

Dating the Fourth Gospel: An Interdisciplinary Approach



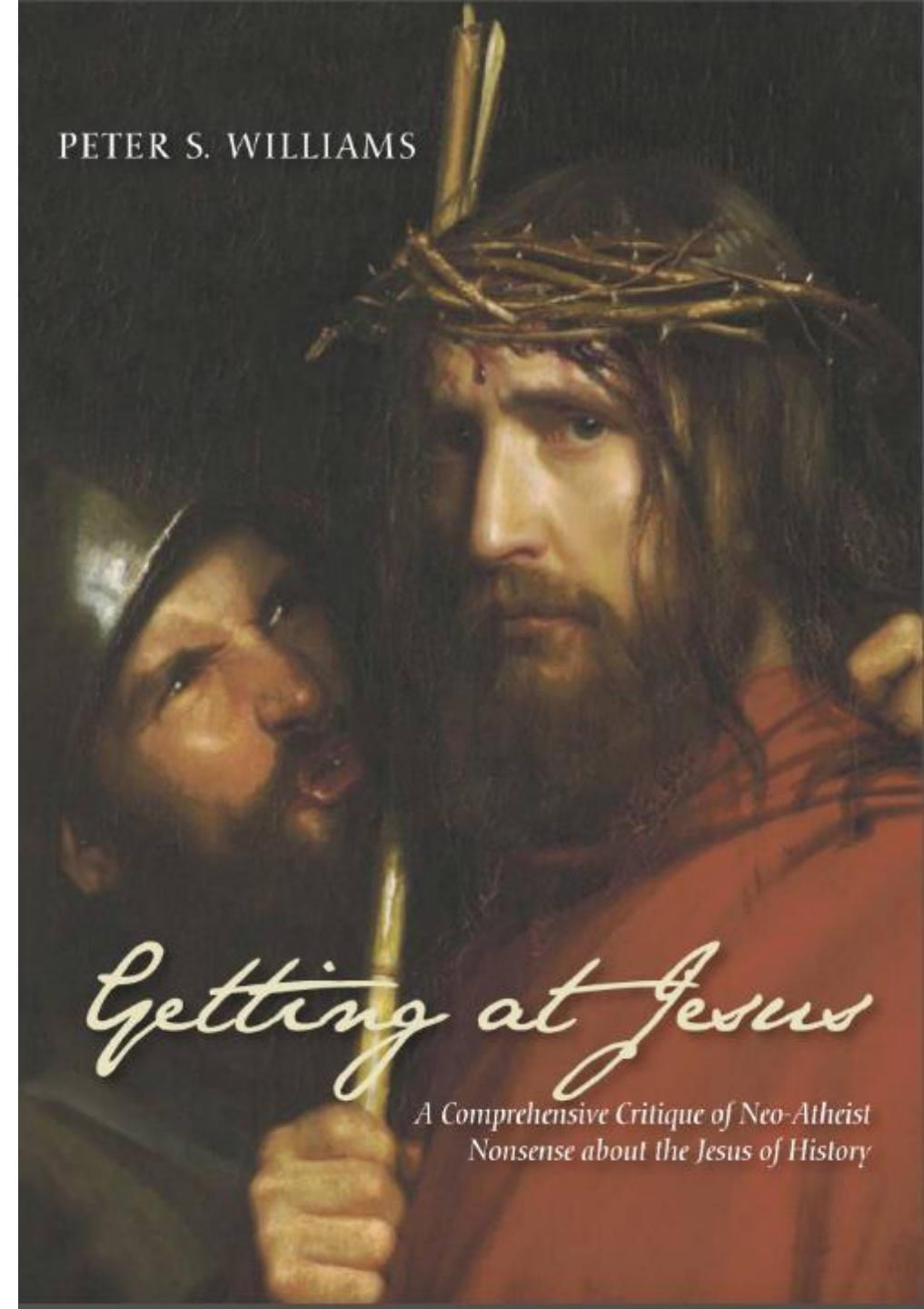
Peter S. Williams – www.peterswilliams.com

‘the interdisciplinary quest for the historical Jesus has just begun.’

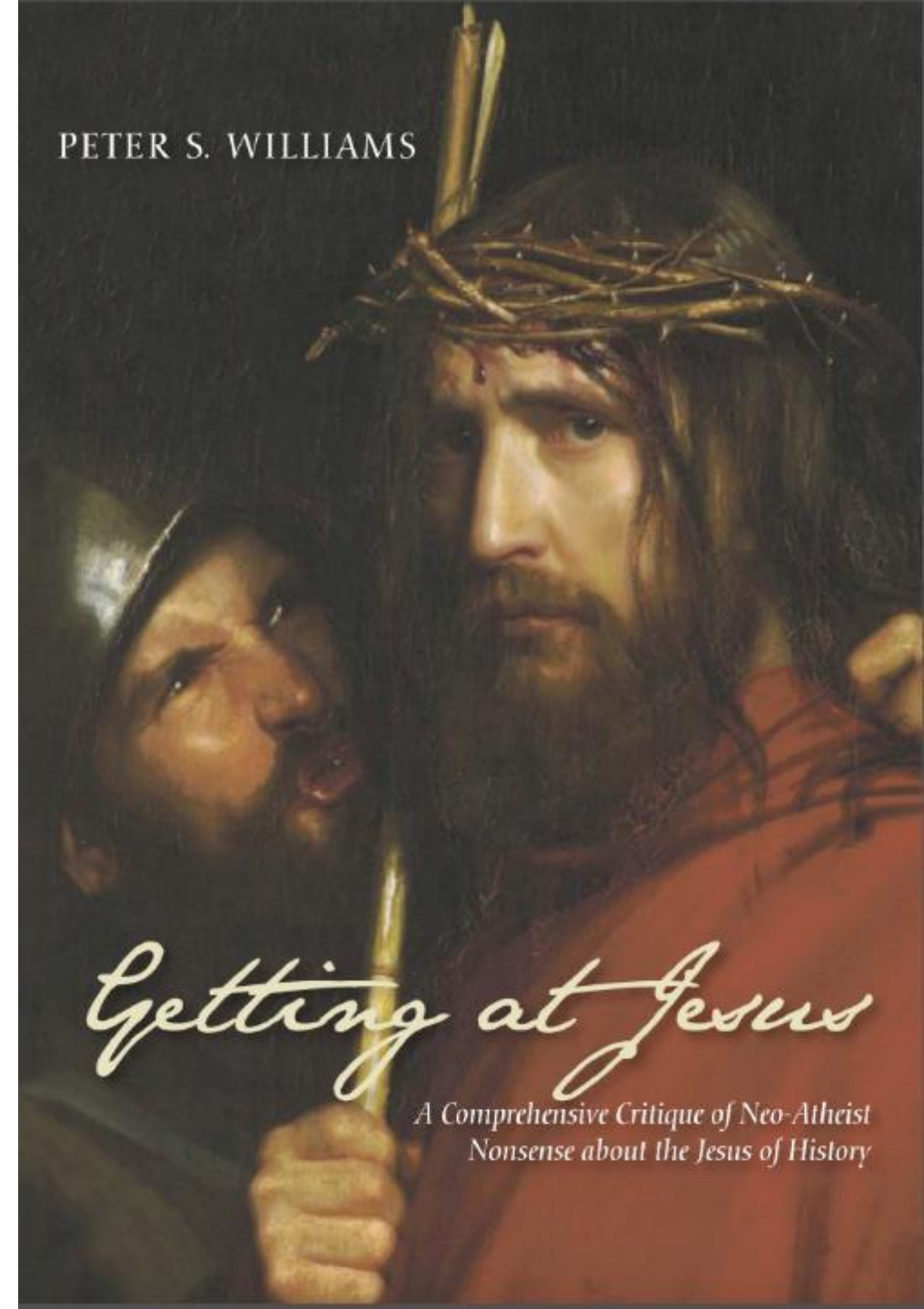
– Bernard Brandon Scott cited by James K. Beilby & Paul Rhodes Eddy, ‘The Quest for the Historical Jesus: An Introduction’ in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (SPCK, 2010), 41

- The fourth gospel is notoriously difficult to date
- **J. Ramsey Michaels** dates it to the second half of the first century (AD 50-100), whilst leaning toward a date after AD 70 - *The Gospel of John*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010, 38
- In *Getting at Jesus* (Wipf & Stock, 2019) I pegged the production of the fourth gospel to ‘c. AD 60-90’, proposing that John had composed much of the gospel in the early 60s, and quoting a selection of scholars who placed the final publication of the gospel in the 80s or 90s

• See: Peter S. Williams, *Getting at Jesus: A Comprehensive Critique of Neo-Atheist Nonsense About the Jesus of History*. Wipf & Stock, 2019, 207



- A June 2020 exchange of Tweets with atheist **Edward T. Babinski** convinced me to re-consider some arguments regarding the dating of the fourth gospel
- These were arguments that, in good faith, I had re-presented in several venues, including *Getting at Jesus* (Wipf & Stock, 2019)
- I wrote a paper to re-visit my thinking on the dating of the fourth gospel, published (in two parts) in *Theofilos* journal
- Here I summarize my findings, with a focus on the newer material





19th century German scholar

F.C. Baur (1792-1860)

dated the fourth gospel from AD 160-170



- Similarly, as **Daniel B. Wallace** reports: ‘In 1925 Delafosse saw 170-175 as the ceiling and in 1936 Loisy felt that “the first publication can hardly have been effected before 135-40.”’ - ‘John 5,2 and the Date of the Fourth Gospel’ *Biblica* Vol. 71, No. 2 (1990), 177-205
- However, by the middle of the 20th century scholarship came to the *current consensus* that the fourth gospel was issued no later than (though probably towards) the end of the first century

Four Lines of Argument for Dating the Fourth Gospel

- One focuses on the fourth gospel's depiction of Jerusalem before its fall in the Jewish War of 66-74 AD (here one often sees discussion of John 5:2's accurate description of the Pool of Bethesda)
- Another involves 'P52', a scrap of ancient papyrus which bears several verses of the fourth gospel, translated and published in 1934 and dated by its translator, classical scholar **Colin H. Roberts** (1909-1990), to AD 125 \pm 25 years
- A third line looks at literary allusions to and/or quotations from the fourth gospel
- A fourth investigates the internal and/or external evidence about the literary origins of the fourth gospel

John 5:2 references the Pool of Bethesda:

‘By the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there is a pool, called Bethesda in Hebrew, which has five colonnades’

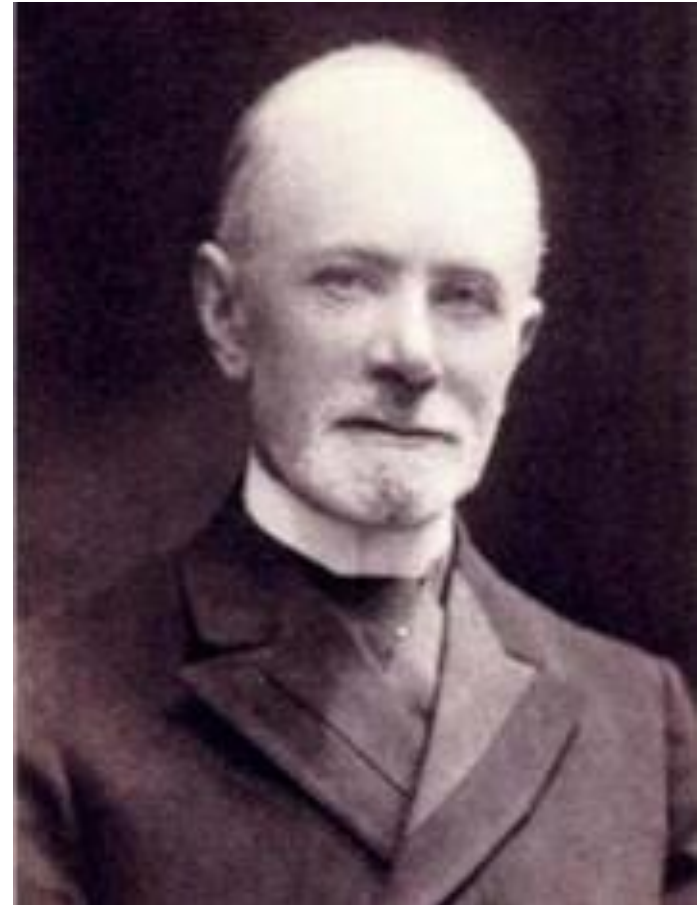


Callum Millar notes:

'In 1903... **Alfred Loisy** claimed that "The pool was a symbol of Judaism, and the five porticoes an allusion to the five books of the law." The name Bethesda, meaning "House of Mercy", was taken to be symbolic too.'

