

The Relationship of the Four Gospels

The Gospel According to Matthew

Biographical

Matthew, surnamed Levi, was the son of Alphaeus and possibly the brother of James the Lesser, son of Alphaeus.

Scripture provides no information about Matthew other than the account of his initial calling and his selection by Christ as an apostle. When he was first encountered by Christ, he was in/near Capernaum working as a tax collector. This would have meant that he was educated and necessarily spoke Greek, Latin, and Aramaic.

Fox's Book of Martyrs reports that he eventually travelled to Parthia (NE Iran) and then to Ethiopia, where he was slain with a halberd in AD 60.

Authorship

Every known manuscript of the four Gospels has included a title ascribing authorship, in this case, 'kata Matthaion,' likewise all early church traditions ascribe the authorship of this Gospel to Matthew. The list of historic testimonies of his authorship includes Papius (2nd C. Bishop of Hierapolis), Irenaeus (2nd C. Bishop of Lyons), Origen (3rd C.), and 4th C. historian, Eusebius (Historia Ecclesiastica).

Unique Purpose

The Gospel of Matthew is written primarily to a Jewish readership, specifically as a proof-text showing that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised throughout the Old Testament. The Gospel begins with an authenticating genealogy of Jesus and makes at least 60 supporting references to Old Testament Scripture in its 28 chapters, both by Matthew in narration, and as spoken by Jesus.

Dating the Gospel of Matthew

Internal Evidence

The first piece of internal evidence is that Matthew recorded the resurrection of Christ, which puts the completion of his Gospel no earlier than AD 33.

Likewise, Matthew predicted the destruction of the temple which occurred August 9/10 of AD 70, but did not relate the occurrence of the fulfillment. This puts reasonable dating before AD 70.

These two evidences provide a maximum span of the authorship of Gospel of Matthew at between AD 33-70.

External Evidence

Departure – According to Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215), Matthew stayed in Jerusalem for 12 years after the crucifixion (until about AD 45). While this is external evidence, it is from a close date and a reliable author.

Synoptic Use – In keeping with the church tradition of the primacy of Matthew, and therefore assuming that Mark and Luke collaborated together during Paul's first imprisonment using Matthew as a source document, then the Gospel of Matthew would need to be in circulation (not just a complete original) before AD 60.

Traditional Death – A third external evidence is that Matthew traditionally died in Ethiopia in AD 60.

Internal Clue

There is an interesting clue for dating Matthew, in that he twice uses the phrase "unto this day" (Matthew 27, 28). **First**, this phrase raises an expectation that some years have passed from the events until the completion of the account. A bare minimum of 5-10 years would be expected for such an expression to be used. **Secondly**, this phrase indicates that the writing was done while Matthew was still local to Jerusalem. He would hardly have local insight as to whether the vernacular name of the field and the lies of the guards were still in circulation if he was living in Parthia or Ethiopia.

Combined with the tradition of an AD 45 departure, this clue would lead us to understand that the Gospel was written between 5-10 years after the crucifixion and Matthew's departure in AD 45.

Other Considerations

Matthew, being an educated and multilingual apostle, can reasonably be expected to have kept notes or a journal of some sort as he traveled with Jesus. This would answer for ready source material with exact records of events, teachings, and conversations. This would allow for a relatively quick publication of his Gospel and would also answer for the tradition that Matthew originally wrote in Hebrew, if he had kept these notes in Aramaic.

Secondly, it seems likely that a primary reason Matthew lingered in Jerusalem would be to complete his Gospel in a relatively stable environment among the other disciples. It would be a good reason to stay put for a while, and completing the work could have easily been his catalyst for leaving Jerusalem when he did.

Conclusion

Due to the evidences and considerations above, it seems that Matthew completed his Gospel around AD 45, and then left for his missionary journey to Parthia.

Primacy of Matthew

All church traditions hold to the primacy of Matthew, written before Mark and Luke. There is **no dissent** among the Church Fathers in either regard. Considering that Matthew was well-educated and one of the twelve, he would certainly have the first opportunity to publish his Gospel account. It also makes sense because Matthew had a ready audience to write to, as his Gospel is directed to his fellow Jews.

The Gospel According to Mark

Biographical

Mark is understood to be John Mark as named in Acts 12:12, the son of Mary, who owned a large house and at least one servant in Jerusalem. He is the nephew (or similar relative) of Barnabas.

