

QUESTION:

In a comment on my recent post on the letter of Barnabas, where I indicated that “it is almost certainly to be dated to the 130s CE (for reasons I could explain if anyone really wants to know....)” - one reader asked:

I, for one, would be quite interested in the how these various works are dated. Seems like it would be of utmost importance seeing as the date of composition all but decides the question of authorship. Even if it only provides a general sense of why a particular date is hung on a manuscript or composition, I think it would be helpful.

RESPONSE:

Yes, as it turns out, it is very difficult to date ancient writings; but scholars who have worked on such matters (for nearly 300 years now, in some instances) have marshaled pretty good evidence in case after case, although in many instances there continue to be substantial debates. There are several ways to establish parameters, which are fairly commonsensical. If a writing is quoted by an author whose dates are relatively certain (his dates too need to be established on independent grounds! But in lots of cases there is almost no doubt), then obviously the writing is earlier than that. So that’s a beginning. Second, if the writing itself quotes a datable writing or author then it must be written later than that. And third, relatedly, if the writing refers to a datable event, then it must be later.

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