing instead to ignore it. However, Robinson's thesis provides a reasonable assumption of composition dates based on sound scholarship not ideological illusion.

Recently the scholarly work of the papyrologist, Carsten Peter Thiede, has received widespread notice. He persuasively argues that Matthew's Gospel is the account of an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. His pathfinding book written with Matthew D'Ancona, *Eyewitness to Jesus*, published in 1996, argues that the Magdalen Papyrus of St. Matthew's Gospel was written around A.D. 60.

Between Robinson and Thiede other persuasive voices have also challenged the late dating nonsense. Gunther Zuntz, the internationally recognized authority on Hellenistic Greek, assigned the date 40 A.D. as the most likely date of Mark's composition. Orchard and Riley in their book, *The Order of the Synoptics*, argue that Matthew was written in A.D. 43. Reicke's "Synoptic Prophecies on the Destruction of Jerusalem," in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wikgren*, 1972, give the years 50-64 A.D. for the composition of Matthew. Eta Linnemann's two works: *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* and *Is There a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels* provide a piercing debunking of the myths of modern biblical scholarship. What makes her arguments so penetrating is the fact that she studied under Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Fuchs.

Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. in his doctoral dissertation, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, argues persuasively that John wrote the Book of Revelation before 70 A.D. David Chilton in his excellent commentary on the Book of Revelation, *The Days of Vengeance*, comes

to the same conclusion. Dating of the Book of Revelation is important since even most revisionist scholars affirm that it was the last New Testament book written.

The impressive work of Claude Tresmontant, a distinguished scholar at the Sorbonne, confirms Robinson's thesis. He bases his arguments on language and archaeology. He points out, for example, that in John 5:2 that "there is [*estin* in Greek, not "was"] at Jerusalem, at the sheep gate, a pool named in Hebrew Bethzatha. It has five porticos." This makes no sense if Jerusalem was reduced to a heap of stones 25 or 30 years earlier. (See: Claude Tresmontant, *The Hebrew Christ* and *The Gospel of Matthew*.) Father Jean Carmignac of Paris also assigns early composition to the four Gospels. Carmignac, a philologist with exceptional skills in biblical Hebrew, was a noted scholar of the Dead Sea scrolls and the world's most renowned expert on the Our Father. His *The Birth of the Synoptic Gospels* is a lucid summary of his thesis.

As a result of the persuasive erudition of these and other scholars a shift is occurring away from the blind acceptance of late New Testament authorship. An example of this shift is reflected in Fr. George H. Duggan's fine article in the May 1997 issue of *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* titled: "The Dates of the Gospels." By the grace of God may this trend continue!

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