There is one reason to believe that Mark may have been among the followers of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. A humorous account of “a young man” occurs only in the Gospel of Mark (14:51-52) in a situation apparently without disciple witnesses, so has been speculatively identified with Mark himself. At any rate he lived in Jerusalem, would have been there for the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and was active in the earliest days of the church.

Mark was acquainted with Peter, who perhaps led him to salvation. Mark went on a first missionary journey with Paul, a second missionary journey with Barnabas, a third missionary with Paul and, among others, Luke, and then later joined with Peter in Rome. Paul sent for Mark during his second imprisonment, but Scripture does not actually record if he joined him.

Mark is reported to have been martyred in Alexandria, Egypt by being dragged by horses.

Authorship

All early church traditions ascribe the authorship of this Gospel to Mark. The list of historic testimonies of his authorship includes Papius (2nd C. Bishop of Hierapolis), Irenaeus (2nd C. Bishop of Lyons), Clement of Alexandria (2nd C.), and Origen (3rd C.).

Furthermore, the consensus of these traditions is that it was written in Rome. If this is the case, this has great bearing on the earliest possible date it could have been written, as Mark was from Jerusalem and would not have been in Rome before Paul’s third missionary journey.

Unique Purpose

Mark was engaged in missionary church-planting among the Gentiles and in his time with Paul obviously developed a heart for those in Rome, where he stayed with Paul during his two years of house arrest.

There are several general evidences that Mark’s Gospel was targeting Gentiles, specifically Romans. One evidence is that he used several Latin terms instead of Greek equivalents. Mark explains Jewish customs, translates Aramaic expressions into Greek, and uses Roman reckoning for time.

Assuming that Matthew was in circulation, the Jewish nature of the Book and the continuous references to fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies would alienate the Gentiles who would be completely ignorant of the greater context. The Roman world needed a Gospel which was not squarely fixed on the Jewish nation.

Dating the Gospel of Mark

Latest Date: Mark traditionally wrote his Gospel in conjunction with Peter, and Peter traditionally died in AD 64. This argues for a publication of Mark which is not much later than AD 64-65.

Secondly Mark includes the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem as a prophecy. Since this occurred in AD 70, Mark must have been written before this time.

Earliest Date:

Church tradition has Mark writing from Rome, which would make the earliest date AD 60-62.

Expected Publication of the Gospel of Mark, therefore, would be AD 60-65, with an expectation matching church tradition for a date of around AD 60-62.

Refutation of Primacy of Mark

The Primacy of Matthew is **opposed by the Markan Priority theory** in which 19th C. German critical scholar, Karl Lachmann, proposed a two-source hypothesis. He posits that Matthew and Luke used both Mark and a lost 'Q' source document to write their Gospels. Markan Priority has no substantial evidence, being speculative at best, and assumes errors in Scripture, i.e. supposed contradictions between Matthew and Luke. Sadly, Markan Priority has been widely accepted and developed in liberal circles of modern Christian scholarship.

The Gospel According to Luke

Biographical

Luke is identified as a Gentile, and a physician (Colossians 4:10-14), traditionally from Syrian Antioch. He is only known from his time with Paul. He joined Paul at Troas on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:10-11) and journeyed with Paul extensively, including being with Paul during his first and second imprisonment.

Tradition holds that Luke was martyred in Greece, where he was hung from an olive tree by idolatrous priests. Other tradition has him living to the age of 84.

Authorship

Church tradition strongly supports Luke, the companion of Paul, as the author of this Gospel, and of the Book of Acts. This includes Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome. He is also listed as the author in the Muratorian Fragment.

Unique Purpose

The Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles, are both addressed to "Theophilus." Because of the honorific "most excellent" used in Luke there is reason to believe that part of the motivation for this Gospel is in Paul's defense related to his first imprisonment, but this is speculative, and it has also been speculated that Theophilus is sponsoring the Gospel. It is also likely that Theophilus (Loved by God) is not the individual addressee's actual name.

At any rate, Luke states his purpose very distinctly in Luke 1:1-4:

Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to draw up a narrative concerning those matters which have been fulfilled among us, even as they delivered them unto us, who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having traced the course of all things accurately from the first, to write unto thee in order, most

excellent Theophilus; that thou mightest know the certainty concerning the things wherein thou wast instructed. (ASV)

Luke is giving an accurate, orderly account of the life of Christ and His teachings.

Relationship to Acts

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles comprise a two-volume set written by Luke in an unbroken account. Where Luke ends, Acts starts and continues. While there is some overlap between Luke 24 and Acts 1, Luke simply continues his account to the point of Paul's first imprisonment.

