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PROBLEMS WITH **NEW** TESTAMENT HISTORY

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last time we arrived at the year A.M. 3960 as the date for the inauguration of the New Creation through the death, resurrection, ascension, and session of Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. We also saw that this is most likely the year of Paul's conversion.

Fourteen years after Paul's conversion, in 3974, we find him in Jerusalem at the time of Herod's death in A.D. 44. At this time we find a kind of death and resurrection of Peter, in Acts 12, a story that deliberately parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Jesus turned the Church over to the disciples, so Apostle Peter turns the Jerusalem Church over to Elder James. (See my essay, "The Resurrection of Peter and the Coming of the Kingdom, in *Biblical Horizons* No. 34, available for a donation from Biblical Horizons, Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32566).

At this point, I want to raise three difficulties connected with the chronology of the New Testament. The first is the testimony of the "Church Fathers." Some of these indicate that Peter died in Rome, for instance, though the testimony is slim and often clearly untrustworthy. There is no real proof that Peter was ever in Rome at all. In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter says that he writes from "Babylon," and this has almost always been taken as a reference to Rome, but it is far more likely a reference to Jerusalem. Indeed, Paul expressly tells us that Peter captained the ministry to Jewish converts (Galatians 2:8). We do see Peter traveling in Acts, and if he travelled to minister to Jews, it is more likely that he went to the real Babylon than to Rome, because there was a large Jewish community in the Persian empire. But it is still more likely that he was headquartered in Jerusalem. He turned the actual administration of the Church over to James, and continued as an advisor and apostle. James was not an apostle, but the presiding elder of the Jerusalem Church. The only time after Acts 12 that we meet Peter is in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council, over which James presided.

Similarly, the story that Peter was crucified upside down comes from the highly fictional apocryphal *Acts of Peter*. John 21:18ff. can be taken as a prediction of this kind of death, but it can also be taken in other ways as well.

We have to remember that we only have a few Church Fathers to draw on. Often Christian scholars have strained mightily to build on evidence from these writings, writings of men clearly not familiar with the facts in other instances. Many of the Fathers were new converts to the faith who wrote apologetics, and who did not know much about Christianity (as can be seen when we compare them with the teachings of the New Testament). What we don't have are reams of sermons preached by pastors in local churches

in a sense, and are of real value to us, they are also the "Church Babies" in another sense. All this should be born in mind when it comes to their haphazard testimony about the deaths of Peter, Paul, and others.

The second problem with New Testament history is the tendency of scholars to read the Roman persecutions back into the New Testament. Except for the book of Revelation, the New Testament does not picture Rome as the enemy, and even in Revelation, the Roman Beast is clearly secondary to the Babylonian Whore. Rather, it is the Jews who are the enemy. It is the unconverted Jews who repeatedly try to get the apostles arrested in the history recorded in Acts, and repeatedly we see the Roman officials intervene to protect the Church. The theology here is very important: When our ways please God, He will usually cause the state to protect us against heretics who try to destroy us. Again, it is the Jews and Judaizers who are the troublemakers of the Church in the writings of Paul and the other New Testament authors. Babylon in Revelation is Jerusalem. Once we see this clearly, a somewhat different picture of the history of the earliest Church emerges.

The third problem concerns the dating of New Testament writings. The governing viewpoint is this: "The authors of the New Testament books thought Jesus would come back in their lifetimes. When He didn't, they finally wrote down their testimonies." Thus, scholars start with the latest possible date for New Testament books, and then work backwards.

This is sheer supposition, knew that Jesus was coming back to destroy Jerusalem, but they did not expect Him to come back to judge the quick and the dead in their lifetimes. Because of their concern for the Jews, it stands to reason that they would write their gospels and letters for the Jews at an early time, not at a late one.

John, we are told, wrote his Gospel in his old age. Why should we believe this? Why could he not have written it in the mid-30s A.D.? Supposedly John's theology is post-Pauline. Why should we believe this? Again, Galatians 2:9 links James and John with Peter as ministers to the Jews. The letter of James is pretty universally regarded as very early and as written to Jews. This would suggest that John also was centered in Jerusalem and wrote fairly early in the period we are considering. Matthew and Mark could also have written fairly early, perhaps in the mid-30s.

Luke, who worked with Paul, wrote his gospel before he wrote Acts, but for the same person, Theophilus. Acts was probably written in the late 50s, after the last event recorded in it. The gospel was written before that time.

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 A.D. 40. Peter writes of suffering and persecution, and the unconverted Jews had been persecuting Jewish converts from the very beginning, in A.D. 30. We need to move the date forward, however, because 2 Peter 3:1 says that 2 Peter was written to the same people, and 2 Peter 1:12-15 says that 2 Peter was written shortly before Peter's death. 2 Peter 3:15-16 refers to Paul's epistles. Those who are certain that Peter was put to death by Nero place these letters in the early 60s. Tertullian says Nero put Peter to death in Rome, but are we sure of this? Peter may well have died in Jerusalem at the hands of the Jews. Josephus says that James was put to death in 61 or 62 in Jerusalem, but Josephus does not know much about Christianity, and may have omitted other figures put to death about the same time.

It is interesting that Luke says that Paul continued under house arrest in Rome for two years, until around 59, but does not mention the martyrdom of James. This shows the highly selective and theological character of the book of Acts. Paul passes judgment on the unconverted Jews in Acts 28:26-28, around A.D. 57. This hints to me that at this point God allowed the Jews to begin killing Christians in Jerusalem, committing the abominable acts that would bring about His destruction of the city. If I were going to try and make a guess at the death of Peter from Biblical evidence alone, I would put it at about the same time as the death of James, and in Jerusalem.

(A coin from Nero's fifth year, A.D. 58, identifies it as the third year of Festus. Festus thus took over in A.D. 56, and Paul was sent to Rome at that time, arriving probably in A.D. 57; from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 1:691.)

The letters of John, we are told, must be fairly late because they deal with incipient Gnosticism in the Church. This is also highly questionable. The "antichrists" in John look suspiciously like some of the Judaizing heretics, especially those dealt with in Colossians. From what Paul

tially Jewish churches. The beliefs of many Jews, especially the Sadducees, were very similar to those of the later gnostics, and John was familiar with the Temple priesthood, who were Sadducees. John's letters, then, might be fairly early. True, John calls himself an "elder," and his recipients "children," but the age for eldership in the Bible seems to be 50 (John 8:57; Lev. 8:25). My guess is that Peter was about 50 when he turned the Jerusalem church over to James in A.D. 44. John was younger, of course, but I don't think Jesus would have called him to preach before the Biblical age of 30, the age of Jesus Himself when He began. Thus, by A.D. 47, John would have been an "elder."

(If James was an elder in A.D. 44, and thus 50 years old, then he was a year older than Jesus, which would indicate that Joseph was married before and that some of Jesus' brothers and sisters were older than He. If Joseph was an older widower when he married Mary, it would explain why he was apparently already dead by the time Jesus began His ministry.)

I am not writing to settle this or other issues, but to point out that less is known about these matters than many Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias would lead you to believe. There is some need for revisionism in this area, done by people who take the Bible seriously, and who are not overwhelmed by the sparse and often unreliable testimony of Church Fathers who lived 150 or more years after the facts.

Chronological Summary

The book of Acts does not provide a complete chronology, but as we have seen ends in A.D. 59 (A.M. 3689). The book of Revelation was written shortly thereafter, predicting the downfall of Jerusalem as "shortly to come to pass." The date A.D. 70 for that event (A.M. 4000) does not come from the Bible, but as we have seen, the Bible leads to the very brink of it.