- 'Places in the Gospels and Archaeology'

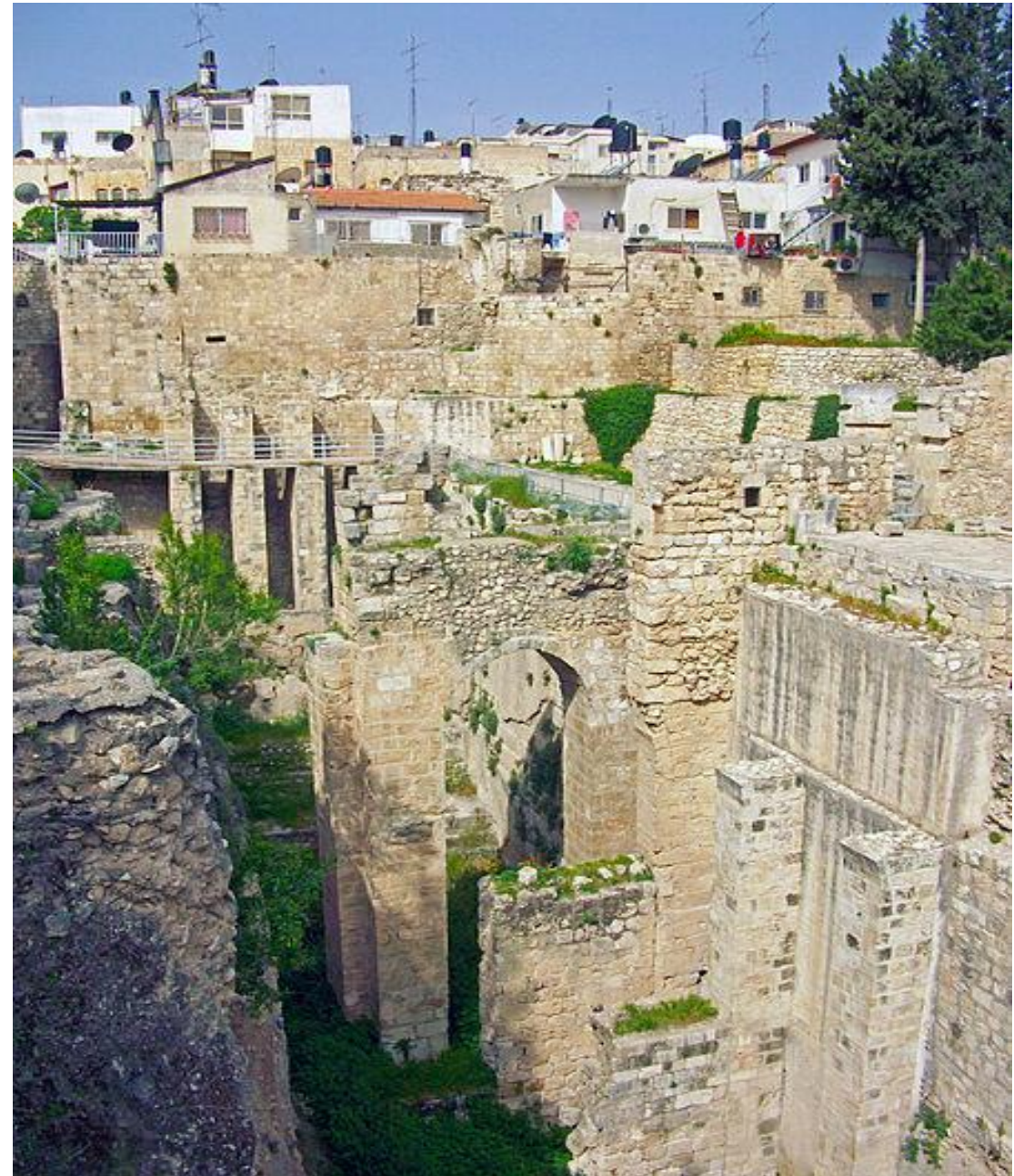
<https://calumsblog.com/apologetics/arguments-for-christianity/places-in-the-gospels-and-archaeology/>



However

‘In 1956 archaeologists found the pool of Bethesda where 1st century Jewish-Roman historian Josephus described it, just north of the Temple Mount and near the Sheep Gate. And although most similar pools at the time would have had 4 porticoes (one for each wall), this pool actually turned out to be two pools with a dividing wall in the middle – and hence would include a fifth portico – just as John says!’

- Callum Millar, ‘Places in the Gospels and Archaeology’
<https://calumblog.com/apologetics/arguments-for-christianity/places-in-the-gospels-and-archaeology/>



The Pool of Bethesda ruins

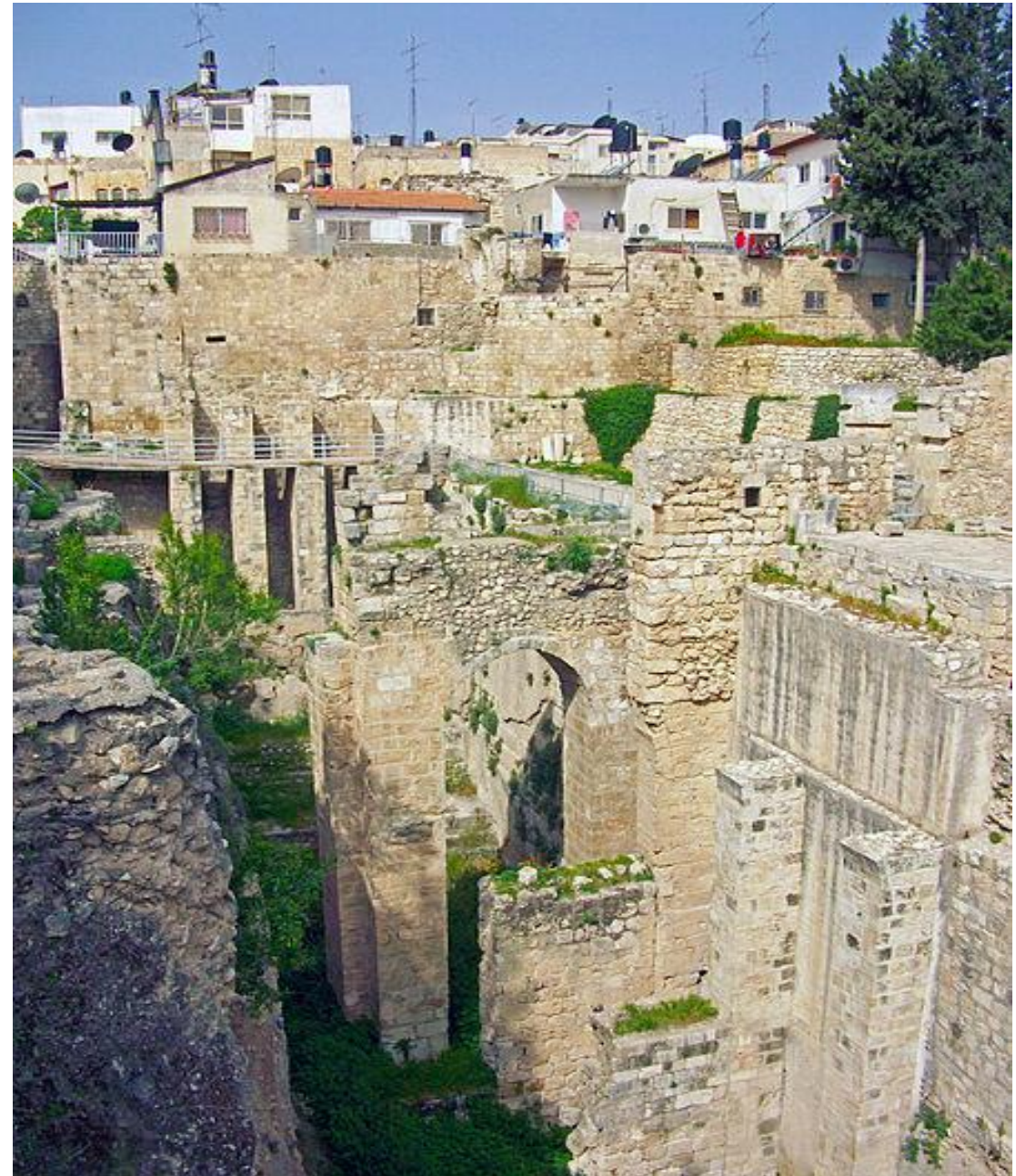
(the walkway on the right hand side of the photo marks the division between the two pools)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ruins_of_Pool_of_Bethesda,_Jerusalem.jpg

Urban C. von Wahlde observes that, contra **Loisy**:

‘The discovery of the pools proves beyond a doubt that the description of this pool was not the creation of the Evangelist but reflected accurate and detailed knowledge of Jerusalem...’

- ‘Archaeology and John’s Gospel’ in James H. Charlesworth ed., *Jesus and Archaeology*. Eerdmans, 2006, 566



Model Photographs showing Temple Mount & Pools

www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/51-bethesda-pool.html

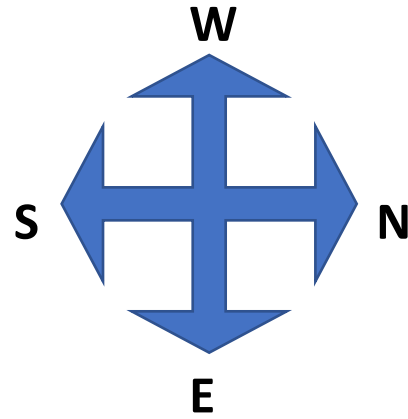


Photo by Berthold Werner, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jerusalem_Modell_BW_2.JPG

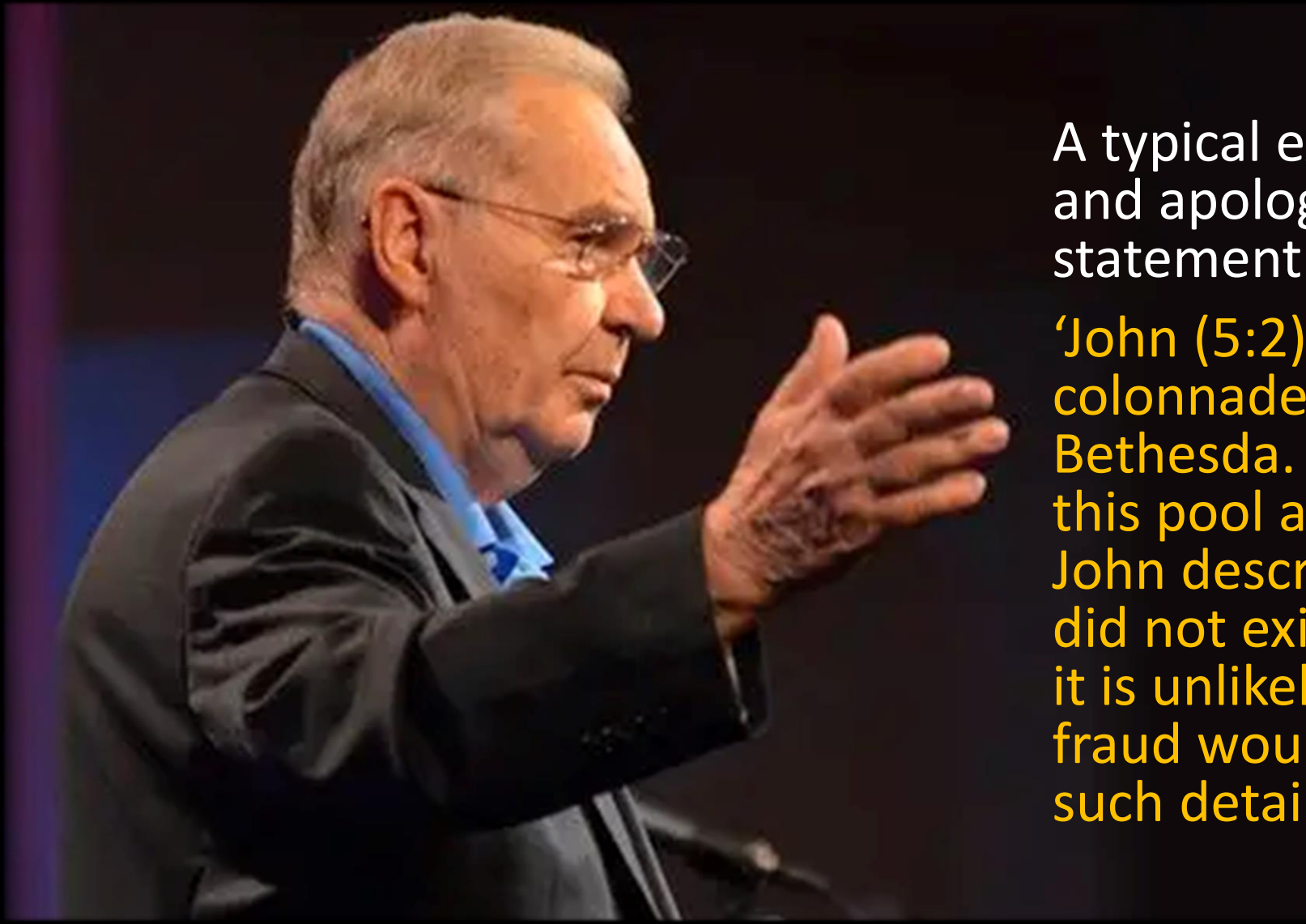


← Antonia Fortress (north-west, of the Temple Mount)

← **Pool of Bethesda Complex**

← The Israel Pool (north-east, of Temple Mount)

- Many scholars press this data into an argument for assigning a first century date to the fourth gospel



A typical example is philosopher and apologist **Norman L. Geisler's** statement that:

'John (5:2) mentions five colonnades at the pool of Bethesda. Excavations... uncovered this pool and found it to be just as John described it. Since that pool did not exist in the second century, it is unlikely any second-century fraud would have had access to such detail.'

