

Dating the crucial sources in early Christianity

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1. Preliminaries

There are certain topics in New Testament studies that are vital to the discipline but which make most of us sigh, the topics we must cover in our introductory course but on which we have nothing original or interesting to say. For some, this includes the Synoptic Problem; for others it includes Textual Criticism. For many, it is the dating of the crucial literary works that induces a tired lack of conviction, that part of the class that is to be endured rather than enjoyed. The difficulty with discussions about dating is that we feel we know the key date ranges – we are used to working with them – but when pressed we know that our arguments for them are sketchy, our views open to question and counter-argument. The counter-arguments are irritants, confusing clear schemes that enable us to conceptualize the development of Christianity in straightforward ways.

The standard picture is remarkably easy to grasp, and has proved pedagogically useful. Broadly speaking, every decade is covered. Paul writes in the 40s and 50s, Mark in the 60s, Matthew in the 70s, Luke in the 80s and John in the 90s. Other assorted items that are of lesser interest punctuate this pattern, and the non-canonicals are safely dated in the second century, sometimes well into the second century. But how secure is this general picture, what are the complications and why should we care?

With a large topic like this, it would be easy to shoot quickly for absolute dates, to try to pinpoint each text to a specific moment without doing the necessary prior work on establishing the relationships of literary works to one another. One of the virtues of B. H. Streeter's classic *Four Gospels*¹ was that it took seriously the necessity to work on Gospel relationships before attempting to establish dates. However much we might find matters like the Synoptic Problem not to our taste, it is essential to get on top of such things if we are to get some feeling for the most plausible relationship of literary works to one another. It is a necessary prior step before attempting to fix literary works to a specific date or range of dates.

¹ Burnett Hillman Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study Of Origins Treating Of The Manuscript Tradition, Sources, Authorship And Dates* (London: Macmillan, 1924).

Before that, though, several important reminders are necessary:

(a) What is a literary work? It is easy to engage in this kind of discussion without thinking through the broader issues of what it means to talk about “texts” and “literary works” in antiquity. It is a somewhat hackneyed to point out the obvious facts that none of the autographs have survived and that there were no printing presses, but textual critics rightly remind us to behave like we actually know that that is the case.² Too often, we lapse into treating our scholarly constructs as if they are the actual artefacts that they can only aspire to be. At the very least, we need to keep reminding ourselves in discussions like this that we are not dealing with fixed points and known entities but with reconstructions and approximations.

(b) A Work’s Evolution: There is a related issue here, that the more we become text-critically sensitive, the more we are inclined to reflect on the evolution of the literary works we think we know. When we try to date Mark’s Gospel, what are we dating? Something that approximates to our scholarly reconstructions of

² See especially David Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Mark 1.1-16.8 or something akin to what the vast majority of witnesses have, a Mark that goes on beyond 16.8? When we try to date John, are we imagining a version with or without the Pericope Adulterae, with or without Chapter 21? When we date Thomas, are we dating textual antecedents to the Oxyrhynchus fragments, where Coptic Thomas's Saying 77 is found with Saying 30, or constructs more akin to the Coptic, or both or neither? Even in our print culture, a literary work's history is often about a date range rather than a fixed point in time. When we refer to John Knox's *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, are we dating it to its original influential edition in 1954 or the revised version of 1989, in which he reacts to critics of his earlier work?³ Sometimes our attempts to date literary works too precisely ignore what we know to be the case, that documents are not static entities even today, let alone in antiquity.

(c) Text and Tradition: There is a further related issue that often causes confusion. We sometimes speak as if a literary work is as early as the traditions it contains. Or, to put it in another way, we confuse tradition history with a document's dating. Thus a document first penned in the year 80CE might contain good traditions from the early 30s. One first penned in the 60s might be

³ John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (London: Black, 1954; rev. ed., London: SCM, 1989). To make it still more complicated, we could insist too that even the 1954 edition featured revised versions of articles written in the 1930s.

full of historically dubious legends. We should be careful to make sure that in attempting to date a document we are not simply dating the traditions contained in that literary work.

It is not my intention, though, to talk only about the difficulties involved in the task at hand, but rather to make sure that certain warnings are in place before embarking on the journey ahead. It is important to be clear that this discussion of the dating of literary works takes place in a context that admits that there are complexities but which aims for the greatest degree of clarity possible.

One of the easy mistakes in the dating game is to shoot too quickly for absolute dates, to look in a given work for hints that might help the interpreter to pin it to a specific date. Some of the literary works, though, are not of the nature that will allow us to pin them to a particular decade, let alone a particular year, and in such circumstances, it is important to try to get them into the right relative order, to make sure that we are stacking them up in the right order with respect to one another. Our general reluctance to do this may have something to do with our general reluctance to get our hands dirty doing serious work on the Synoptic Problem or to do the related, equally difficult work on other big issues that make some of us recoil, Pauline chronology, John's familiarity (or not) with the

Synoptics, Thomas's use (or not) of the Synoptics. But if we are to make progress on dating the crucial sources, these are the kinds of specialist areas that we need to invest in.

The discussion will proceed in the following way. We will attempt first to provide some insight into the sequence of the key literary works, first Paul's epistles, then the Gospels. Paul's epistles aid the historian in leaving lots of autobiographical clues about their relative sequence. The Gospels are different since they are, of course, written by different authors who are representing the same events. Here, one suggested method is to look for clues in their editing for their relationship to one another. Having attempted to place the Gospels in sequence, we will then turn to the big question: does the earliest Gospel have any knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE? If the earliest Gospel dates after 70, this helps us also to date the other Gospels after this point. Further clues will be drawn from the relatively unexplored area of authorial self-representation. I will limit the discussion to the works that currently prove the most important for the discussion of Christian origins, Paul's letters, the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospels of John and Thomas.

