

# The Date of John's Gospel and Its Origins

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## Introduction

Discussions of the origins of John's Gospel—and most books of the New Testament, for that matter—rarely treat the question of the date of its composition. In fact, in many discussions of various biblical books, and John's Gospel is among these, there is relatively little discussion of the date of composition. Introductions to commentaries and New Testament introductions apparently indicate that there are far more important issues to be discussed regarding a book of the New Testament, often leaving the question of date as a late and brief word near the end—sometimes even failing to provide any relatively firm date at all. There is no doubt that the date of composition for many biblical books is often regarded as an issue that cannot be firmly established, especially within the current critical climate in biblical scholarship. There is also no doubt that the date of composition of a book is itself not a driving force in discussion of the various issues surrounding the context and situation of a given book, but is the result of such discussion. The date of composition is a way of situating a variety of other factors that must be considered. The result of this critical situation is that the dating of a variety of New Testament books is often marginalized within New Testament studies.

I believe, however, that this marginalization is to the detriment of our informed discussion of a number of books of the New Testament, because the necessity of assigning a date forces us as scholars to make some hard and important decisions—decisions not only about the individual book concerned but also about how a given book might relate to other books within the New Testament. All of this knowledge of a given book and its environment should provide a means of weaving together a number of individual strands into a coherent tapestry that traces the origins of not only a given book but of the development of early Christianity. In this essay, I wish to examine the subject of the dates assigned to John's Gospel as a means of exploring wider questions of the origins of John's Gospel. I first examine the range of dates that has been proposed, offering some observations on the importance of these various dates. I then tease out some of the most important implications regarding these dates for various theories of the origins of John's Gospel. In anticipation of my conclusion, I simply wish to say here that the story of how we date John's Gospel provides an interesting and intriguing episode in the history of New

Testament scholarship, one that provides impetus for examining wider implications regarding the New Testament as a whole.

### The Dates Suggested for the Writing of John's Gospel

There has been an incredibly wide range of dates suggested for the writing of John's Gospel, whether one accepts various periods of writing or rewriting as part of the process of composition. These dates range from pre-AD 70, even as early as the late AD 50s, to as late as around AD 170, and virtually every date or range of dates in between.<sup>1</sup> This is an extent of nearly 120 years, perhaps a wider span than for just about any other book in the New Testament. This fact alone ought to cause one to wonder regarding both the dates themselves and the means by which they are estimated. For John's Gospel, indeed it should.

Before I pursue this point further, however, I wish to note that, in fact, the dates proposed for John's Gospel—indeed, very similarly to those proposed for virtually every other book in the New Testament—arrange themselves into three rough groupings: early, middle, and late dates.<sup>2</sup> This might at first glance appear as if each of these dates has had an equal and viable history regarding the date of John's Gospel. This is certainly not the case. Instead, as John A.T. Robinson states, “The story of the dating of the fourth gospel in modern scholarship is an extraordinarily simple one,”<sup>3</sup> in which one date, the middle one of roughly AD 90, has been predominant. However, having said that, the history of the development of the three different views regarding the date of composition is far from straightforward.<sup>4</sup>

In most discussion of the date of composition of New Testament books, discussion begins with the rise of historical criticism. This, however, is decidedly not the case for John's Gospel. As Gerald Borchert states, “For most of Christian

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1 See Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming), ch. 1, where these are surveyed with bibliography.

2 I pursue this means of examining the dates in various New Testament books in Stanley E. Porter, “Dating the Composition of New Testament Books and Their Influence upon Reconstructing the Origins of Christianity,” in *Festschrift for Antonio Piñero* (ed. Jesús Peláez and Israel Gallarte; Córdoba: Ediciones El Almendro, forthcoming 2015).

3 John A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 259.

4 The following discussion is dependent upon a forthcoming publication, Stanley E. Porter, “John's Gospel and the Criteria for Authenticity,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 4* (ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher; SBLSS; Atlanta: SBL, forthcoming).