- *The Big Book of Christian Apologetics*. Baker, 2012, 279

Taking a slightly different tack, theologian **Bruce Milne** writes:

‘In 5:2 John refers to the Pool of Bethesda by “there is”, not “there was”. While too much ought not to be placed on this, it equally should not be dismissed. If the Pool was still identifiable when John wrote we are looking at a date in the late 60’s, certainly prior to AD 70.’ - *The Message of John*. IVP, 1993, 25

- **Milne’s** caution is well taken, for there is a scholarly dispute about whether to understand the Greek tense in John 5:2 as a ‘historical present’
 - (cf. Daniel B. Wallace, ‘John 5:2 and the Date of the Fourth Gospel... again’ <https://bible.org/article/john-52-and-date-fourth-gospel-again>; Andreas Köstenberger, ‘John 5:2 and the Date of John’s Gospel: A Response to Dan Wallace’ www.biblicalfoundations.org/john-52-and-the-date-of-johns-gospel-a-response-to-dan-wallace/)
- On the other hand, while **Geisler** uses the data merely to argue for a first century dating of the fourth gospel, **Milne** uses it to argue for a date in ‘the late 60’s’
- **Milne’s** ‘prior to AD 70’ is inferred from the fact that the Romans laid waste to Jerusalem in AD 70
- This is why **Geisler** states that the ‘pool did not exist in the second century...’

Josephus wrote that, after the conquest of Jerusalem, the Roman soldiers received orders that:

'they should now demolish the entire city, and temple: but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest eminency... there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe Jerusalem had ever been inhabited.'

- Jewish War, Bk 7, Chapter 1



However, as **Babinski** argues, **Josephus'** statement must be interpreted as hyperbole in light of other historical sources which testify that *the Pool of Bethesda continued to be visible in Jerusalem until the fourth century*



Archaeologist **Shimon Gibson** (a Senior Associate Fellow at the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research and a Visiting Professor of Archaeology at UNC Charlotte):

‘The Bethesda Pool is referred to in third and fourth century sources... Judging by the testimony of Origen [*Commentary on John*, Catena fragment 61], the original four porticoes running around the edges of the twin pools with another across the middle, were still visible to visitors in his day [c. 231 AD]. This information was repeated by Cyril of Jerusalem before 348 [*Homily on the Cripple at the Pool* 2], but the language of Eusebius suggests that in his day, before 331, the actual porticoes were already in ruins: “a bathing-pool in Jerusalem which is called the Probatike, and formerly had five porticoes”. It is unclear from the description of the Bordeaux Pilgrim (333) whether the porticoes were still visible... What is certain is that both pools were still in use and gathered water: according to Eucherius (441), the Northern Pool was filled with rainwater, and the Southern Pool with drained water stained with a reddish colour.’

- ‘The Excavations at the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem: Preliminary Report on a Project of Stratigraphic and Structural Analysis’
www.academia.edu/22894959/The_Excavations_at_the_Bethesda_Pool_in_Jerusalem_Preliminary_Report_on_a_Project_of_Stratigraphic_and_Structural_Analysis_Text
- Interpolated information from F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Commentary*. Eerdmans, 1994, footnote 6 on page 140
- See also: Eusebius of Caesarea (also known as Eusebius of Pamphilia), ‘The Gospels: Bēzatha (Bethsaida)’, entry 291 in *Concerning the Place Names in Sacred Scripture* (early fourth century AD), Translated by C. Umhau Wolf (1971), www.tertullian.org/fathers/eusebius_onomasticon_02_trans.htm

- **Loisy** missed these historical sources when arguing against the historicity of John 5:2!
- This omission wasn't corrected by later scholars who argued against **Loisy** from the archaeological discovery of the Pool of Bethesda
- Consequently, the inference from the fourth gospel's description of the Pool of Bethesda to the conclusion that it *must*, on that account, have been written by someone with direct or indirect local knowledge of Jerusalem in the first century (i.e. 'prior to AD 70'), is mistaken
- Following the widespread use of this argument, I stated in *Getting at Jesus* that John 5:2: 'displays a detailed local knowledge of Jerusalem before AD 70'
- I now recognize my statement as (unintentionally) misleading, and conclude that *this argument for a first century dating of the fourth gospel is unsound*

John 5:2 and The Sheep Gate

Astronomer **Guillermo Gonzalez** argues for a pre-70 AD date for the fourth gospel by noting:

‘John 5:2 describes the sheep gate in the present tense, even though the sheep gate was wiped out when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD...’

- ‘When Were the Gospels Written? The Challenge of Dating the Gospel of John’, *The Stream*, <https://stream.org/when-were-the-gospels-written-the-challenge-of-dating-the-gospel-of-john/>

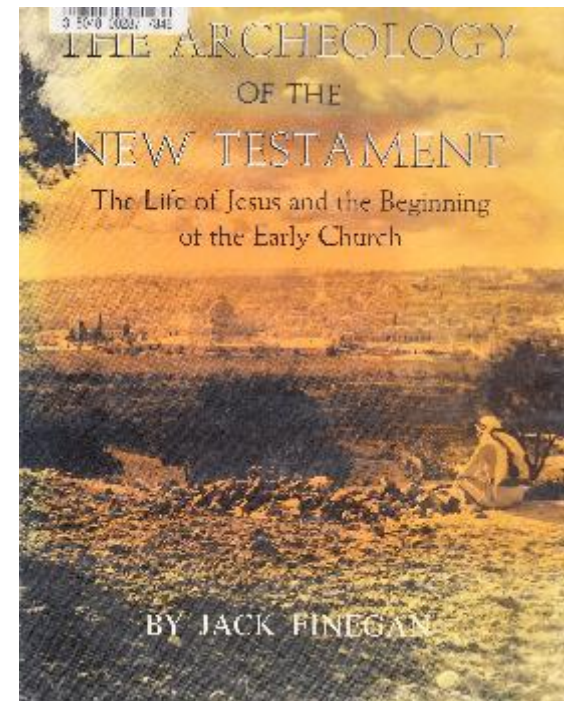


Jack Finegan (Emeritus Professor of New Testament History and Archaeology at Berkeley):

‘That there was in fact a Sheep Gate which is mentioned by Nehemiah (3:1; 12:39) and that, according to his references, this was probably in the north city wall on the north side of the Temple area, between the “corner” on the northeast and the Tower of the Hundred and Tower of Hananel, the latter probably predecessors of the Antonia [fortress] on the northwest. The fact that this gate was built by Eliashib the high priest and his brethren the priests (Neh 3:1) confirms its close association with the Temple area, and it may have been the same as the Tadi Gate mentioned by Middoth [the book of ‘Measurement’ in the Jewish *Mishnah*]... as the portal on the north side of the Temple area...’

of the Early Church. Princeton, 1992, 2014, 228

- *The Archaeology Of The New Testament: The Life and Beginnings*



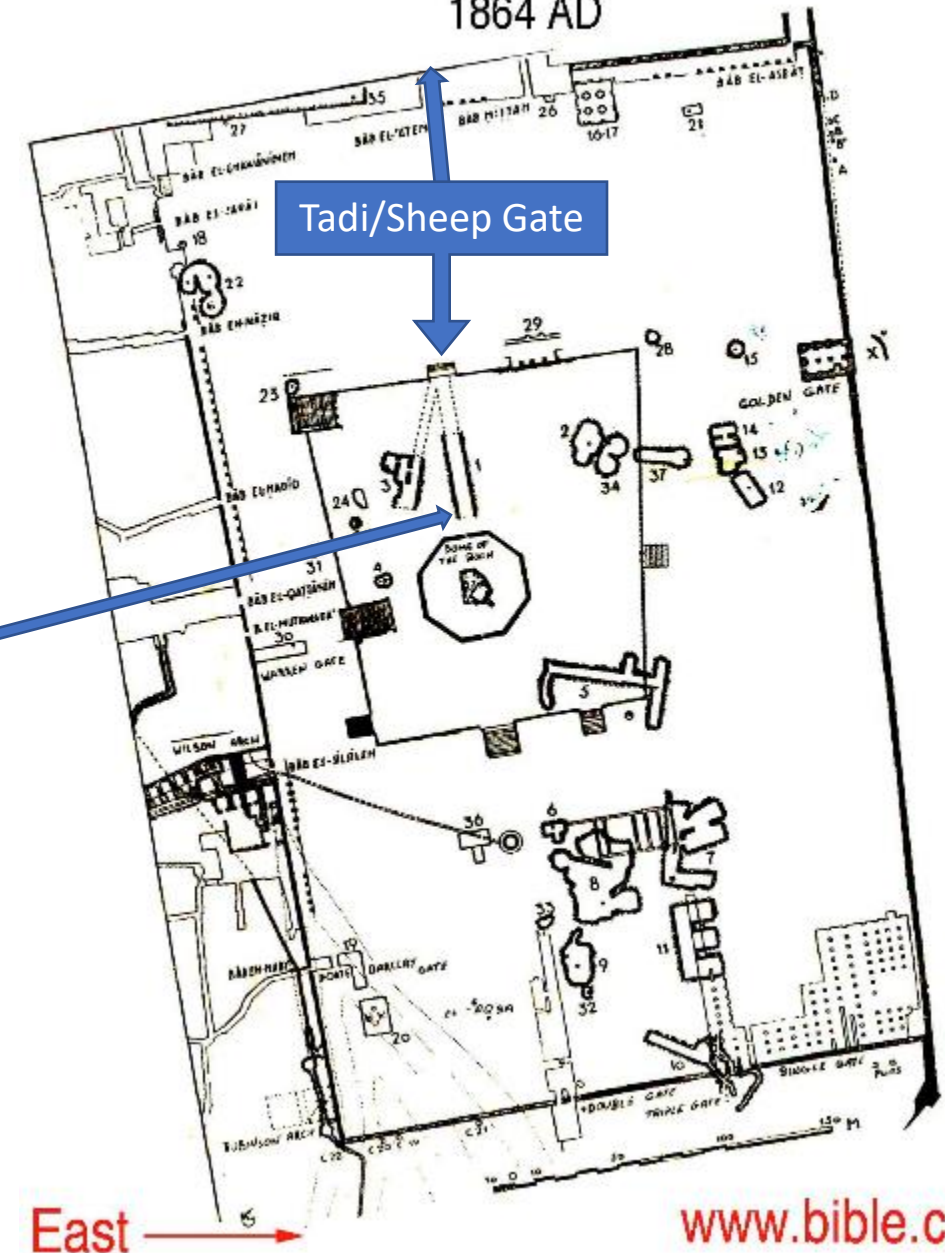
- The Tadi Gate was apparently located in the northern retaining wall of the pre-Herodian Temple Mount, with a tunnel leading up into the temple complex

- Archaeologist **Dan Bahat** notes: ‘There is a theory that cistern No. 1 [one of the many cistern’s and tunnels within the Temple Mount mapped in 1864-5 by Major-General Sir Charles Wilson] was the tunnel which led from the Temple compound, directly out of the Temple Mount.’ - *The Atlas Of Biblical*

