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CHURCH HISTORY MONTHLY

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Timeline of Topics

- Why do Christians do that?
- AD and BC
- Quote:
- "Cloud of Unknowing," 1300s
- Early Church
- The earliest piece of the New Testament that has been discovered

HOW DID WE GET AD AND BC? ALTERNATIVE TITLE: WHY DO MANY SCHOLARS SAY THAT JESUS WAS BORN BETWEEN 4-7 BC INSTEAD OF THE YEAR 0?

First of all, there is no year zero, but more on that later. You may have never thought about it, but the Bible does not contain any year designations, like the year 2021. That is because the system of counting years which we use did not develop until the 500s, and then it didn't really catch on until a couple of hundred years after that. The guy who developed the A.D. system was named Dionysius Exiguus (470-544), but more about him and why he felt it necessary to develop the A.D. system later.

I said that the Bible does not have year designations, but it does use an old way of keeping track of the years. This method is known as the "regnal system" and is based on telling when an event happened within the reign of a ruler. For instance, "such-and-such occurred in the fifth year of King Whoever." A great example of this is in Luke 3:1-2. Luke is attempting to tell when "the word of God came to John [the Baptist] son of Zechariah in the desert." Luke describing John's preaching within the rule of a number of people: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

Luke is very specific: he dates the call of John by using the reigns of seven different people! This system worked well as long as you knew when the rulers ruled, but as time passed and people begin to forget these rulers, they also forgot the dates when they ruled.

Now to Dionysius. Dionysius was a monk who helped keep track of the day when Easter was celebrated. (Which was a difficult thing when you don't have a regular calendar.) In all of his calculating, he decided to change the counting of years which was based on Diocletian. Why? Because Diocletian had severely persecuted Christians. Therefore, Dionysius developed a system of counting years based on the birth of Jesus. Thus Dionysius began his calendar with Anno Domini ("In the year of the Lord") 1. He first began using this system in the year AD 525. (Which means that you will never find any dates using the AD system before the year 525. In other words, the people living in the year 524 didn't realize it.)

Dionysius' system was mainly theoretical at that time, and did not have a wide appeal. But in the early 700s a man named Venerable Bede wrote a history book which used Dionysius' system, and soon afterwards this dating system was widely accepted.

Now about Jesus. Dionysius decided to start the calendar by calling the birth of Jesus year 1. But as archaeology developed in the 1800s and 1900s, scholars began to be able to date people and events in the distant past with more accuracy. And they came to the conclusion that King Herod the Great died in the year 4 BC. Well, since Herod was live when Jesus was born, this pushed the date of Jesus back to 4 BC (or maybe even a couple of years earlier). So the reason scholars say that Jesus was born in the year 4 BC (and some say 5, 6, or even 7 BC) is that Dionysius got it wrong 4, 5, 6, or 7 years. Which isn't too bad considering he came up with the system in the Middle Ages without computers.

[Note: This is one of my top three favorite quotes from all of Church History.]

"Perfect disciples do not ask to be richly rewarded nor to be spared pain nor for anything other than for God Himself. They do not care if they are happy or sad, as long as the will of Him whom they love is fulfilled."

"Cloud of Unknowing," 1300s

From John 18:31-33:
 "the Jews, To us" it is not permitted to kill
 "anyone, so that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spoke signifyin'g what kind of death he was going to die. Entered therefore gain into the Praetorium Pilate and summed Jesus
 "and said to him, Are you the king of the Jews?"

From John 18:37, 38:
 a King I am. For "this I have been born" and I have come into the "world so that I would testify to the truth. Everyone who is "of the truth" hears my voice. "Said to him" Pilate, "What is truth?" and this" having said, again he went out until "the Jews" and said to them, I find "not one" fault in him.



Both sides of P52 to the bottom right plus a picture of the display that holds it. These images come from "P52" on Wikipedia

The earliest piece of the New Testament that has been discovered

A simple fact: we do not have original writings of any of the 27 New Testament books. After the original books were written, copies were made and spread around. Then people made copies of the copies and spread them around even more. And copies were made of those copies of copies, and the pattern continued. Scholars and libraries and universities have hundreds if not thousands of these copies, but not the original copies.

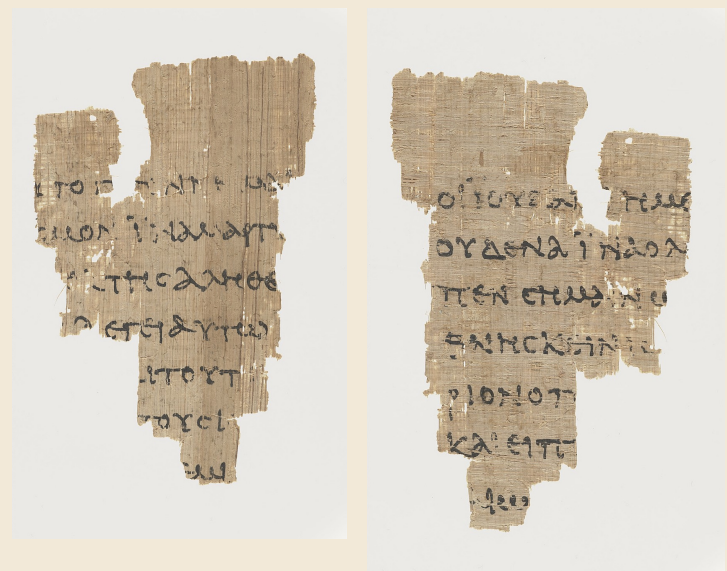
[Translators compared all these multiple copies. The difference in these copies amounts to .01% or less.]

That being said, one scrap of paper, or I should say papyrus, exists which may be a copy of an original NT book. It is known as P52 and has a portion of John 18:31-33 on one side and a portion of John 18:37, 38 on the other side. It is written in Greek, as were all the New Testament books.

P52 is dated by most scholars to around 125-150, so about a hundred years after Jesus. But it contains a portion of the Gospel of John, which itself was not written until the 90s. That means that P52 was written maybe 30 years after John wrote the Gospel.

Therefore, P52 could have been a copy from the original Gospel of John. Or it could be a copy of a copy from the original John. You see how this works. But it is exciting to imagine that it could be a copy from the original Gospel of John, which means that whoever copied it would have had the original copy made by John in front of him. So we might have a writing made by someone who knew the Apostle John.

Now for P52 itself, which I quote to the left. I have quoted the complete verses and the parts in quotation marks are the ones you can see in the pieces of manuscript below.



Upcoming classes:

--Sep 6 - Oct 3: How we got the Old Testament and OT Apocrypha

--Sep 13 - Oct 17: Overview of the Old Testament

---More info? go here

Questions, comments, or want to join a free class contact Mark at marknickens@gmail.com