2. *Getting Paul's Letter's in Order*

Let us take what is perhaps the most straightforward area first, the issue of getting Paul's letters in order. Fortunately, there is a degree of consensus on the parameters and general shape of the question.⁴ It is agreed, broadly, that Paul's letters were written in the 50s. The late 40s is the earliest possible date for his earlier letters. There is general agreement on the basics of how to frame Paul's life. No one seriously thinks that 1 Thessalonians is a late letter, or that Romans is an early one. If there are serious disagreements about the integrity of 2 Corinthians, and the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, there is nevertheless broad consensus over the general shape of the letter sequence, with 1 Thessalonians as Paul's earliest extant epistle, Romans at the end, with Galatians and 1-2 Corinthians in between. Philippians and Philemon are, of course, less easy to place in sequence, though most would put Philippians quite late.

It is easy to be sure about Romans. Paul is explicit that he has preached the

⁴ The major disagreements in Pauline chronology tend to be over the role played by Acts rather than on letter sequence. Important works include John Knox, *Chapters*; Gerd Lüdemann, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles. Studies in Chronology* (ET, London: SCM, 1984); Robert Jewett, *Dating Paul's Life (= A Chronology of Paul's Life*, London: SCM, 1979); R. Riesner, *Paul's Early Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) and Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

gospel fully in a circle from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15.19), and that he is on the way now to Jerusalem with the collection for the saints there, with a view to heading off next to Rome and then to Spain (Rom. 15.23-9). Now the collection provides us with the most helpful basic piece of sequential dating material because it is mentioned, at different states of development, in three other epistles, all of which must therefore predate Romans.

Gal. 2.10: Only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.

1 Cor. 16.1-4: Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. 2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. 3 And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. 4 If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

2 Cor. 9.1-4: Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the offering for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brethren so that our boasting about you may not prove vain in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; lest if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we be humiliated - to say nothing of you - for being so confident.

This is a fine example of the way in which sequential biography mentioned in literary works can help in the dating of those works. Clearly the collection is at

an early point when Paul writes 1 Corinthians – he has recently instructed the Galatians about it, and he is only beginning now to talk to Achaia about it; presumably he has not yet begun to talk to Macedonia about it. By 2 Cor. 9 it has advanced much further. At least a year has passed; Paul is expecting Achaia to be ready, and Macedonia is ready too. So 1 and 2 Corinthians are placed in their expected sequence with respect to one another, but both also earlier than Romans.

There is one more opportunity the material here provides, but it is an invitation often and surprisingly refused. The major, marked difference between 1 Cor. 16 on the one hand and 2 Cor. 8-9 and Rom. 15 on the other is that Galatia has dropped out. Whereas Paul, when he was writing 1 Corinthians, had expected the Galatians to participate, they are out of the picture by the time that he was writing 2 Corinthians, something further confirmed by their absence from Romans. The crisis in Galatia, therefore, appears to have taken place between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians.⁵ This is when Paul lost the allegiance of the Galatians who had turned to what Paul saw as “another gospel” and getting

⁵ See further Gregory Tatum, *New Chapters in the Life of Paul: The Relative Chronology of his Career* (CBQ Monograph Series; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Society of America, 2006), for a defence of the view that Galatians post-dates 1 Corinthians, though Tatum partitions 2 Corinthians and places 2 Cor. 10-13 before Galatians, and 2 Cor. 1-9 after Galatians.

circumcised. The order of Paul's letters, then, goes something like this:

1 Thessalonians

1 Corinthians

Galatians

2 Corinthians

?Philippians

?Philemon

Romans

Getting the relative dating of 1 Corinthians and Galatians right illustrates the value of dating questions in the study of Christian origins. The hints provided by Paul's biography for establishing that 1 Corinthians precedes Galatians correlate with other factors of interest in the study of Paul. What is the source of his gospel? Is it through human agency (1 Corinthians 15.1-11) or directly from God (Galatians 1.6-12)? What about his use of Jesus material? Is it a coincidence that his earlier epistles, 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians, are rich in Jesus material but his later epistles are not? What about Paul, the Law and justification? Is it significant that the earlier epistles, 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, are light

(to put it mildly) on the forensic language while the later epistles (Galatians, Romans, Philippians 3) feature it heavily?

3. Getting the Synoptic Gospels in Order

Getting the Gospels in order is one of the fundamental issues in dating the crucial sources in early Christianity. Before attempting to work out whether the Gospels can be located in any particular decade, there is preliminary work to be done, to see whether it is possible to put them into sequence in relation to one another. The issue is separable into several different questions, all of them controversial, all of them interesting, (1) the Synoptic Problem, (2) the question of John's knowledge of the Synoptics, (3) the question of Thomas's knowledge of the Synoptics. There are still other additional questions that we could add, like the relationship of the Gospel of Peter or the Didache to the others, but to make the task manageable, at least in an introductory discussion, it is worth focusing on the texts generally regarded in the scholarship as crucial to the task at hand.

Let us begin with the Synoptic Problem. Since I have written fairly extensively on this topic, I will not pretend that I am beginning fresh and will instead

summarize my conclusions and then offer an illustration of how we may be able to stack up the Synoptic Gospels in sequence.

(a) Mark is the first Gospel and it was used as primary source by both Matthew and Luke. The Priority of Mark is rightly the consensus view in Gospel scholarship. Its major contemporary competitor, the Griesbach (Two-Gospel) Hypothesis does not adequately account for much of the Synoptic data, especially the combination of Mark's alleged omissions from and additions to the combined witness of Matthew and Luke, which generate a curious profile for Mark the redactor.⁶

(b) Luke is dependent on Matthew as well as Mark. This theory (the Farrer theory) dispenses with the need to posit a hypothetical document, Q, to explain the extensive verbatim agreement between Matthew and Luke that is not mediated by Mark. This is the thesis of *The Case Against Q*, summarized also for introductory students in the last chapter of *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through*

⁶ See *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), Chapter 2 and *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), Chapters 3-4, and other works cited there.

the Maze.⁷ It is an argument against a major element in what is currently the majority view in Gospels scholarship, the Two-Source Theory, which argues that Matthew and Luke used Mark independently of one another, which necessitates Q. Arguments for Luke's independence of Matthew are unconvincing, and evidence of Luke's familiarity with Matthew needs to be taken seriously. To take just one area, it is commonly said that Luke's re-ordering of Matthew's discourses is inexplicable, but it makes good sense when one pays attention to Luke's redactional habits with respect to Mark, and his narrative habits overall.