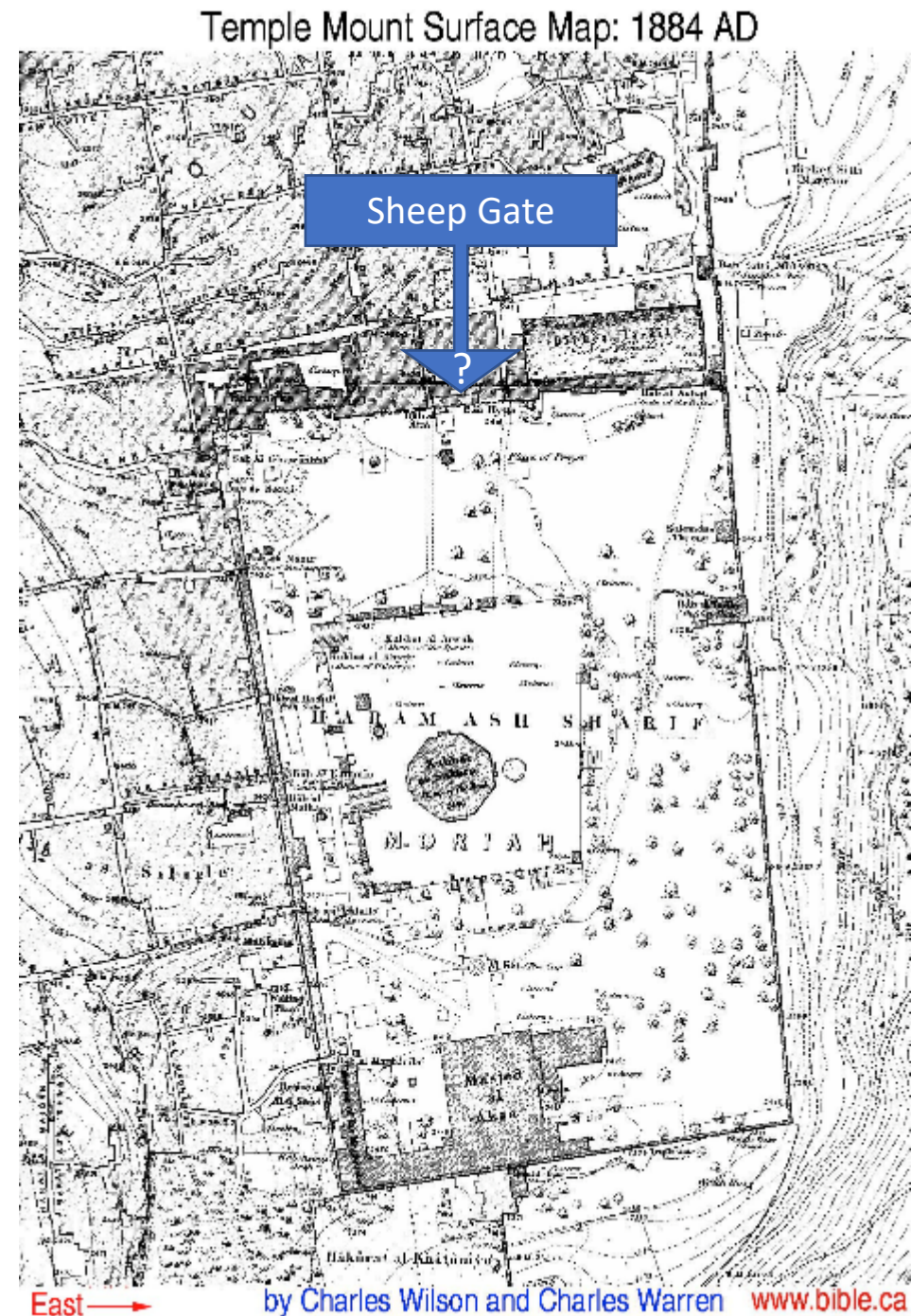
Jerusalem. Carta, 1994, 32

- This Gate was subsumed by Herod’s renovations to the north of the Temple Mount and functionally replaced by the fourth gospel’s ‘Sheep Gate’

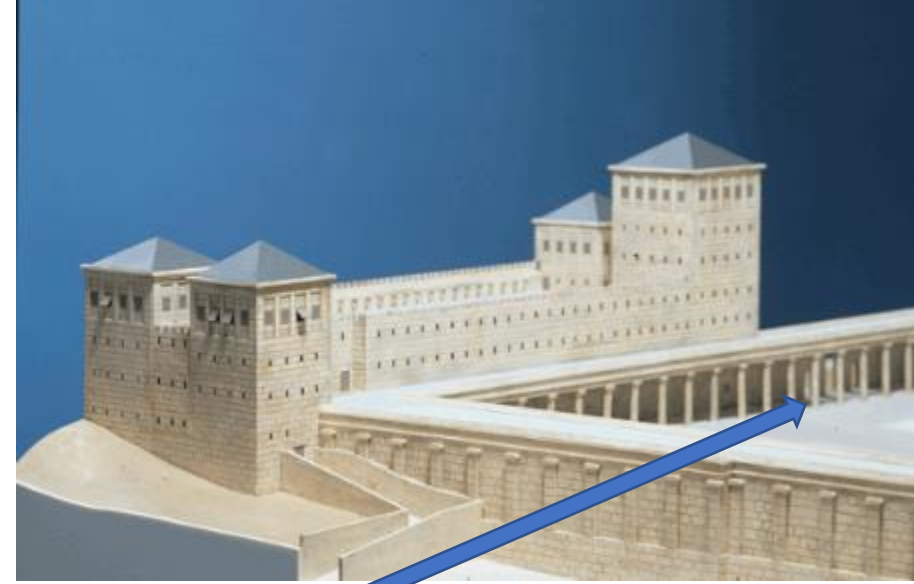
Temple Mount
Charles Wilson and Charles Warren
1864 AD



- The question is, *what architectural form did the Herodian Sheep Gate take?*
- While it was presumably in-between the Antonia Fortress and the Israel Pool (at the western and eastern ends of the north wall), **Bahat** laments that its **‘exact location is not known.’** - *The Atlas Of Biblical Jerusalem*. Carta, 1994, 20
- Today: **‘Very little can be seen of the Northern Wall of the Temple Mount’,** although **‘the remains of the Herodian northern retaining wall are still preserved below ground.’** - Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer, *Jerusalem: The Temple Mount*. Carta, 2015, 87/Leen Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing The Temple Mount In Jerusalem*. Carta/Thee Lamb Foundation, 2015, 123
- Access to the Temple Mount is highly restricted: **‘the site has not even been surveyed – looked at – for more than a century and a [half], and excavations, even small ones, are forbidden.’** - Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer, *Secrets of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount*. Biblical Archaeological Society, 1998, 7
- Even **‘the cisterns under the Temple Mount are inaccessible today because of Muslim religious and political sensitivities.’** - *Secrets of Jerusalem’s Temple Mount*, 1998, 83
- This ignorance hampers any firm conclusion about the Sheep Gate’s fate in the first century, but there is a cumulative case for thinking that the Sheep Gate was situated *in the northern retaining wall* of the Herodian Temple Mount



- Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer postulate that the Herodian Sheep Gate was located *in the portico on the northern summit of the Herodian Temple Mount*
- There would, in this case, have been some sort of ramp or staircase leading up to the Sheep Gate
- Given this hypothesis, the Sheep Gate probably *was obliterated* by the Romans in AD 70



Sheep Gate

Antonia Fortress (north-west of the Temple Mount)

Pool of Bethesda Complex

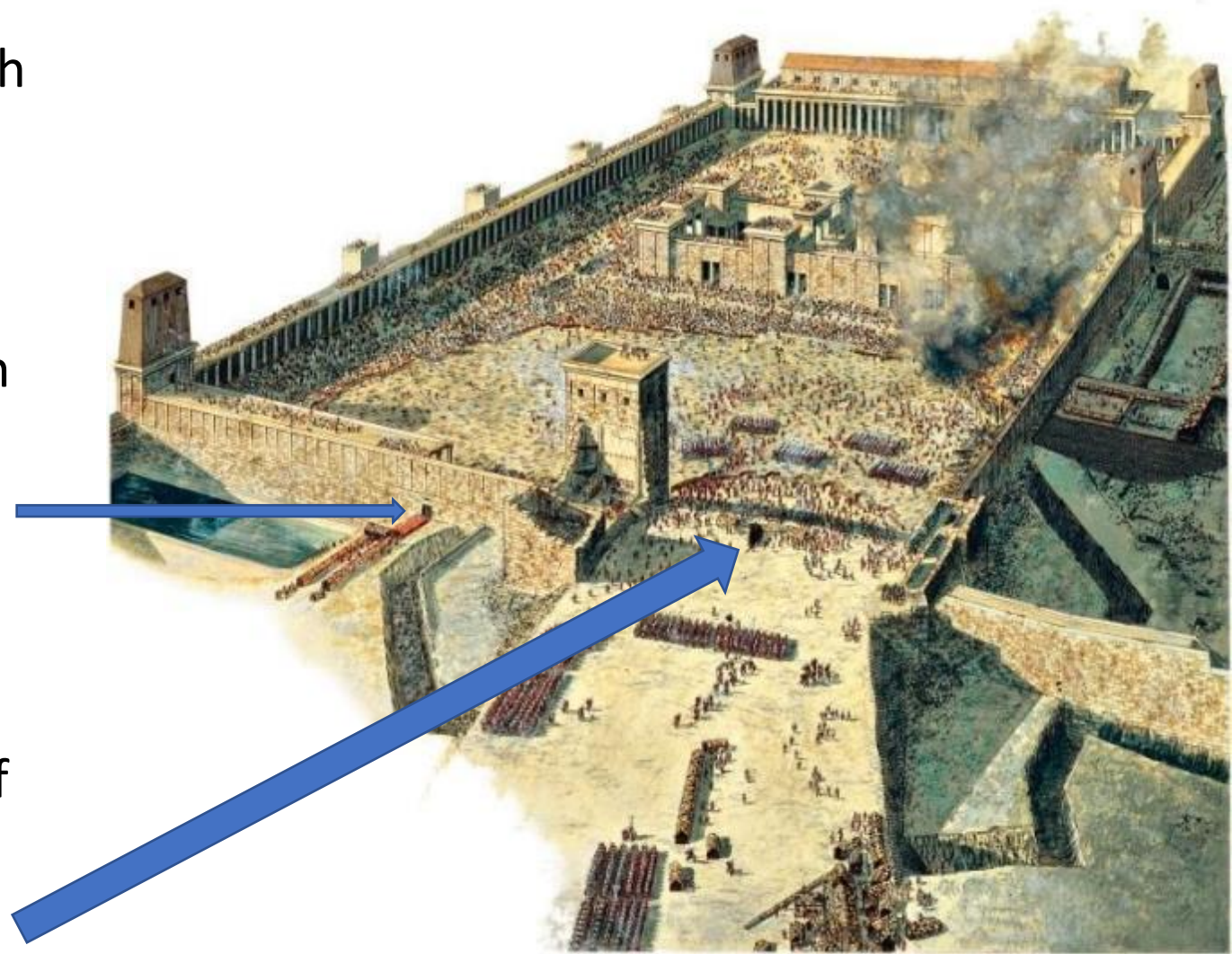
The Israel Pool (north-east of Temple Mount)

- However, when Herod extended the Temple Mount north, might not the builders have extended the passage from the (now defunct) Tadi Gate to the new retaining wall, ending at 'the Sheep Gate'?
- **Michael Lustig:** 'Herod extended existing Temple path and passageways, like those of the Huldah Gates, to pass through his extensions to the exterior. This was likely also required for those of the Tadi Gate.' - Herod's Temple.
- Creating such a tunnel extension would preserve the existing social function of the Gate as being for the use of the priests (See: Lustig, Herod's Temple. Amazon, 2017, 33)
- It would also save the space taken up by the tunnel from having to be filled-in with hard core, and save building a ramp or stairs up to the gate

Sheep Gate



- The Temple Mount was vulnerable to attack from the higher ground to the north – hence the Antonia fortress – and a gate leading onto the temple platform seems like more of a vulnerability than a gate in the retaining wall
- Storming a small gate under fire, and then fighting up a long, narrow, underground tunnel against determined opposition is a poor military prospect, so a gate in the northern retaining wall could have been ignored by the Romans as an easily defensible chokepoint
- The Jews could easily have filled-in part of the tunnel to block access (they built an additional defensive wall within the Antonia fortress, where we know the Romans *did* attack)



