

**The Iona Collaborative
Introduction to the New Testament**

Biblical Chronology: The Big Picture and Why It Matters

Rule of Thumb: For human beings, God can only be known contextually.

- We observe what God is doing in relation to us and to the powers at work in our lives.
- Over time, we build up knowledge of God's ways.
- The Bible is a thousands-of-years-long record of our relationship with God, edited over time, boiled down, deepened, corrected with the wisdom of hindsight.
- Revelation has happened and continues to happen. God still surprises us and exceeds our understanding. Tony Baker: "Theology is like following a path in a dark woodland - but we do have a candle." Like the dark woodland beyond the light, there is much of the life of God that we do not know. But we can see a walkable path in front of us by the light of the scriptures, the sacraments, and the community of faith.

Biblical Chronology, a Story of Relating to Empire

1200-1000 BCE The tribal period

1000-930 BCE the united monarchy (*home rule*)

930-722 BCE divided monarchy; in 722 Assyria destroys Israel and begins the domination of Judah

745-586 BCE Israel and Judah dominated by Assyria, Egypt, then Babylon

586-538 BCE destruction of Jerusalem; exile of the elites to Babylon (*in this period and the subsequent period under Persian Rule important compilation and editing of the scriptures take place*)

538-332 BCE Return of the exiles in several waves; the Persian Period

(ca.522) rebuilding of the Temple begins: The Second Temple

332-167 BCE Hellenistic Period (*the beginnings of the apocalyptic worldview; belief in*

resurrection; angelology)

142-63 BCE Hasmonean Period (home rule)

63 BCE beginning of the Roman period (*Hellenistic culture persists*)

(4 BCE) birth of Jesus (dated from the death of Herod the Great) *Understanding the mission of Jesus within the framework of the Roman occupation of Galilee/Judea.*

50s CE letters of Paul

66-70 CE Jewish War, culminating in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; composition of the Gospel of Mark

80-90 composition of Matthew and Luke; Deutero-Pauline Epistles

90-100 composition of the Gospel of John; Revelation

100+ Acts of the Apostles

An example of exilic/post-exilic editing: Genesis 2-3

Gen. 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Gen. 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; **3** but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" **4** But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; **5** for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." **6** So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened,

and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Gen. 3:22 Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— **23** therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. **24** He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Notes

1. There is already a very simple kind of Torah (teaching) in the garden, a limitation that God puts in place for the human beings: they may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (or good and bad). The people are not given a reason; they are given a commandment.
2. The serpent calls on the people to decide for themselves what they will do, without regard for God’s clear instruction.
3. The outcome of the people’s decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and bad is that relationships between men and women, human beings and animals, and human beings and God are all distorted from God’s original plan.
4. The first people are “exiled” from the garden as the Jews are exiled from Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE. The place of exile becomes a place of learning and of the possibility of the mending of relationships by increased faithfulness to God’s Torah.
5. What was perhaps an ancient story of the creation of the first human beings is re-shaped and deepened by the experience of exile: by experiences of suffering, remorse, and renewed faithfulness to God’s commands.
6. The moral “lesson” of Genesis 2-3, that people should listen closely to God’s commands, and not try to think through situations on their own, is not consistent throughout the scriptures. There are times when people need to discern what to do in a situation for which there is no clear commandment. We need to take the whole of the Biblical witness into account when we are considering how to live faithfully.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

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There is a story of *your* life in relation to God being “written” every day in your experiences and thoughts.

1. How have you learned about God over time, through the varied experiences of your life both good and bad?
2. How has your view of God changed over time, from childhood through adolescence into adulthood?
3. What other sources (people, scripture, prayer) have helped you pay attention to and interpret what God is doing in your life?