The direction Mark > Matthew > Luke can be observed by paying attention to an important but underestimated indicator of the genealogy of literary works, the phenomenon of editorial fatigue. I have argued⁸ that Matthew's and Luke's dependence on Mark, and Luke's dependence on Matthew, can be seen in the way in which each evangelist will, on occasion, begin by making changes to a pericope, only to lapse into the wording of the source as time goes on, creating minor contradictions. Thus we can observe Matthew using Mark in the story of the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6.14-29 // Matt 14.1-12), beginning the

⁷ See previous footnote.

⁸ Mark Goodacre, "Fatigue in the Synoptics", *NTS* 44 (1998), 45-58, reproduced at <http://www.ntgateway.com/Q/fatigue.htm>.

pericope by changing Mark's Herod "the king" (Mark 6.14) to his own more accurate "Herod the tetrarch" (Matt. 14.1), only to lapse into calling him "king", with Mark, half-way through the passage (Matt. 14.9 // Mark 6.26). Moreover, he adjusts the plot of the story. Where in Mark, Herodias wants John killed (Mark 6.19), Matthew has Herod himself desiring to kill John (Matt. 14.5); this then creates an inconcinnity when Matthew retains Mark's notice that Herod grieved John's death (Matt. 14.9 // Mark 6.26). Matthew has become fatigued in his editing of Mark, and there are several examples of the same phenomenon elsewhere, and no counter-examples.

The phenomenon is not limited to Matthew. Luke regularly appears secondary to Mark in the same way. The Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matt 14.13-21 // Mark 6.30-44 // Luke 9.10-17) provides one example. Luke begins the pericope by resetting it in "a city called Bethsaida" (Luke 9.10), which causes an inconcinnity when he later repeats, with Mark, "we are in a desert place here" (Mark 6.35 // Luke 9.12).

The same phenomenon of editorial fatigue occurs also in double tradition material, where the evidence suggests that Luke is secondary to Matthew. In the Parable of the Talents / Pounds (Matt 25.14-30 // Luke 19.11-27), Luke, who loves

the 10:1 ratio (Luke 15.8-10, Ten Coins, one lost; Luke 17.11-19, Ten Lepers, one thankful, etc.) begins with a typical change: ten servants, not three; and with one pound each (Luke 19.13). Yet as the story progresses, Luke appears to be drawn back to the plot of the Matthean parable, with three servants, “the first” (Luke 19.16), “the second” (Luke 19.18) and, remarkably, “the other” (Luke 19.20, ὁ ἕτερος). Moreover, the wording moves steadily closer to Matthew’s as the parable progresses, creating an internal contradiction when the master speaks of the first servant as “the one who has the ten pounds” (Luke 19.24), in parallel with Matthew 25.28. In Luke, he does not have ten pounds but eleven (Luke 19.16, contrast Matt. 25.20).

These brief examples of the phenomenon of fatigue draw attention to the possibilities for using literary criticism to theorize about the direction of dependence among related literary works, and so to find a way of establishing their sequence. But if there is some help here for the Synoptics, is the same true for John?

4. *What about John?*

Discussion of John in this context is less straightforward than discussion of the Synoptics. Whereas the Synoptic Gospels are clearly related on the literary level, the links between the Synoptics and John still leave room for doubt about the nature of the relationship and there is no consensus about whether or not John is familiar with the Synoptics.⁹ One way of looking at the question is to develop the perspective discussed above in relation to the Synoptics and to ask whether it is possible to see similar phenomena in John.

One of the indicators of familiarity with prior texts is a rewriting of elements in those texts in such a way that the author inadvertently creates anomaly or inconcinnity. A good example of this phenomenon in John occurs in his story of the anointing of Jesus by Mary in John 12.1-8. The story is parallel to Matthew 26.6-13 // Mark 14.3-9. The Johannine incident is clearly the same as the Synoptic incident: (1) It takes place in Bethany (2) just before Passover, (3) at a dinner

⁹ The strongest case is often thought to be made in C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978) and by Frans Neiryck; see especially F. Neiryck, "John and the Synoptics" in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'évangile de Jean* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1977), 73-106; *Jean et les Synoptiques. Examen critique de l'exegese de M.-E. Boismard* (BETL 49; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979); and "John 4.46-54. Signs Source and / or Synoptic Gospels," *ETL* 60 (1984): 367-75.

where a woman has a jar of very expensive perfume of pure nard (Mark 14.3, ἀλάβαστρον μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτελοῦς; John 12.3, λίτρον μύρου νάρδου πιστικῆς πολυτίμου); (4) she anoints Jesus; (5) there are complaints about the costliness of the perfume (τριακοσίων δηναρίων) which could have been given to the poor (Mark 14.5, καὶ δοθῆναι τοῖς πτωχοῖς; John 12.5, καὶ ἐδόθη πτωχοῖς); (6) Jesus says “Leave her. . . The poor you will always have with you . . . But you will not always have me” (Mark 14.6-7, ἄφετε αὐτήν . . . πάντοτε γὰρ τοὺς πτωχοὺς ἔχετε μεθ’ ἐαυτῶν καὶ ὅταν θέλητε δύνασθε αὐτοῖς εὖ ποιῆσαι ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε; John 12.7-8, ἄφες αὐτήν . . . τοὺς πτωχοὺς γὰρ πάντοτε ἔχετε μεθ’ ἐαυτῶν ἐμὲ δὲ οὐ πάντοτε ἔχετε); (7) Jesus interprets the anointing in connection with his burial (John 12.7, Mark 14.8).