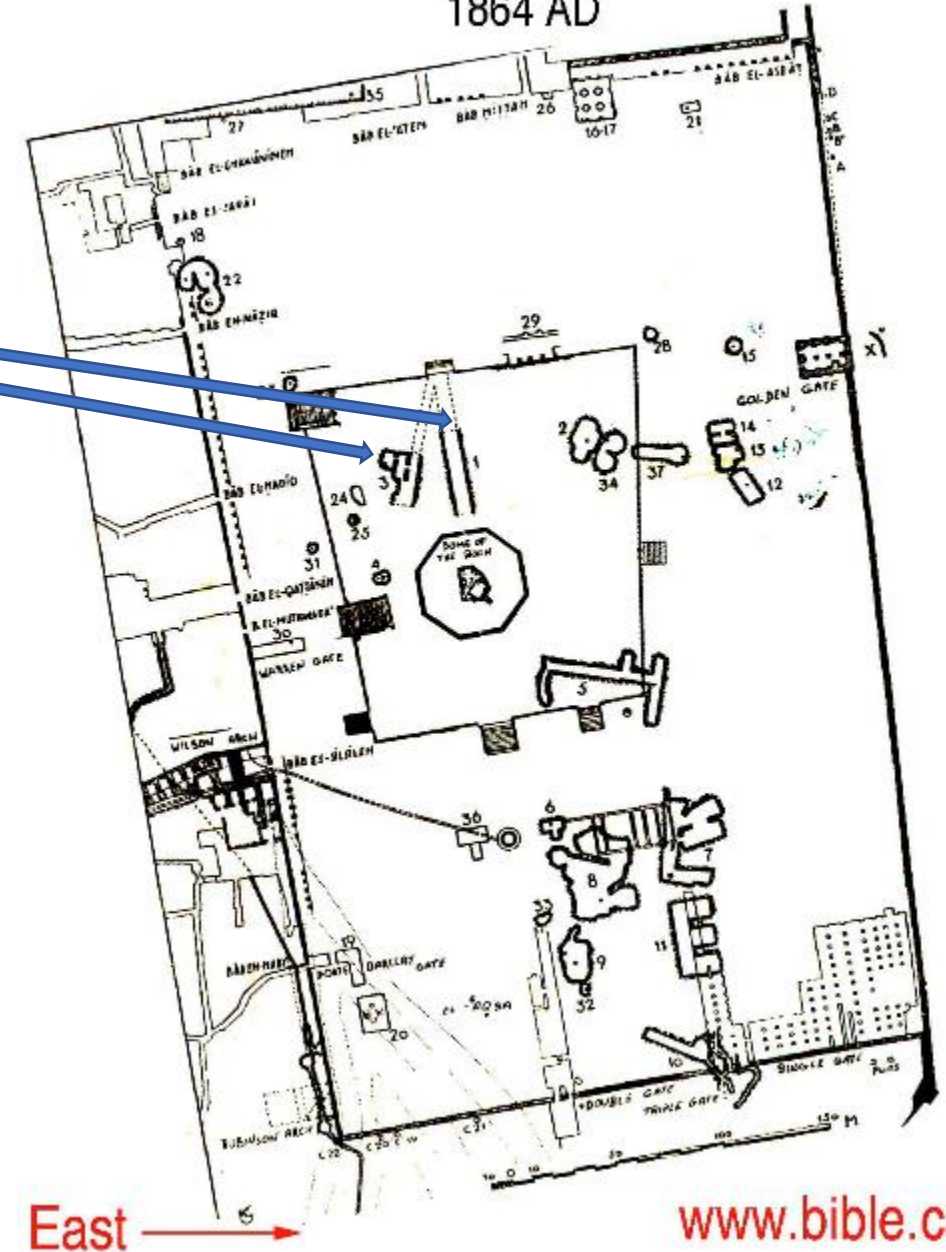


The North ends of 'Cisterns'
1 & 3 are both blocked

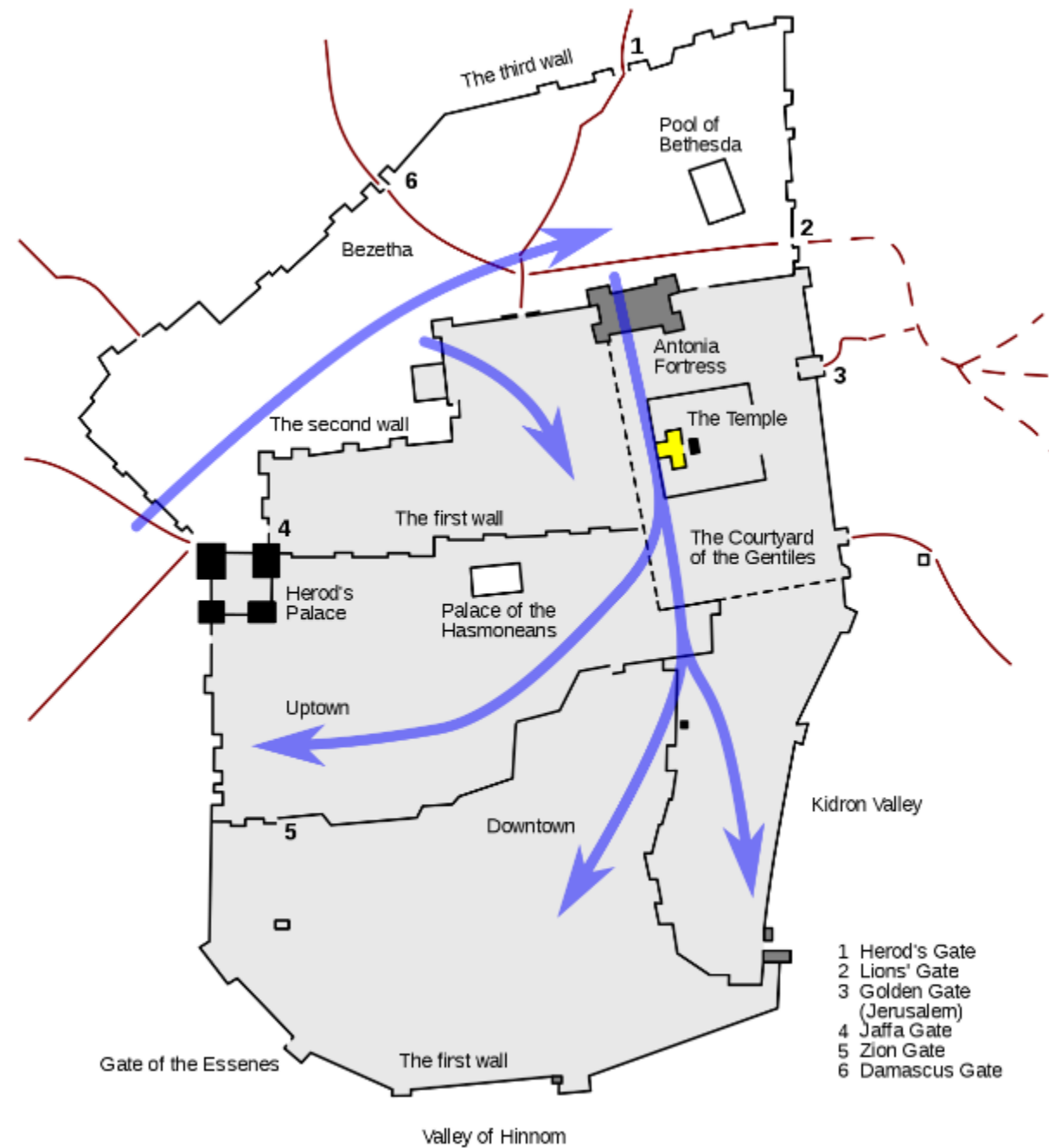
- **Charles Warren** reported that the northern end of Cistern 1 was 'closed with a rough stone wall', and **Ritmeyer** notes of both Cisterns 1 and 3 that: 'The northern parts of both these passages are blocked by similar-looking walls that made it impossible for Warren to investigate their relation to the northern wall of the raised platform.'

- Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing The Temple Mount In Jerusalem*. Carta/Thee Lamb Foundation, 2015, 204 & 205

Temple Mount
Charles Wilson and Charles Warren
1864 AD



- If there was a gate onto the temple platform near the Antonia, Titus would likely have been tempted to raise a bank so battering rams could be bought to bear against it, as he did against the massive stonework of the Fortress
- He didn't



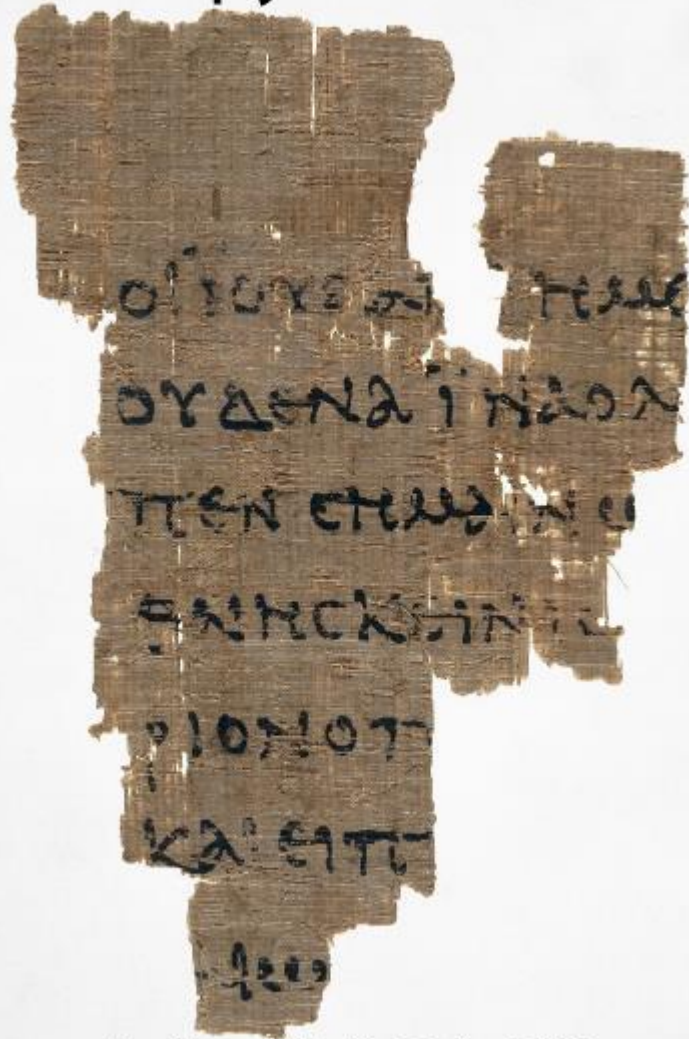
- Even assuming John 5:2 isn't using a historical present, the fact that the retaining walls of the Temple Mount were 'deliberately left lying in ruins' means that *if* the Sheep Gate was in the retaining wall, *then* a present tense reference to the Sheep Gate *might* have been accurate well after AD 70 - Kathleen

Ritmeyer and Leen Ritmeyer, 'Reconstructing Herod's Temple Mount in Jerusalem', *Biblical Archaeological Review* 15:6 (1989)

- Indeed, even if the door or doors of the gate had been destroyed, reference to 'the Sheep Gate' wouldn't have been misleading. In the English city of Southampton (where I live) the gate house of the twelfth century town walls still exists on Above Bar Street. The original gates are no longer part of this structure, but it is nevertheless known as 'Bargate'



Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

The designation 'P52' refers to a scrap of ancient papyrus, also known as P. Rylands 3.457, which 'contains only a few verses of the fourth gospel, John 18:31-33 (recto, the front), 37, and 38 (verso, the back).' - Edward D. Andrews, *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek New Testament Manuscript?* Christian Publishing House, 2020

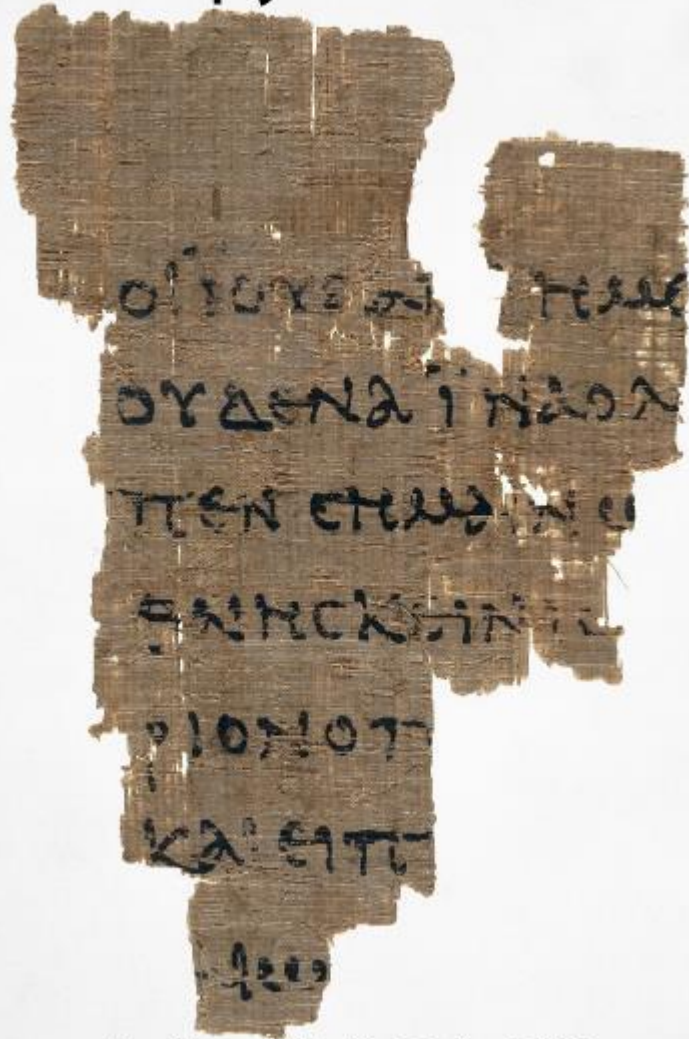
P52 was dated by its original editor, **Colin Roberts**, to c. AD 125 ± 25 years

Wilson Paroschi reports concerning P52 that:

'most scholars argue for a date no later than A.D. 125.'