Dating the Gospel of Luke

Dating the completion of Luke is related to the completion of Acts. Since Acts ends before Paul's trial in AD 62 and also does not mention the persecutions of Nero in AD 64, it can be reasonably surmised that Acts was completed around AD 62.

Because the Gospel of Luke is referred to as "the former treatise" (Acts 1:1), we know it was completed before Acts, i.e. before AD 62. Because Luke traveled with Paul starting around July of AD 50, he could have begun writing his Gospel any time afterwards. Because Luke is synoptic with Matthew and Mark, the more so with Mark, it is assumed that Luke was written in collaboration with Mark, most likely during Paul's two-year house arrest. Meaning that Luke would have been completed maybe AD 60-61 and Acts maybe AD 62.

The Gospel According to John

Biographical

John was a fisherman from Bethsaida, but of a family who could afford hired servants (Mark 1:20) and John was personally acquainted with the high priest (John 18:15). He was the younger brother of James, his father was Zebedee and his mother was Salome. Salome also followed Christ, was possibly one of the financially supporting women (Luke 8:1-3), and was present at His crucifixion and resurrection.

John was initially a disciple of John the Baptist and began following Jesus after His baptism. John and his brother James joined Peter as primary disciples and witnessed Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. John and Peter were the only disciples to follow Jesus to his trial by the high priest when he was arrested, and Jesus gave John responsibility for His mother while He was on the cross. John was the first of the twelve to see the empty tomb. When John writes of himself in his Gospel, he never uses his name, but "another disciple" or "the disciple Jesus loved."

John remained in Jerusalem for many years, as a pillar of the church in Jerusalem and also caring for Mary, the mother of Christ. Some time around AD 70, John traveled to Ephesus and potentially to the other churches which he names in Revelation 1-3. At some point, John was arrested.

Unsuccessfully Martyred: Traditionally, John was boiled in oil for his faith in Rome but was unharmed by the experience. He was then banished to the Isle of Patmos by Domitian (Roman Emperor AD 81-96) until recalled by Nerva (Emperor AD 96-98). John traditionally died of natural

causes, living until the time of emperor Trajan (AD 98-117), which would make him at least 90 years old (based on the assumption that he was at least 20 when Jesus was baptized).

Rumors of Immortality: There is no Scriptural record of the death of John, nor of any divine ascension such as granted Enoch and Elijah. There is a tradition of John being unharmed by being boiled in oil. The Mormon book of Doctrines and Covenants (128:20) has a passage in which Jesus tells John that he will tarry until the second coming due to John's own request, but this is strictly Mormonism, given as a special revelation to Joseph Smith, and is not Scripture.

In his Gospel, John himself takes care to specifically deny a rumor that he would live until the return of Christ (John 21:21-24). So there obviously was a rumored misconception during his lifetime.

As to the promise that "some standing here which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:27, also Mark 9:1, Matthew 16:28), this seems to obviously pertain to the transfiguration which follows this passage in each Gospel, as "some" is obviously plural and applied to James, John, and Peter. Also as pertains to John, he DID see the second coming of Christ in clear visions which he recorded in the Book of Revelation.

Authorship

John's authorship of his Gospel is supported by Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian. Internal evidence is that John's Gospel is written in a very personal first-hand style, writing things that only John would have seen, known, or noticed.

The Gospel of John can also be compared to the other Books attributed to him; I John, II John, III John, and Revelation.

Unique Purpose

The Gospel of John is deeply spiritual and deeply personal. He begins with the deity of Jesus Christ and provides material which is almost all unique compared to the other three Gospels and is generally only synoptic with the others from the Last Supper onward.

Dating the Gospel of John

There is no evidence for when John was written. It has traditionally been ascribed a late date of AD 85-95 by conservative scholarship. There is no reason that John could not have published the Gospel from Jerusalem (anytime between AD 33 and AD 70) or any time before his death around AD 100. We can better date his other writings. The three epistles (I-III John) are all dated around AD 90, and Revelation is dated AD 95-96, so if John wrote his Gospel first, but shortly before his epistles, then the traditional date of AD 85-95 would be likely. Another factor in choosing an 85-95 date for John is that Scripture reports him to be uneducated (Acts 4:13), so it is possible he required some time for writing skill development. This idea is supported by the fact that Acts 4:13 also says this of Peter, who wrote his epistles with the scribal assistance of Silvanus (Silas).