John appears to have crafted this account on the basis of the Marcan narrative; the structure, the story, the wording have substantial links. The only major fresh elements in John are the naming of the woman as Mary, contextually determined by his resetting of the account as a postlude to the Lazarus story, and the naming of the one who complains as Judas, which itself may be derived from Mark 14.10-11, which comes straight after the anointing, and links Judas with an unhealthy interest in money. But there is one element in John that appears not to be found in Mark, Mary’s wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair (καὶ ἐξέμαξεν ταῖς θριξίν

αὐτῆς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ, John 12.3; see too 11.2, καὶ ἐκμάξασα τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ ταῖς θριξίν αὐτῆς). This detail appears to come from Luke 7.38 (καὶ ταῖς θριξίν τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς ἐξέμασσεν. . .), where it forms part of Luke's story of the anointing, 7.36-50, his version of the Marcan // Matthean anointing, an anointing by an anonymous woman in the house of a man called Simon, though Luke relocates it at an earlier point in the narrative, as often,¹⁰ a move that necessitates some reworking of the details, especially the stress on the forthcoming death and burial. It is now a story about a "sinner", whose hair hangs down.

The anointing in each of the Synoptic accounts makes sense. In Mark and Matthew, Jesus' head is anointed with perfume. No hair is mentioned, no feet are mentioned. In Luke, the woman wets Jesus' feet with her tears, an act of repentance, and she wipes them with her loose "sinner's" hair before she anoints them with perfume. But John's reminiscence of the Lucan detail about the wiping of Jesus' feet with her hair creates an anomaly. First, there is no reason for Mary, in John, to be wearing her hair like a "sinner", which is the point of the Lucan story. Second, because there are no tears in John, Mary's wiping of Jesus' feet

¹⁰ Cf. the Rejection at Nazareth, brought forward to Luke 4.16-30; Paul's first visit to Jerusalem, brought forward to Acts 9.25-6 and the Jerusalem Council, brought forward to Acts 15 from its "true" location in Acts 18.22.

with her hair means that the perfume ends up on her hair and not on Jesus. Jesus is the one who is supposed to be getting anointed. This appears to be an example of John's secondary use of prior texts that has generated narrative inconcinnity and which helps us, therefore, to sketch John into a relationship of post-dating the Synoptics.

5. Thomas and the Gospels

The relationship between Thomas and the other Gospels is a still more vexed question, and one on which there is no consensus currently in the scholarship.¹¹

¹¹ One important perspective sees Thomas as independent of the Synoptics, at best only influenced late in the text's evolution by scribal harmonisation – see especially Stephen J. Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1993). Others argue in favour of Thomas's familiarity with the Synoptics, e.g. C. M. Tuckett, "Thomas and the Synoptics", *NovT* 30 (1988), 132-57 and K. Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Thomas: A Secondary Gospel", *Second Century* 7 (1989-90), 19-38. Recent developments include Nicholas Perrin's argument that Thomas is familiar with Tatian's Diatessaron, *Thomas and Tatian: The Relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002) and *Thomas: The Other Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Risto Uro's appeal to the importance of secondary orality in understanding Thomas's relationship with the Synoptics, Risto Uro, "Thomas and the Oral Gospel Tradition" in Risto Uro (ed.), *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), Chapter 1 and *Thomas: Seeking the Historical Context of the Gospel of Thomas* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), especially Chapter 5; and April DeConick's argument for the evolution of Thomas as a rolling corpus in which there is a running mixture of influences from oral traditions, written texts and secondary orality, April D. De Conick,

It is worth asking, therefore, whether the same kind of discussion, focusing on secondary editing and narrative inconcinnity, might shed some light here too. The area is under explored in Thomas and the introduction of a synoptic view may be helpful, especially in the analysis of his parable material. Thomas is not a sophisticated story-teller, unlike the Synoptic evangelists, and especially Luke. Perhaps because of his decision to write a sayings Gospel rather than a narrative Gospel, or at least consonant with it, is the fact that sometimes Thomas misses out key parts of a given story. On several occasions, we see what might be called the phenomenon of the missing middle, whereby Thomas fails to narrate the middle part of a given parable, making the ending almost unintelligible. The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares¹² provides a clear example of this:

Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: A History of the Gospel and Its Growth (ECC; LNTS 286; New York: T&T Clark International, 2005) and *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation: With a Commentary and New English Translation of the Complete Gospel* (ECC; LNTS 287; London: T & T Clark, 2006). My view is closest to that of Tuckett and Snodgrass. I argue the case in a forthcoming book, *Thomas and the Gospels*.

¹² A strong case can be made that the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares is Matthew's redactional expansion of Mark's Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4.26-29). It is in the same place in the narrative and the material unparalleled in Mark is driven through with Matthean language and imagery. For the detailed case, see my *Thomas and the Gospels* (forthcoming), Chapter 6.