- 'Archaeology and the Interpretation of John's Gospel: A Review Essay', *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 20/1-2 (2009): 67-88, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1132&context=jats>

Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

Neil Godfrey:

‘The main point of interest of this fragment is that it is generally dated to around 125 CE, and that since it was found in Egypt, this date accordingly is evidence that the Gospel of John, generally thought to have been composed in Asia Minor, must have been some time earlier than 125 CE.’

- “New” Date for that St John’s Fragment, Rylands Library Papyrus P52’ <https://vridar.org/2013/03/08/new-date-for-that-st-johns-fragment-rylands-library-papyrus-p52/>.

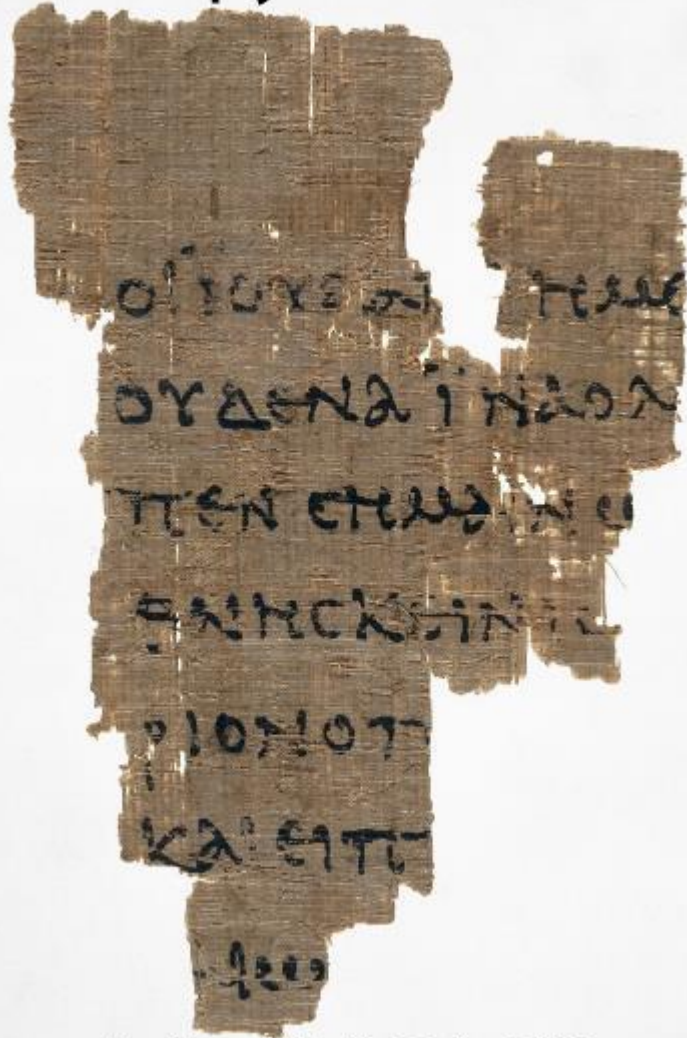
Craig S. Keener:

‘Although some skeptical scholars once dated John... in the late second century, the discovery of a fragment of this Gospel from the first half of the second century laid that skepticism to rest. Allowing time for the work’s circulation pushes the probable date of composition back into the first century.’ - *John (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)*, 4

In the judgement of **Philip Wesley Comfort** and **David P. Barrett**, P52: ‘testifies to the fact that the autograph of John’s Gospel must have been written before the close of the first century.’ - *The Text Of The Earliest New Testament*

Manuscripts, volume 1. Kregel Publications, 2019, 337

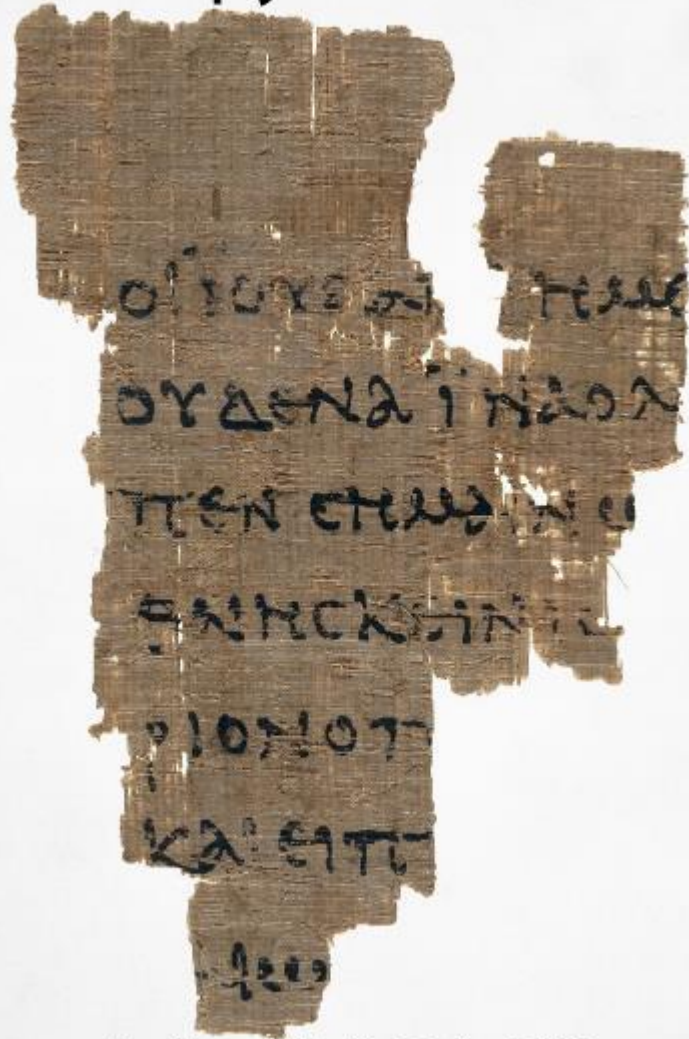
Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

- **Babinski** brought to my attention several scholars who have recently sought to push the dating envelope of P52 somewhat, *in both directions*
- **Godfry** lists paleographers who date P52 anywhere from around 80 to 175 AD
- This dating envelope still tell against the second century dates for the fourth gospel promulgated by scholars like **Baur** and **Delafosse**

Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

Wilson Paroschi:

'**A. Schmidt** argues for a date around 170 AD, plus or minus twenty-five years... **Brent Nongbri**... contends that the date range for this papyrus fragment must be extended to late second and even early third century... Most New Testament scholars, however, continue to favor the earlier dating.'

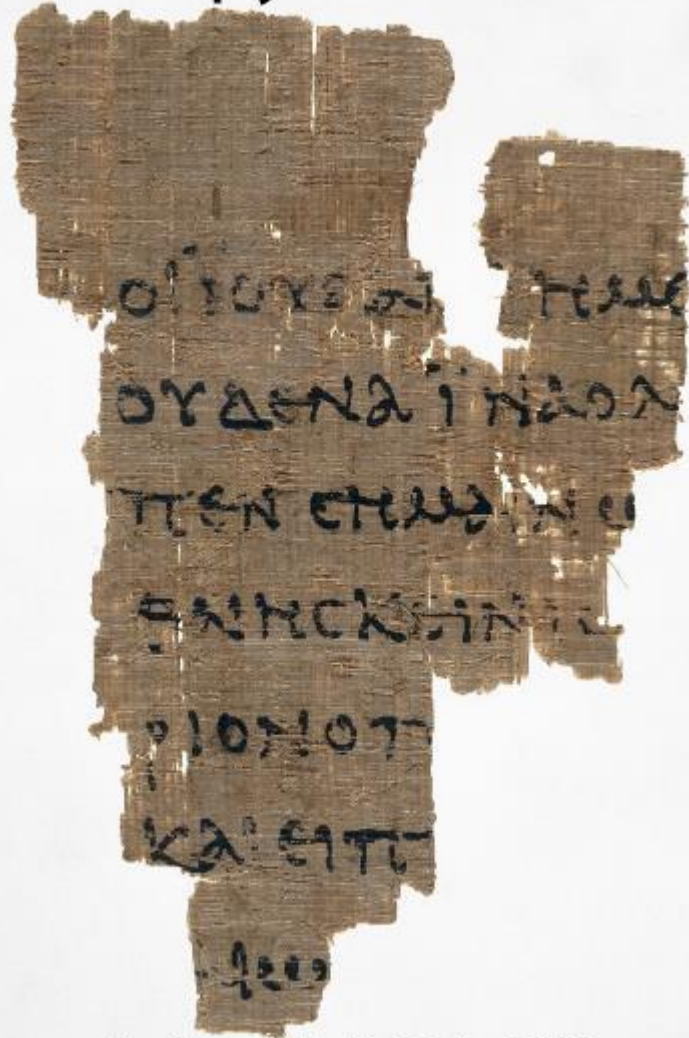
- 'Archaeology and the Interpretation of John's Gospel: A Review Essay', *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 20/1-2 (2009): 67-88, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1132&context=jats>, footnote 22.

Philip Comfort:

'A. Schmidt has challenged the earlier dating of P52. He has placed it near the end of the second century . . . This redating has appealed to some scholars, but most hold with the earlier dating and still affirm that P52 is probably the earliest New Testament manuscript.'