Matt. 13.24-30	Thomas 57
<p>24. Another parable he put before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while the people were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. 27 And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he said,</p> <p>'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"</p>	<p>Jesus says, "The Kingdom of the Father is like a man who had [good] seed.</p> <p>His enemy came by night and sowed weeds among the good seed.</p> <p>The man did not allow them to pull up the weeds; he said to them, 'I am afraid that you will go intending to pull up the weeds and pull up the wheat along with them.'</p> <p>For on the day of the harvest the weeds will be plainly visible, and they will be pulled up and burned."</p>

The middle of the story is missing in Thomas's version, to the detriment of its narrative flow and logic. The missing middle part of the story, which is present in Matthew, introduces servants who begin a conversation with their master. In Thomas, by contrast, the antecedent for "them" (ΜΠΕ ΠΡΩΜΕ ΚΟΟΥ . . . ΠΕΧΑϞ

ΝΑΥ, “the man did not allow them . . . he said to them”) is lacking, which Wolfgang Schrage took to be a sign of *Thomas’s* familiarity with Matthew.¹³

There are further examples of the same phenomenon. In the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12.15-21 // Thomas 63), Thomas lacks the middle part of Luke’s story, 12.18b-19, in which the Rich Fool is reflecting on his apparent great fortune, in characteristic Lucan fashion,¹⁴ “And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’” Thomas’s fool is thinking things in his heart, but the full content of Luke’s

¹³ Wolfgang Schrage, *Das Verhältnis des Thomas-Evangeliums zur synoptischen Tradition und zu den koptischen Evangelien-übersetzungen: zugleich ein Beitrag zur gnostischen Synoptikerdeutung* (Beihefte zu Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche, 29; Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1964), 124-6. The point is largely conceded by those arguing for Thomasine independence, but alongside the suggestion that *Thomas* is familiar with a hypothetical alternative version – J. Sieber, “A redactional analysis of the synoptic Gospels with regard to the question of the sources of the Gospel according to Thomas” (Thesis-Claremont, 1966), 168-9; Stephen Patterson, *Gospel of Thomas*, 46. Cf. DeConick, *Original Gospel*, 194, who suggests that “both versions of the parable represent later developments of an earlier form no longer extant”. The difficulty with these ad hoc explanations, however, is that they do not take seriously the feature of the missing middle as a characteristic of Thomas’s redaction in narrative material.

¹⁴ For a study of Lucan soliloquy in the parable tradition, see my *Goulder and the Gospels* (JSNTS 133; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 169-71; see further *Thomas and the Gospels* (forthcoming), Chapter 6.

version provides a much better antecedent than the blander, truncated soliloquy of Thomas's version.

That this is a characteristic feature of Thomas's (lack of) story-telling ability rather than the affect of Thomas's closeness to raw, primitive oral traditions of Jesus parables is confirmed by the fact that the same feature occurs in Thomas outside of the narrative parables. Thus, in the Tribute to Caesar story (Matt. 22.15-22 // Mark 12.13-17 // Luke 20.20-26 // Thomas 100), Thomas lacks the middle part of the Synoptic story in which it is revealed that the coin has Caesar's image on it, the exchange that results in the aphorism shared with Thomas, "Render to Caesar . . ." ¹⁵

It may be that this rather clumsy feature of Thomas's storytelling comes from Thomas's familiarity with the Synoptic stories he is retelling. In the rush to retell the familiar story, he does not notice that key parts have been left out, rather like those who are not very good at telling jokes, and who rush ahead too quickly, after having introduced it, to the punchline. Thomas sets the scene, gets the ball rolling, and then fast forwards to the story's conclusion. It may be that this is a

¹⁵ Note, similarly, the missing middle in Matt. 7.3-5 // Luke 6.41-2 // Thomas 26, in which all of Matt. 7.4 // Luke 6.42a is missing.

casualty of writing a Sayings Gospel rather than a narrative Gospel. The Synoptic writers are all, to varying degrees, used to writing mini-narratives in their Gospels, and on the whole they make a good job of it. But Thomas is focused on shorter, self-contained sayings, with minimal narrative settings. When it comes to writing a fuller narrative, he is not as well practised as the Synoptic evangelists.

6. Dating Mark

So far we have been looking at the relative ordering of the crucial literary works, focusing on the sequence of these works without attempting to pin them to particular decades. By looking at narrative inconcinnities created in the process of constructing derivative texts, it is possible to trace a broad genealogy of the related literary works. In the sketch attempted here, an order of Mark > Matthew > Luke > John / Thomas makes good sense. The time comes, though, when we need to attempt to pin these texts to points in time. Here, the dating issue is determined by a pivotal question: do the literary works post-date the destruction of Jerusalem in 70CE? Since Mark is the first in this sequence of literary works, dating Mark would be a very helpful way of moving forward. If Mark post-dates 70, so do Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas.

Before tackling that question, however, there are some necessary reminders. The discussion is inevitably clouded by the complications of textual tradition (observable) and textual tradition (hypothesized). We discussed above some of the difficulties involved with a literary work's evolution and range of dates and the inevitable difficulties that that causes the historian. Nevertheless, it is possible to speak reasonably about the dating of the literary works as long as one bears these kinds of difficulties in mind. History, and especially ancient history, often needs to deal in approximations. It is a heuristic and not a descriptive discipline, and reasoned discussion of the date of given works is achievable provided one proceeds with care.

It is important, for example, to distinguish clearly between the date of a given work and the date of the traditions within it and to avoid allowing document dating to get bound up with tradition history. How, then, should we conceive the question of dating a literary work? It should refer, it might be argued, to the date of the given literary work as an observable, substantive entity with recognizable parameters such that it distinguishes itself from other works. Matthew, for example, is recognizably Matthew and not Mark, even though it contains a lot of Mark. Luke is recognizably Luke; it is not Matthew and it is not Mark even

though it contains a lot of the shape and the substance of those works. In this kind of discussion, then, we need to be clear about what it is we are trying to date. We are dating the literary works to which our texts bear witness, and not prior oral traditions, written traditions, or hypothetical earlier versions of the work in question. In this context, we are not investigating the dating of elements within the larger, later literary work; we are attempting to date the work itself.

A work can be no earlier than its most recent datable tradition. This is why, when we come to Mark, the question of its knowledge of the destruction of the temple is so important. If Mark is familiar with the events of 70, the presence of traditions earlier than 70 is irrelevant. Thus when Gerd Theissen argues that Mark's Little Apocalypse (Mark 13) and Passion Narrative (Mark 14-15) can be dated to the late 30s or early 40s, he is nevertheless still able to locate the production of Mark's Gospel in the early 70s, so distinguishing clearly between the date of the literary work and the history of its constituent elements.¹⁶

¹⁶ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

It is in this context that James Crossley's recent *The Date of Mark's Gospel*¹⁷ is worth considering. Crossley argues against the consensus that Mark should be dated somewhere in the region 65-75CE, suggesting instead that Mark's knowledge of Jewish Law, and the assumptions he makes about it, make best sense at a very early point, as early as the mid to late 30s or early 40s. One of the book's virtues is that it effectively strengthens the case for a law observant Historical Jesus and Crossley's arguments to that end are effective. The book is less persuasive, though, in closing the gap that is usually theorized between Jesus in the early 30s and Mark in the late 60s or early 70s.¹⁸ The notion that the originating circumstances of the tradition correlate directly with perspective of the evangelist is problematic. It may be that Mark is sometimes a faithful retailer of traditional material.¹⁹ It is always going to be a tall order to demonstrate that

¹⁷ James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (JSNTS 266; London & New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

¹⁸ Cf. David Gowler's review of Crossley's subsequent *Why Christianity Happened*, *CBQ* 69 (2007): 815-6 (816), "Jesus' Torah observance could still have been adequately represented by Mark in the 60s".

¹⁹ Cf. Charles Talbert's review in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33/4 (Winter 2006): 524-527 (527), "This is a provocative thesis. Its arguments, however, are a house of cards, exegetically and logically. If Jesus is portrayed as a Torah-observant Jew in the Synoptics, it is debatable that Matthew and Luke reflect early church controversies in their support of such a view. It may be simpler to

assumptions apparently made in given traditions are identical with assumptions made by the author of the work in which they appear.

Moreover, where there are clear signs of Marcan redaction, they point away from Crossley's thesis. In the key passage about hand-washing in Mark 7, the narrator's framing of the material explains that hand-washing before eating food is something practised by "the Pharisees *and all the Jews*" (καὶ πάντες οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι). This does not set up the debate as an intra-Jewish one of the kind that Crossley's thesis requires. The practice of hand-washing is established as something that all Jews do, and which Jesus' disciples do not do (7.2, 5), setting up a contrast that Jesus' words then speak into, a contrast that makes good sense on classic form-critical grounds. For Crossley, the reference here to "all the Jews" is a Marcan exaggeration,²⁰ but this concedes the ground about the

say that Jesus is so portrayed because that was the church's memory of him. Such a portrayal, in discontinuity with early church controversies, argues for the historicity of the depiction." See David Instone Brewer's review in *JTS* 57/2 (October 2006): 647-650 for a similar critique, though Instone Brewer is attracted by Crossley's "startling exegesis" of Mark 7.19.

²⁰ Crossley, *Dating*, 184-5. Crossley cross-refers to a similar exaggeration in *Letter of Aristeas* 305f, but this does not help his case given that the author of Aristeas is assuming the persona of a Gentile, affecting an outsider perspective to make his point.

accuracy and precision of Mark's knowledge of Judaism that is a major and necessary element in his case.²¹

If Crossley's commendable effort to rethink the dating of Mark is unsuccessful, it is nevertheless worth asking how secure the standard scholarly dating is. Several recent studies have reinforced the grounds for locating Mark in the aftermath of 70, Brian Incigneri's *The Gospel to the Romans*, H. M. Roskam's *The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in its Historical and Social Context* and John Kloppenborg's article "*Evocatio Deorum* and the Date of Mark".²² Although these

²¹ There is a further difficulty with Crossley's attempts to date the Gospel early – his assumption that Gentile Christians in the early period were observing Biblical laws (*Dating*, Chapter 5). Paula Fredriksen, in an article not discussed by Crossley, argues persuasively that in the early period, it was assumed that Gentiles were included in the people of God without the necessity for conversion to Judaism. The idea of circumcising Gentiles was an innovation in some parts of the emerging Christian movement, in Antioch, Jerusalem and Galatia. See "Judaism, The Circumcision of Gentiles and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2", *JTS* 42 (1991): 532-64. Crossley's assumption is that avoidance of Biblical law was something introduced later; it involved a change of policy for Paul.

²² Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark's Gospel* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 65; Leiden: Brill, 2003); H. N. Roskam, *The Purpose of the Gospel of Mark in its Historical and Social Context* (NovTSupp, 114; Leiden: Brill, 2004) and John S. Kloppenborg, "*Evocatio Deorum* and the Date of Mark", *JBL* 124/3 (2005): 419-50. All three works are written independently of one another, and independently of Crossley, thus there is no interaction between these four important recent works on the same question.

three disagree with one another on the details (e.g. the precise referent of Mark 13.14),²³ all agree on the significance of Mark 13.1-2, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another which will not be torn down." For many, so blatant a prediction of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem settles the question of Mark's date – it is written in full knowledge of the disastrous events of 70. For Kloppenborg, "The fact that this seems to correspond so precisely to what occurred invites the conclusion that it was formulated (or reformulated) *ex eventu*."²⁴ For Roskam, "the evangelist could not have presented the prediction of the destruction of the temple as an utterance of Jesus with such firmness unless he was very certain about its fulfilment."²⁵ Objections to this view are ably discussed by Incigneri,²⁶ who stresses Mark's "over-arching concentration on the Temple,"²⁷ the destruction of which is so

²³ Roskam follows Lührmann in seeing a reference to the Roman general or his army (*Purpose*, 90-1); Incigneri is certain that Titus is in view (*Gospel*, 130-3).

²⁴ Kloppenborg, "Evocatio deorum", 431. The key text is Josephus, *Jewish War* 7, especially 7.1-4.

²⁵ Roskam, *Purpose*, 86.

²⁶ Incigneri, *Gospel*, Chapter 3, "No Stone Upon Another", is a detailed and persuasive argument in favour of a post-70 date for Mark.

²⁷ Incigneri, *Gospel*, 154.

important in his narrative that it is implausible that it was still standing when Mark wrote.²⁸

One of the standard arguments against the idea that Mark shows knowledge of the destruction of Jerusalem is the reassertion of the text's own character here as prediction. In his *Introduction to the New Testament*, David A. DeSilva suggests that "The primary reason many scholars tend to date Mark's Gospel after 70 CE is the presupposition that Jesus could not foresee the destruction of Jerusalem – an ideological conviction clearly not shared by all."²⁹ But this kind of appeal, while popular, tends not to take seriously the literary function of predictions in narrative texts like Mark.³⁰ Successful predictions play a major role in the narrative, reinforcing the authority of the one making the prediction and confirming the accuracy of the text's theological view. It is like reading Jeremiah.

²⁸ For the centrality of the temple theme in Mark, see further Thomas R. Hatina, "The Focus of Mark 13:24-27--The Parousia, or the Destruction of the Temple?" *BBR* 6 (1996): 43-66.

²⁹ David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2004), 196. Similarly Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1971) 54, and often elsewhere.

³⁰ Cf. John Kloppenborg, "*Evocatio deorum*", which stresses the role played by the literary motif of *evocatio deorum* echoed here in Mark, e.g. 446, "This raises a crucial distinction between omens and rituals that (allegedly) occurred before the events, and their literary and historiographic use in narrative."

It works because the reader knows that the prophecies of doom turned out to be correct. It is about “when prophecy succeeds”.

The text makes sense as Mark’s attempt to signal, in a post-70 context, that the event familiar to his readers was anticipated by Jesus, in word (13.2, 13.14) and deed (11.12-21) and in the symbolism of his death, when the veil of the temple was torn in two (15.38). The framing of the narrative requires knowledge of the destruction of the temple for its literary impact to be felt. It is a perspective that is underlined by the first of the taunts levelled when Jesus is crucified, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (Mark 15.29-30).³¹ For the irony to work, the reader has to understand that the Temple has been destroyed;³² the mockers look foolish from the privileged perspective of the post-70 reader, who now sees that

³¹ I am grateful to Ken Olson for alerting me to the importance of this text in a paper, “You who would destroy this temple,” presented at the British New Testament Conference Synoptics Seminar in September 2005. Olson points out that the other taunts on the cross are presumed true, Jesus saved others (15.31), he is the Christ, the king of Israel (15.32), the Son of God (15.39).

³² Cf. Incigneri, *Gospel*, 152-3, “Ironically, it is true: he *is* in the process of destroying it and building a new one, commencing with his willingness to die so that all will hear the gospel. As the readers know that the new temple, the Church, had already been built, for the irony of 15.29 to work fully, the Temple, too, must already have been destroyed.” Cf. Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 82.

Jesus' death is the moment when the temple was proleptically destroyed, the deity departing as the curtain is torn, the event of destruction interpreted through Gospel narrative and prophecy.

7. Dating of Dependent Gospels

If Mark is written after 70, and if Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas all post-date Mark, we have a useful working thesis in place for dating the crucial sources, not least given the fact that Paul's letters are safely assigned to the pre-70 period. Does a closer look at the later Gospels correlate with this picture? For J. A. T. Robinson, it was the lack of reference to 70 anywhere in the New Testament that proved decisive in his attempts at redating:

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.³³

³³ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), xx.

The claim is unimpressive, though, given that most of the literary works in question are either written in the pre-70 period (Paul's letters) or set in the pre-70 period (Gospels-Acts). What is remarkable is that literary works set a generation before 70 appear to speak so clearly about the destruction of the Temple. For Robinson, "That Jesus could have predicted the doom of Jerusalem and its sanctuary is no more inherently improbable than that another Jesus, the son of Ananias, should have done so in the autumn of 62".³⁴ The problem for this perspective is that Jesus ben Ananias's prophecy occurs in a literary work that post-dates 70, Josephus's *Jewish War*. As with Mark, it is important to ask the question about the literary function of the prediction in the narrative, here in a work that climaxes with the story of Jerusalem's destruction.³⁵ Indeed, a comparison between Jesus ben Ananias in Josephus and Jesus of Nazareth in Matthew and Luke provides further striking parallels. The oracle Matthew 23.37-39 // Luke 13.34-35 has marked similarities with the oracle in *Jewish War* 300-1, the same threefold focus on the people, the city, the temple. Jesus ben

³⁴ Robinson, *Redating*, xx.

³⁵ The same difficulty rears its head in C. A. Evans's excellent and exhaustive article, "Predictions of the Destruction of the Herodian Temple in the Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Scrolls and Related Texts", *JSP* 10 (1992): 89-147, the task of which is "to try to determine as precisely as possible the significance of Jesus' prophecy and the way it would have been understood by his contemporaries" (91) rather than to look at the literary function of predictions of the destruction of the temple in narratives like Mark.

Ananias cries “a voice against Jerusalem . . .” and Jesus laments “Jerusalem, Jerusalem”. Jesus ben Ananias singles out “the holy house” and Jesus says “Behold your house is forsaken.” Jesus ben Ananias raises “a voice against this whole people” just as Jesus exclaims, “how often would I have gathered your children.” Moreover, the same context in Josephus features a portent of voices being heard in the temple saying “we are departing from hence” (μεταβαίνομεν ἐντεῦθεν, *War* 6.299), similar to the implication here in Matthew and Luke that God has left the temple – “Behold your house is forsaken and desolate” (Matt. 23.38).³⁶ Such prophecies and portents function similarly in each of the texts and they point to a post-70 dating.

If John and Thomas are familiar with the Synoptics (see above), they will of course post-date 70. That there may be some greater distance from 70 may be reflected in the fact that there is less apparent reference to the destruction of the Temple, though in Thomas’s case this is likely to be a function of its genre (Sayings Gospel in which narratives about the Temple are of course absent) and theological proclivity (the relative lack of so-called apocalyptic eschatology).

³⁶ See further my *Case Against Q*, 23-8, which argues for the post-70 dating of Matthew and Luke. At that point, I had not seen how strong the case was for a post-70 Mark.

Nevertheless, both texts allude to the destruction of the Temple, John in 2.19-20, “Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days . . . ” and Thomas in logion 71, “I shall destroy this house and no one will be able to rebuild it.”³⁷

The more blatant signs, though, of the relative lateness of John and Thomas lie in their attempts at authorial self-representation.³⁸ Where earlier Gospels like Mark and Matthew are anonymous and avoid attempting to project an authorial presence to lend authority to their work,³⁹ the author of the Fourth Gospel makes

³⁷ Hans-Martin Schenke suggests in the light of Thomas 68 and 71 that it may post-date Bar Kochba, “On the Compositional History of the Gospel of Thomas”, *Forum* 10/1-2 (March/June 1994), 9-30 (28).

³⁸ Ismo Dunderberg, “Thomas and the Beloved Disciple” in Risto Uro (ed.), *Thomas at the Crossroads: Essays on the Gospel of Thomas* (Studies of the New Testament and Its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 65-88, especially 80-88, uses the term “authorial fiction”, itself derived from usage by John Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 263-316. I prefer the term “authorial self-representation” because it characterizes the process more precisely and less prejudicially, and uses terminology familiar in literary criticism.

³⁹ Armin D. Baum, “The Anonymity of the New Testament History Books: A Stylistic Device in the Context of Greco-Roman and Ancient Near Eastern Literature,” *NovT* 50 (2008): 120-42, argues that the anonymity of the Gospels follows in the tradition of the anonymity of the history books of the Hebrew Bible, in contrast with the tendency for authors to be named in Greco-Roman texts contemporary with the Gospels. Baum’s observations may shed some light on the discussion here, but he sees too sharp a division between the canonical Gospels and “the author of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas” (122). It is true that

claims to have been present, most notably in 19.35 and of course 21.24, “This is the disciple who testifies to these things and wrote them down (καὶ ὁ γράψας ταῦτα). We know that his testimony is true,” similar in style and literary function to the *Incipit* of Thomas, “These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down.” In both, the authorial self-representation legitimizes the message of the book in a way absent from the earlier Gospels but found explicitly in later texts like the Apocryphon of James.⁴⁰ John’s claim enables the author to establish his Gospel’s authority – he knows that the things he reports are true because he was there. In Thomas, there is a further step: the author was present and, moreover, he was privy not just to the public teaching but also the secret teachings (*Incipit*, Thomas 13).

John is anonymous while Thomas is not, but both have similar degrees of authorial self-representation. Further, anonymity is not necessarily used because of the “priority of the subject matter” or the desire of the authors to remain invisible behind authoritative traditions, as Baum claims. Anonymity may have a marked rhetorical function, for example the attempt to present a narrative as having an inevitable course with an inevitable goal, the unalterable result of divine activity in history.

⁴⁰ Cf. Dunderberg on John and Thomas, “The way authenticating figures are presented in these gospels connects them with Christian writings that are later than the earliest gospels, in which such ascriptions are still lacking. However, in these gospels authorial fiction has assumed less concrete forms than in some other early Christian writings. This indicates that they still stand at the threshold of the development which gradually led to increasingly concrete ways of authenticating pseudepigraphical writings in early Christianity” (“*Thomas and the Beloved Disciple*”, 88).

There is a trajectory among these early Christian texts, from the absence of authorial self-representation in Mark and Matthew, to hints in Luke and Acts (with the first person found in Luke 1.1-4 as well as in the “we” passages in Acts), to the marked but nevertheless still unnamed authorial presence in John, to the explicit self-representation of Didymos Judas Thomas in its Gospel’s Incipit, a naming that also leads the reader to pay special attention to Thomas 13. The same texts likewise witness to a growing consciousness of predecessor texts, from the πολλοί of Luke’s preface, to the many other books that could fill the world in the last verse of John, to the twelve disciples sitting around writing their books at the Last Supper in the Apocryphon of James.

Conclusion

Dating ancient literary works is a tricky business, but it is crucial to the task of understanding Christian origins. However complex and unwieldy the project, it is one that needs to be taken seriously, and with a little care it is possible to produce a sketch that can contribute, one hopes, to some fruitful critical discussion in this new SBL consultation. I have avoided looking at alleged sources, reconstructed earlier exemplars and other hypothetical texts, focusing

instead on the works as substantive entities with recognizable parameters to which our texts bear witness. Inevitably this makes for a more streamlined picture than might otherwise have been imagined, but the attempt to date the works we have helps us to avoid interpreter bias in our reconstructions of early Christianity, looking at the milestones that we know about without distraction from the foliage that grows up around them.

The best way to approach the vexed question of dating the crucial sources in early Christianity is to begin with establishing, as far as possible, the relative order of these key literary works, arranging them in sequence by looking for textual clues of their relationship to one another. Our earliest extant literary works, Paul's letters, with help from the biographical markers, especially his references to the collection, make best sense in this kind of sequence:

1 Thessalonians

1 Corinthians

Galatians

2 Corinthians

?Philippians

?Philemon

Romans

Establishing the sequence of writing for the Gospels takes a little more effort, not least given that all are set at the same time, so there is no narrative progression from one to the other. By taking seriously literary factors that may indicate the relationship of a later work to an earlier one, however, one can trace a sequence that looks like this:

Mark

Matthew

Luke

John

Thomas

But the attempt to get the literary works in order is, of course, only half the battle. In the search for absolute dates, the key question concerns the date of the first of those literary works, Mark. Given his apparent obsession with the temple and the literary function of predictions like Mark 13.2, the best guess for Mark's date is in the early 70s. And of course if Mark post-dates 70, then the literary works dependent on it post-date 70 too. Such a picture coheres with other factors like the allusions to the destruction of the temple in Matthew, Luke, John and Thomas, combined with the growth of explicit authorial self-representation in John and Thomas.