- *The Text Of The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts: Papyri 75-139 and Uncials*, Volume 2. Third Edition. Kregel Academic, 2019, 316

Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

- The date for P52 used in *Getting at Jesus* accurately reflects the scholarly consensus, but the scholarly consensus isn't monolithic, with several paleographers favoring a broader range of dates
- While some of these dates are *earlier* than the standard dating, many are *later*
- **Stephen C. Carlson** (Senior Research Fellow in Biblical and Early Christian Studies at Australian Catholic University) therefore suggests that 'P52 should be dated to the mid-second century, give or take a half-century..' - 'Brent Nongbri on P52' <http://hypotyposeis.org/weblog/2005/08/brent-nongbri-on-p52.html>

- If we follow **Carlson** in averaging proposed dates for P52, the most we can say about the fourth gospel *on the basis of P52* would be that it was written by the middle of the 2nd century
- This would still be within the two generation window between the crucifixion and the editorial voice that endorses the eye-witness status of the fourth gospel's primary witness to Jesus
- The fourth gospel would then be comparable to, or better than, ancient sources such as Suetonius, Josephus and Plutarch, with an average 'publication gap' of c. 100 years
- i.e. It would still be the case that one could not doubt the testimony of the fourth gospel purely on grounds of its temporal distance from the life of Jesus without severely curtailing the practice of ancient history

Author/Work	Reported Events	Report Published	Lapse between events & report	Average lapse
Pliny, Letters	97 – 112 AD	100 - 112 AD	0 - 3 yrs	1.5 yrs
Thucydides, History	431 - 411 BC	410 - 400 BC	0 - 30 yrs	15 yrs
Xenophon, Anabasis	401 - 399 BC	385 - 375 BC	15 - 25 yrs	20 yrs
Polybius, History	200 - 120 BC	150 BC	20 - 70 yrs	45 yrs
Tacitus, Annals	14 - 68 AD	c. 100 - 110 AD	c. 32 - 100 yrs	c. 66 yrs
Heroditus, History	546 - 478 BC	430 - 425 BC	50 - 125 yrs	87.5 yrs
Suetonius, Lives	50 BC - 95 AD	c. 120 AD	c. 25 - 170 yrs	c. 97.5 yrs
Josephus – War	200 BC - 70 AD	c. 80 AD	c. 10 - 280 yrs	c. 145 yrs
Plutarch, Lives	500 BC - 70 AD	c. 100 AD	c. 30 - 600 yrs	c. 315 yrs

- On the one hand *the majority of scholarly opinion* dates P52 to the early 2nd century, which *suggests a 1st century date for the fourth gospel* (making the gospel more comparable on this metric to Tacitus than Suetonius)
- On the other hand, **Daniel D. Wallace** comments: ‘Although Brent Nongbri recently argued that P⁵² is irrelevant for the dating of the Gospel of John, he is basing his views on what is possible, but not on what is probable. The likelihood that this fragment really belongs to the first half of the second century - and most likely to the first quarter of the second century - gives parameters as to when John’s Gospel could have been written.’ - ‘John 5.2 One More Time: A Response to Andreas Köstenberger’ (June 15, 2007) <https://bible.org/article/john-52-one-more-time-response-andreas-k%C3%B6stenberger>

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Xenophon, Anabasis	401 - 399 BC	385 - 375 BC	15 - 25 yrs	20 yrs
Polybius, History	200 - 120 BC	150 BC	20 - 70 yrs	45 yrs
Tacitus, Annals	14 - 68 AD	c. 100 - 110 AD	c. 32 - 100 yrs	c. 66 yrs
Heroditus, History	546 - 478 BC	430 - 425 BC	50 - 125 yrs	87.5 yrs
Suetonius, Lives	50 BC - 95 AD	c. 120 AD	c. 25 - 170 yrs	c. 97.5 yrs
Josephus – War	200 BC - 70 AD	c. 80 AD	c. 10 - 280 yrs	c. 145 yrs
Plutarch, Lives	500 BC - 70 AD	c. 100 AD	c. 30 - 600 yrs	c. 315 yrs

Papyrus 52



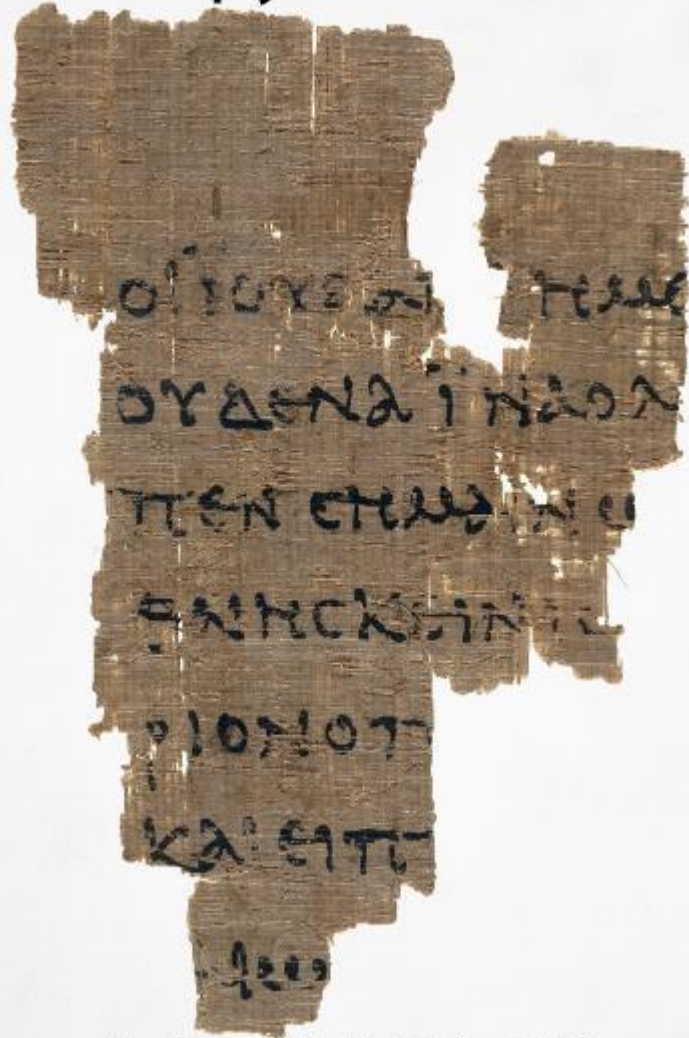
John 18:31-33

NT scholar **Peter M. Head**:

‘some opinions are worth a lot more than others. Of course the opinions of general NT scholars commenting on John... are pretty irrelevant to the dating of a particular manuscript. But the opinions of some scholars, who handled and examined hundreds of manuscripts, remains important. In this connection **Eric Turner**’s acquiescence to **Roberts**’ dating (the only codex he admitted into the first half of the second century) and **Roberts**’ own attention to P. Fayyum 110 as the closest datable text to P52 retain some force, especially since **Nongbri** has, in his own admission, not found a more recently published text from a later period that is closer to P52.’

- ‘Date of P52’ <https://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2006/01/date-of-p52.html#comments>.

Papyrus 52



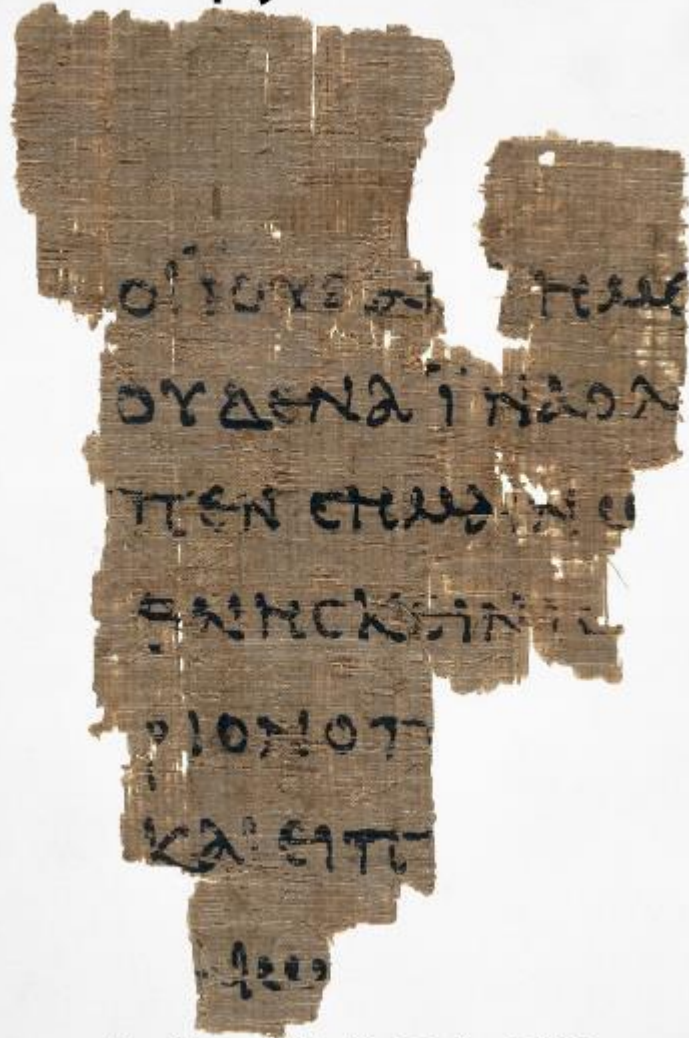
John 18:31-33

For example:

‘eminent papyrologist, **Ulrich Wilken**, indicated that... P52 could be contemporary with manuscripts in the Apollonios Archives, dated A.D. 117-120 (the Bremer Papyri). This is quite a significant observation inasmuch as Wilken had just completed a publication of the Bremer papyri (which includes the Apollonios Archives) when he made this observation about P52. Therefore, he was drawing upon his keen observation of several manuscripts dated between A.D. 117-120.’

- Philip Wesley Comfort, *The Text Of The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts: Papyri 75-139 and Uncials*, Volume 2. Third Edition. Kregel Academic, 2019, 313-314

Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

Edward D. Andrews criticizes **Nongbri** for ‘attempting to find a couple of letterforms at later dates (maybe the fading, diminishing part of the timeline) that have similar features to letters in P52 so as to date P52 to a later date range, i.e., 75-225 C.E.’ - *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek New*

Testament Manuscript? Christian Publishing House, 2020

He notes that **Nongbri** is willing to accept the verdict of **Roberts** that: ‘we may accept with some confidence the first half of the second century as the period in which (P52) was most probably written.’ - *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek*

New Testament Manuscript? Christian Publishing House, 2020

Papyrus Egerton 2 & P52



‘P. Egerton Papyrus 2 fragments have so many parallel expressions found in John’s Gospel, it strongly indicates that whoever wrote P. Egerton Papyrus 2 fragments, he was using John’s writing as a source.’

- Edward D. Andrews, *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek New Testament Manuscript?* Christian Publishing House, 2020

Philip W. Comfort:

‘Schmidt redates P52 to ca. 200 based on the fact that its hand parallels that of the Egerton Gospel, which is now thought by some to date closer to ca. 200 based on [the presence in that manuscript of the specific paleographic feature of a hooked apostrophe between two consonants] appearing in a newly published portion of the Egerton Gospel.’ - *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism*. Broadman & Holman,

2005, 108-109

Edward D. Andrews:

‘the biggest piece of evidence for changing the dating of P52 to 200 C.E. or later was changing the dating of P. Egerton 2 from 150 C.E. to 200 C.E. The problem with changing P. Egerton 2 was a hooked apostrophe between two consonants. The scholars seeking a date change misunderstood [English papyrologist Eric] Turner’s words [relating] to the hooked apostrophe. Turner said it became a practice in the third century, so the scholars redated P. Egerton 2, P52, and P66 based on a hooked apostrophe. The problem being that Turner did not say there were no cases in the second century. In fact, he cited two examples, and there are other examples. So, it was developing in the second century and became a common practice in the third century.’

- *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek New Testament Manuscript?* Christian Publishing House, 2020



Philip Comfort:

‘the previously assigned date of such manuscripts was given by many scholars according to their observations of several paleographic features. Thus, the presence of this particular feature (the hook or apostrophe between double consonants) determines an earlier date for its emergence [i.e. the emergence of this handwriting feature], not the other way around. Thus, the Egerton Gospel, dated by many to ca. 150, should still stand, and so should the date for P52 (as early second century).’

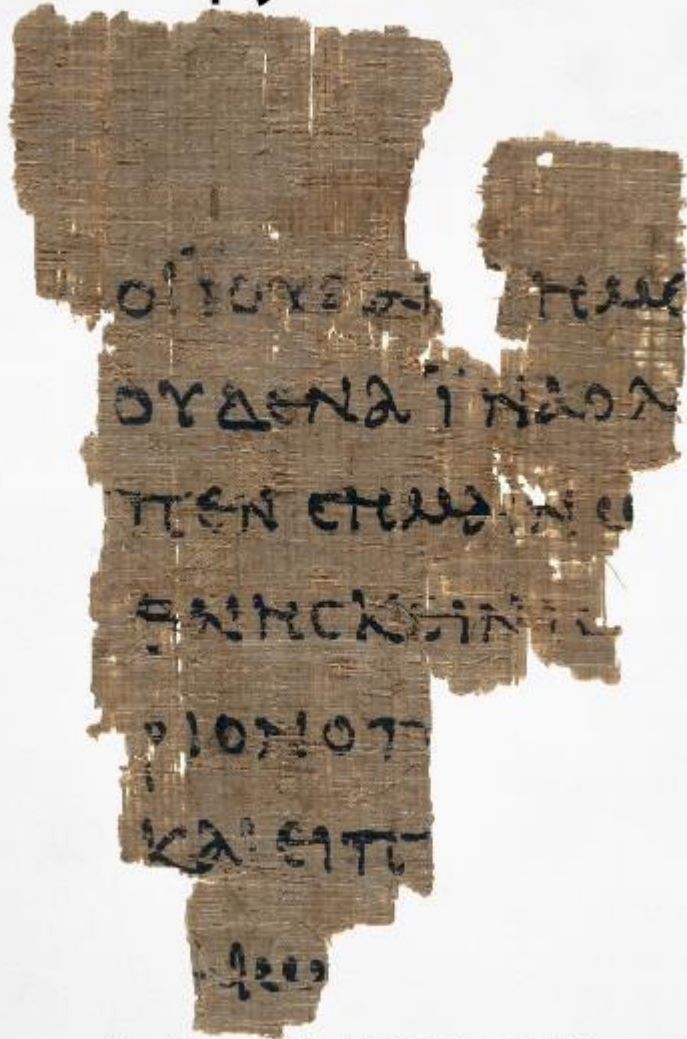
- *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism*. Broadman & Holman, 2005, 108-109

Stanley Porter argues that that both P52 and P. Egerton 2:

‘fit comfortably within the second century. There are of course some letters that are similar to those in the third century (as there are some in the first century) but the letters that tend to be given the most individualization, such as alpha, mu and even sigma, appear to be second century.’

- ‘Recent efforts to Reconstruct Early Christianity on the Basis of its Psychological Evidence’ in *Christian Origins and Graeco-Roman Culture*, ed.’s Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts. Brill, 2013, 82

Papyrus 52



John 18:31-33

- **Philip Comfort** and **David P. Barrett** conclude: ‘P52 can safely be dated to A.D. 100–125. However, its comparability to manuscripts of an even earlier period (especially P. Fayum 110 and P. London 2078), pushes the date closer to A.D. 100, plus or minus a few years.’ - *The Text Of The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, Volume 1. Third Edition. Kregel Academic, 2019, 338
- **Comfort**: ‘In the final analysis, P52 belongs to the beginning of the second century...’ - *The Text Of The Earliest New Testament Manuscripts: Papyri 75-139 and Uncials*, Volume 2. Third Edition. Kregel Academic, 2019, 316
- In light of P52, **Paul Foster** remarks: ‘Was John’s Gospel written before the end of the first century? Yes, probably.’ - Paul Foster quoted by Edward D. Andrews, *The P52 Project: Is P52 Really the Earliest Greek New Testament Manuscript?* Christian Publishing House, 2020

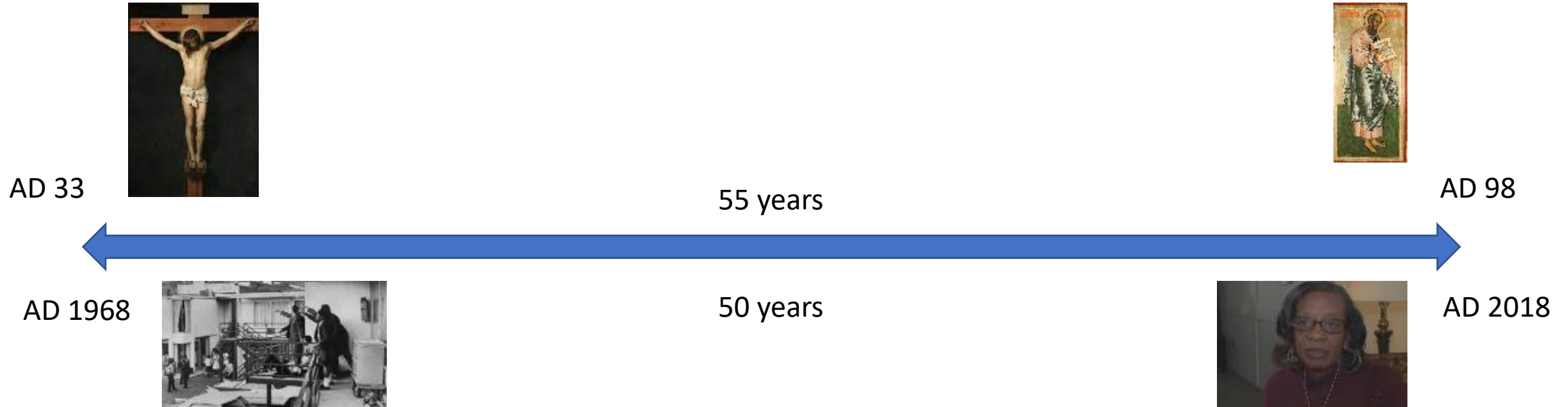
Other Evidence...

- The fourth gospel mentions 'the disciple whom Jesus loved . . . who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper' (John 21:20, see also 11:3, 11:36, 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7 and 21:20) and identifies him as 'the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down.' (John 21:24.)
- Whoever this disciple was, *they are an eyewitness*



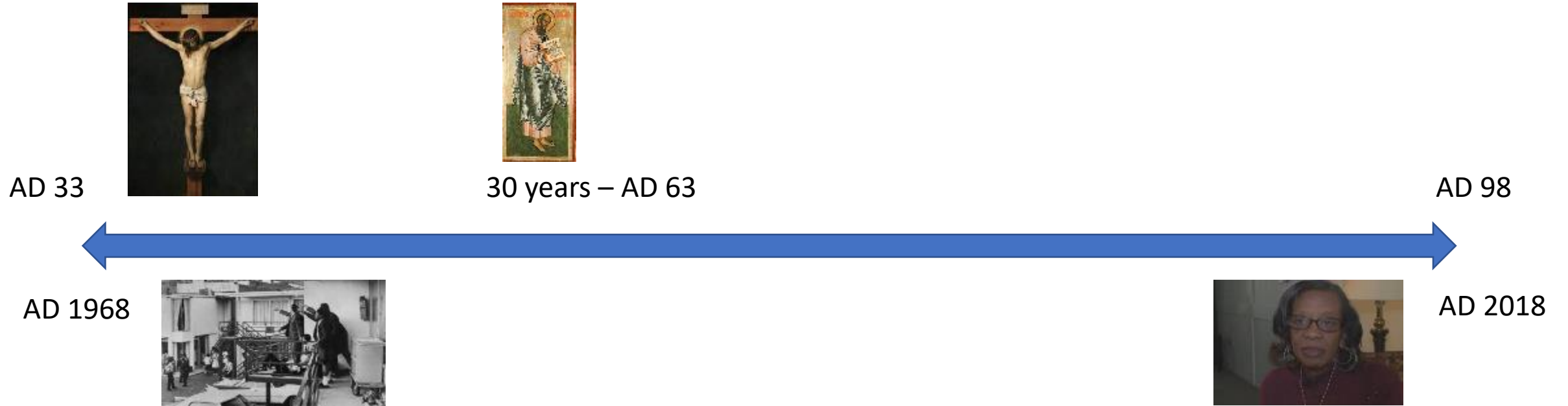
- It might be objected that a disciple of Jesus would have been in his 90s at the end of the first century, and that this is implausible
- However, **Keener** points out that: 'Typical disciples were in their teens, however, making eighties likelier than nineties. Moreover, we know of other ancient thinkers in their eighties and nineties with sharp memories and wit.' - John (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary). Zondervan, 2019
- If we suppose that the beloved disciple was 18 when Jesus died in April of AD 33 (cf. Colin Humphreys, *The Mystery of The Last Supper*. Cambridge University Press, 2011), he'd have become 83 by April of AD 98 - which was soon after the Roman Emperor Trajan began his reign (cf. Herbert W. Benario, 'Trajan (A.D. 98-117)' www.roman-emperors.org/trajan.htm)





- Testimony from the beloved disciple in AD 98 about Jesus' crucifixion in AD 33 would be comparable to the testimony given by Mary Ellen Ford in 2018 about events the day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated at the hotel where she worked as a cook fifty years before in 1968

- Besides, many scholars conjecture that the testimony of, or used by, the beloved disciple was originally recorded, at least in part, before the fall of Jerusalem – *perhaps in the early 60s AD*



- Testimony from the beloved disciple in AD 63 about Jesus' crucifixion would be comparable to my testimony today about events in 1992

According to John



- The title ‘**According to John**’ is attached to every manuscript of the fourth gospel that has a title attached, and these titled manuscripts date ‘**from the end of the second century, if not earlier.**’ - N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament In Its World*. SPCK/Zondervan Academic, 2019, 653
- **Paul Barnett:** ‘the Muratorian Fragment, dated c. 180–200 states: “The fourth book of the gospel is that of John, one of the disciples”.’ - *Is the New Testament History?* Aquila, 2018
- As **Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV** comment, any alternative theory about the origins of the fourth gospel: ‘**requires an explanation as to why this Gospel would have been wrongly associated with John the Apostle at such an early date and by people who claim to have known him personally (e.g., Polycarp).**’ - *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: The Gospel of John*. Baker Academic, 2015, 17



- **Craig L. Blomberg:** ‘a good case can be made that the fourth Gospel was written by John, the “one Jesus loved”... brother of James and son of Zebedee, just as early church tradition suggests. That same tradition places John in and around Ephesus, ministering to the churches of Asia Minor, until his death as an elderly man at roughly the end of the first century.’ - ‘Introduction to John’s Gospel’ in *CSB Apologetics Study Bible*. Holman, 2017, 1303



- At some time after the death of Domitian: ‘John was released from Patmos, whereupon he returned to Ephesus, where he had been ministering before his exile. Then, several years later, around A.D. 100, John died.’ - Bruce C. Barton et al, *Life Application Bible Commentary: Revelation*. Tyndale House, 2000, xiii
- There’s a window of opportunity, after his return from exile and before his death, for John to have ‘published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia’ as Irenaeus reports in *Against Heresies*
- We might speculate that it was John’s exile that accounts for the ‘gap between the draft of the Gospel... (which itself could have circulated locally in and around Ephesus) and its final redaction...’ hypothesized by some scholars (though it remains possible that the gospel according to John was published before his exile) - John Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*. Apollos, 2001, 44
- **Blomberg:** ‘while it is true that the external evidence focuses primarily on John’s age and location of ministry rather than explicitly tying the authorship of his Gospel to the late date, the subsequent conviction of the church that became the “traditional” position should probably be accepted, dating the Fourth Gospel either to the 80s or to the 90s.’ - *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*. Apollos, 2001, 44

- **J. Dongell** cautiously argues: ‘Supposing John the son of Zebedee to be the author of the Gospel, and his disciples to have been its editors and publishers shortly after his death, it seems reasonable to suggest from A.D. 80 to 100 as the span within which the Gospel was published. The time of John’s own writing activity may have preceded his death by moments or decades. Such are the ambiguities involved in dating.’
- He thinks ‘it most probable that John, son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples, was the Beloved Disciple, that he wrote the bulk of the contents of the Fourth Gospel, and that his disciples edited and published his work sometime after his death.’ - *John: A Commentary for Bible Students*. 1997
- However, it seems to me that the testimony of **Ignatius** should be given the benefit of the doubt, with the result that the publication of the fourth gospel came *before the end of the apostle’s life*
- Consequently (allowing time for the Johannine Epistles to postdate the fourth gospel) I think *John’s Gospel was probably published in its extant form under the Emperor Nerva (AD 96-98)*



This dating is *cautious* and *mainstream*

- A wide variety of scholars see earlier sources behind/within the fourth gospel
- **Stanley E. Porter:** ‘Virtually all scholars agree that John’s Gospel was the last written... at the latest, around AD 90.’ - *How We Got The New Testament*. Baker Academic, 2013, 86
- **Craig S. Keener:** ‘most scholars maintain a date in the mid-90s’ - *John (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)* Zondervan, 2019
- **N.T. Wright & Michael F. Bird:** ‘There is no strong evidence against the traditional date near the end of the century, either towards the end of Domitian’s reign (AD 81-96) or at the beginning of Trajan’s (AD 98-117).’ - *The New Testament In Its World*. SPCK/Zondervan Academic, 2019, 661



Conclusions

- John 5:2's description of the Pool of Bethesda and the Sheep Gate *does not* provide grounds for thinking that the fourth gospel was published in the first century/before AD 70
- Evidence pointing to a 1st century date for the fourth gospel *is* provided by P52
- The main author/testimonial source of the fourth gospel (an eyewitness) was *probably* John the apostle
- The beloved disciple *may* have initially written (perhaps with the help of a scribe) in the early 60's AD
- John's testimony was subsequently edited – *probably* with John's blessing - by his own disciples
- John's Gospel was *probably* published in its extant form, in Ephesus, under the Emperor Nerva (AD 96-98)
- The fourth gospel's accurate description of the Pool of Bethesda and the Sheep Gate is evidence that *indicates* the *reliability* of the fourth gospel's *eyewitness, first century testimony to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus*