

Introduction to the Gospels – Part 2

Gospel Origins

Today, we speak of The Gospel According to _____. The early Church that would never have spoken in this way. People didn't speak of Mark's gospel or John's gospel because it doesn't belong to them.

As Saint Paul says in Galatians 1:6-8

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

There is but one gospel.

The traditional titles of the gospels are:

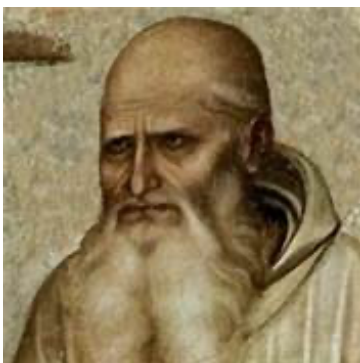
The Gospel of Jesus Christ *according* to Matthew, *according* to Mark, *according* to Luke, or *according* to John.

Patristic Tradition on the Authorship of the Gospels

Why do we call the gospels what we call them?

The early Church Fathers were all unanimous and all believed that the gospels were written by the people that they're named after.

We begin with patristic testimony from the early Church about the origin of the gospels. We will then look at some of the issues that modern scholarship has raised.



Papias (d. ca. 100) was a Greek Apostolic Father and Bishop of Hierapolis who knew the apostles. He tells about his conversations with people like Matthew. He apparently wrote commentaries on the gospels, but all of his works have been lost. If there is one find from antiquity that would be the single most valuable item for biblical studies, it would be the writings of Papias. Fortunately, there was a man named Eusebius, a later Church historian, who wrote a famous history of the Church, who included some of the things Papias said in his book. So, we've got fragments of Papias in Eusebius.

In the early Church there was a man called the Presbyter John, who some think could be the apostle John though some people think the presbyter is a different John. Papias says this:

“And the elder used to say this, Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had followed him, but later on, followed Peter,

who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them." (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 3.39.14-17)

So, Mark was Peter's secretary or scribe according to Papias, who wrote down whatever Peter remembered, but not in any kind of orderly way.

Peter gave homilies and proclaimed the gospel. He would relate experiences he had, but didn't try to explain, this is what happened first, this is what happened second, etc. Mark did his best to put together what Peter had proclaimed, but not with the intention of giving us the order of things exactly as they transpired.

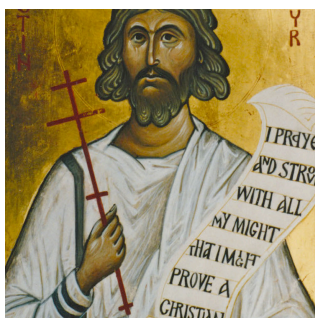
Mark was not one of the disciples of Jesus during his public nor did he follow Jesus. Mark followed Peter who adapted his own teaching to the needs of his hearers. For example, if Peter was in a place where there's rivalry among Christians, he says:

"Let me tell you a story about James and John. How they went to Jesus one day and they asked for the best seats in the kingdom."

So, Peter would adapt his message to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so Mark committed no error while he wrote some things as he remembered them and was careful as not to omit any of the things which he had heard nor to state any of them falsely.

Concerning Matthew, Papias writes:

So, then Matthew wrote the Oracles, the words, in the Hebrew language, and everyone interpreted them as he was able.



St. Justin Martyr (d. A.D. 165) was a very early Christian writer (guess how he died) and talks about what Christians do on the Lord's Day. He says:

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and *the memoirs of the apostles* or the writings of the prophets are read ...

It's interesting that the apostles have memoirs.

St. Irenaeus, d. ca. A.D 202 recounts something very similar to Papias:



Matthew also issues a written gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialects, while Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and laying the foundations of the Church (ca. A.D 60). After their departure (ca. A.D 62) (i.e., after they died), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. (Against Heresies 3.1.1)

One more ... we could go on; these are some of the very early ones.

St. Clement of Alexandria, d. ~ A.D. 215. Again, his writings are lost to us, but fragments of his writings preserved by Eusebius. He says the gospels containing the genealogies were published (i.e., widely disseminated) first.



The gospels containing the genealogies [i.e., Matthew and Luke], he says were ~~written~~ published [progegrasthai] first. The gospel according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter had preached the word publicly at Rome and declared the gospel by the Spirit, many who are present requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out. And having composed the gospel he gave it to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither directly forbade nor encouraged it. But, last of all, John perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the gospel, urged by his friends, and inspired by this spirit composed a spiritual gospel. (Eusebius summarizing Clement of Alexandria 6.14.5-7)

So, Matthew the apostle writes first, and writes in Hebrew. Mark is understood to be the interpreter of Peter who wrote down what he remembered of Peter's preaching. Luke is the companion of Paul, and John writes last and writes after the other gospels had been written, and it's the apostle John that various patristic sources say is responsible for the gospel of John.

This is the tradition of the Church, tradition with a small t. It's not dogmatically defined by any council, and the broad tradition of the Church that the ordering of Matthew Mark, Luke and John actually have some historical anchor in these personages.

Critical Scholarship and the Transmission of the Jesus Tradition

Now, with the rise of critical scholarship in the 18th century, 19th century, many questions are being raised about whether or not the gospels are not only written by the people they're attributed to, but whether they're even reliable. A big reason for this is (there are many reasons) is with the rise of **rationalism**. People don't believe in miracles anymore. Miracles superstitious nonsense according to enlightenment thinkers like Baruch Spinoza, so we can't trust the gospels since they "evolved".

How did the gospels get to the place where they are today?

The Gospels and the "Telephone Game."

One standard way of explaining this is articulated by New Testament scholar **Bart Ehrman** who grew up in a very fundamentalist Christian home and now has become an atheist.

Ehrman is a famous and popular New Testament scholar. His book, *The Introduction to the New Testament*, is used at almost every state university's religious studies department. He is a masterful textual critic (textual critics look at all the different manuscripts).

We don't have the actual original copy of Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, or John. We have a copy of a copy of a copy. So, what scholars do is look at the various copies and determine which is the best copy.

Almost no two manuscripts agree, but the majority of the circumstances where they disagree is because of a misspelled word, or what today we would call a typo.

Sometimes you can tell that a scribe is copying Luke, when he gets to the Our Father, he writes it out just as it appears in Matthew's gospel, because he knows Matthew's version we well.

Ehrman says:



Nearly all of these storytellers (in the early Church) had no independent knowledge of what really happened to Jesus. It takes a little imagination to realize what happened to the stories. You're probably familiar with the old birthday party game telephone. A group of kids sits in a circle. The first tells a brief story to one sitting next to her who tells it to the next and to the next and so on until it comes back full circle to the one who started it. Invariably the story has changed so much in the process of retelling that everyone gets a good laugh.

Imagine this same activity taking place, not in a solitary living room with 10 kids on one afternoon, but over the expanse of the Roman empire, some 2,500 miles across with thousands of participants. — Bart Ehrman

Ehrman suggests that there's a *long* transmission process that stretches from Jesus's actual teaching to the gospels being written down, and there's a lot of fluidity in that process.

Form-Critical Model of Transmission

Ehrman espouses a model that is taken from German biblical critics of the 20th century known as form criticism. Form critics try to identify all the different forms of Jesus's teachings in the gospels. They look at the tradition and say, this is a miracle story, this is a parable, this is a controversy story, and so forth. They then come up with different forms of stories and extrapolate from the forms what kind of circumstance would give rise to a story like this.

For example, why do Mark and Matthew tell us a story about James and John coming to Jesus and asking for the best seats in the kingdom? The only explanation is that at some point in the early Church the apostles had an inflated sense of self-importance and other Christians had to put them in their place. And so, they made up the story of James and John asking for special seats in the kingdom and has Jesus shoot them down.

Form critics don't take a very high view of the reliability of the gospels and believe that the titles of the gospels were all added later. According to the form critics the gospels originally circulated without titles and later on titles were invented and put on the gospels, so the gospels therefore really reflect more of the transmission process than Jesus' actual teaching.

Reconsidering the Form-Critical Model

There are many reasons to rethink the form critical model. Richard Bauckham (an Anglican biblical scholar) wrote a very influential book, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* argues that the idea that the stories that ended up in the gospels were in circulation for a long time is all exaggerated because the gospels are written within the living memory of the first disciples.

Jesus dies in about the year 30, and even the most skeptical scholars will say the gospels are probably written by the end of the first century or at most at the beginning of the second. Mark, the most skeptical scholars say is written sometime after 70. The original disciples of Jesus are still alive at this point.

The form critics said it's like the telephone game. Everybody heard the story and then they embellished it and added to it and changed it in creative ways. But Bauckham (brilliantly) points out that for three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they not only tell the same stories, they often use, in long stretches, the same exact words to tell the same stories. If a professor gets three papers that have the exact same words in the exact same order, he's not going to say it was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There's obviously borrowing. With Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is obviously some literary relationship as Augustine and Jerome and the early Church fathers recognized.

So, let's say Luke is copying from Mark. When Luke copies from Mark, he doesn't tell a wildly different story. Luke is similar to Mark. The gospel writers were quite conservative in the way they received the stories about Jesus. They weren't making up wholesale stories and adding them to their gospels.

Bauckham goes on to show that the transmission of the Jesus tradition is always associated with particular authorities. It's the gospel according to Matthew. It's the gospel *according to* Mark. We don't have an anonymous gospel. Early Christians always attached to the stories to witnesses. There is no evidence of a long anonymous process of oral transmission.

In fact, what we do have contradicts the idea of the form critics. Luke begins his gospel:

In as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were *delivered* to us ...

Literally the Greek word is *traditioned to us*.

... just as they were *delivered* to us by those who from the beginning were *eyewitnesses* and ministers of the word.

So, Luke is claiming to get his information from the eyewitnesses. It's not a telephone game.

Luke 1:3-4:

... it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have **certainty** concerning the things you have been **taught**.

Certainty: ἀσφάλειαν, *asphalean*, security, certainty – this is origin of the word asphalt, concrete

Taught: κατηχήθης, *catechesis*, to pass on.

The catechesis of the Church is not myth or invention. It goes back to the eyewitnesses. That's the way the early Christians understood it.

The gospel of John is also telling. In John 19, we read:

But one of the soldiers pierced Jesus's side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. *He who saw it has borne witness*. His testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth that you also may believe.

John isn't saying, "This information came to us from somebody else, came from somebody else. No, I'm the one who saw it and I'm writing it down for you."

Jesus had disciples, and disciple means student, and students study. What did Jesus' students study? They were studying Jesus. Historically, Jesus was surrounded by people who were completely dedicated to remembering what he said.

These first disciples were still around in the early Church. It's not as though we don't know what Jesus really said. It might've been this, it might have been that. The early Christians could ask Peter, or James, or John. In Galatians 2:9 St. Paul says the apostles were known as pillars.

... James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars ...

Further, ancient disciples kept using wax tablets. In Luke's gospel. how did the people know to name Zechariah's child John? Zechariah couldn't tell them, he was mute, so he wrote it down on a tablet. The way students would write it down until they had the words memorized.



Writing with stylus and folding wax tablet. painter, Douris, ca 500 BC (Berlin).

The Three Stages of the Formation of the Gospel in Catholic Teaching

Catholic teaching affirms that there are three stages in the formation of the gospels.

1. The life and teaching of Jesus.
2. The preaching of Jesus's disciples. As with Peter, Mark is listening.
3. Finally, the third stage, the writing of the gospels.

Dating the Gospels

When were the gospels written down? The vast majority of scholars will say that the gospels were all written after the destruction of the temple in the year 70 when the Jerusalem temple built by Herod was destroyed. These scholars tell you that because in the gospels Jesus predicts that the temple will be destroyed.

In Matthew 24:1-2:

Jesus came out of the temple, and as he was going out his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Amen I say to you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down."

With a straight face, many scholars will ask how the gospel writers could know that the temple was going to be destroyed. Clearly because it must have already happened. The assumption here is that Jesus couldn't have issued a prophecy.

Another example is the story of the wicked tenants in a vineyard.

The King sends messengers to them and they refuse. And so, in the end, he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and he burned their city. Matt 22:7.

With a straight face, many scholars will say that since it says the city burned, and that's how Jerusalem was destroyed, then the gospels must have been written after the destruction of the temple.

Bart Ehrman's standard textbook will tell you that the gospels were written after A.D. 70 because it says the temple was destroyed.

The problem with this is multi-fold. There is a strong minority of New Testament scholars who think the gospels were written before 70 AD.

First, we know of other figures from Jesus's day such as a man named Jesus ben Ananias (not Jesus of Nazareth). The first century Jewish historian Josephus tells us about how Jesus ben Ananias went into the temple and announced it was going to be destroyed as he was a prophet.

Contemporary scholars will say that Jesus ben Ananias predicted it but Jesus of Nazareth couldn't. Really? If Jesus ben Ananias can predict it, why do you assume that Jesus of Nazareth couldn't predict the destruction of the temple?

Also, in Matthew 24, Jesus says, *pray that your flight*. So, he's warning them to flee Jerusalem when these things take place so that you won't be caught in the war.

Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

Bart Ehrman would say this is written after the destruction of the temple, and the gospel writers want to make Jesus look good claiming that Jesus predicted it. But why would you include this line? Doesn't Jesus know exactly when it's going to take place? Why would you have Jesus say, pray that it may not be on this day, pray that it may not be on that day? Why not just say, and Jesus said it would happen on a Sabbath? Jesus' words wouldn't have been written in this way if gospel writers were concocting this story as a false prophecy.

Further, where might you get the idea that the city might be burned? It happened before, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in the sixth century. If Jesus announced that the city is going to be destroyed, it was going to get burned. That's the way they destroy cities in the ancient world.

An Interesting Aside: The Manuscript Evidence

The manuscripts of the gospels are in a certain sense historical documents, so we should treat them with at least as much respect as other historical sources.

If we were to count manuscripts of the New Testament, there are thousands, somewhere around 3000 manuscripts of different lengths. Some of them very fragmentary, but still, there are thousands of manuscripts. If you count the number of manuscripts of, say, Caesar's Gallic Wars, which is taken as history, we have about 12.

So, there are a tiny, tiny number of manuscripts for something that scholars say is historical, and a huge number of manuscripts for the New Testament, yet many doubt their historicity.

Multiple Solutions to the “Synoptic Problem”

Another reason scholars date the gospels after the year 70 is because of what's known as the **synoptic problem**. The synoptic problem is, simply put, how we understand the order of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Synoptic: syn (together) + optic (to look at)

There is a good deal of similar material in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There's wide agreement in the events and sayings, in the order of the events and the order of the sayings, even the wordings are very similar, so there's got to be some literary relationship, some borrowing. And this always gets complicated because we are relying on scribes to copy the gospels.

As mentioned earlier, one can tell a scribe has made a mistake and started writing out the Our Father that they know well from Matthew. There are some issues when you have a slight difference between Matthew, Mark and Luke. Is this just in this one particular manuscript? Is this in all the manuscripts?

The major positions on how the gospels are written are as follows:

The majority of scholars today think Mark wrote first, and that Matthew and Luke both borrowed from Mark. But scholars are also of the opinion that Luke could not have known Matthew because:

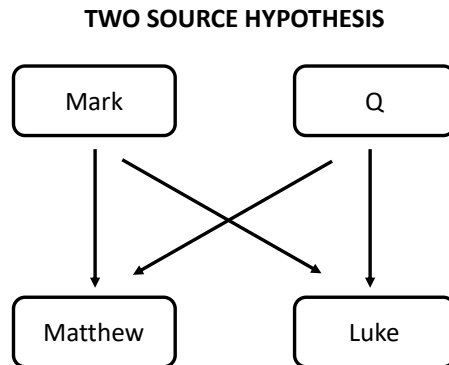
- Luke doesn't tell us about Magi.
- Luke doesn't tell us Jesus was called Emmanuel.
- Luke doesn't tell us about Joseph's dream.
- Luke doesn't tell us about Peter being given the keys of the kingdom, and many other things.

Some scholars say if Luke had known Matthew, he would put all that in his gospel, therefore Luke could not have known Matthew.

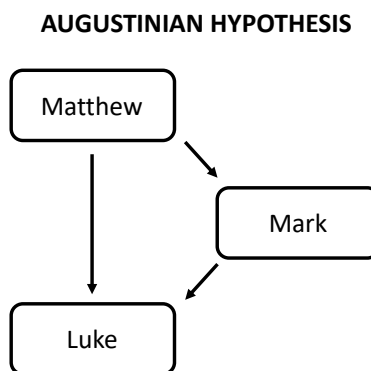
How do we explain the fact that there is so much more in Matthew and Luke that's not in Mark? How do we explain this if Luke didn't know Matthew? Scholars have come up with another source called the Q source, from the German term *quelle*, which means source. So, they've hypothesized that there is another document called Q which is lost to us.

Scholars take all the material that's in Matthew and Luke that's not in Mark and call it the Q source. And this is known as the **Two Source Hypothesis**, and this is still the majority view

among scholars; Catholics, Protestants, believing scholars, non-believing scholars. Mark wrote first, then Matthew and Luke copied from Mark, but since there's material in Matthew and Luke that's not in Mark, and since Luke could not have known Matthew, then there must be another document called Q.

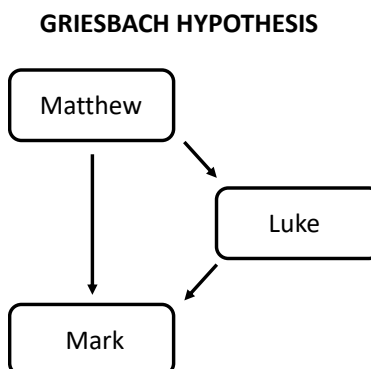


The more traditional view of Augustine is that Matthew wrote first, and that Mark copied from Matthew, and then Luke wrote, and Luke copied from Mark and Matthew.



Some scholars say this doesn't work because if Luke copied from Matthew, why are there no Magi?

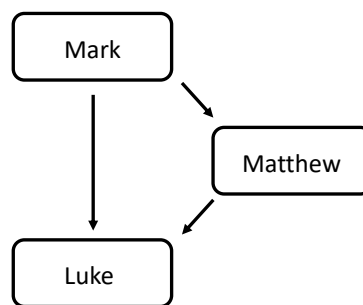
Another very popular view from a few years ago but that's waning in popularity is the Griesbach Hypothesis. This view holds that Matthew wrote first, and then Mark, but after Luke.



Supporters point to St. Clement's testimony where Clement says that Matthew and Luke (with the genealogies) were written first.

Another view growing rapidly in popularity is named after Austin Farrar, a British scholar. He held that Mark wrote first, and then Matthew copied from Mark, and then Luke copied from Matthew and Mark.

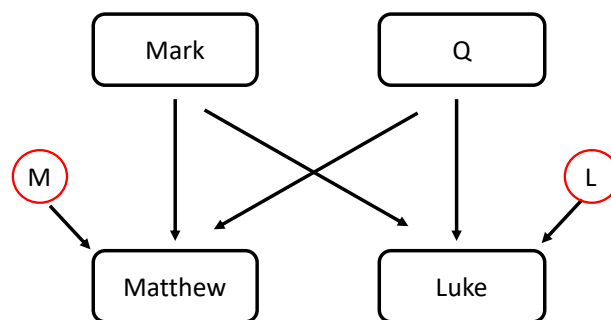
FARRER HYPOTHESIS



This can go on:



TWO SOURCE HYPOTHESIS



Scholars are still trying to figure out how is there information that is in Matthew and Luke that is similar, and this is the two-source theory again, but both Matthew and Luke had unique sources known only to them. These are designated as M and L in the figure.

The reason that Q was developed is because there's material in Matthew and Luke that's not in Mark. For example, Jesus goes out to the wilderness and Satan comes and tempts him three times. That's only in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. In Mark's gospel, Jesus goes out to the wilderness without any mention of the devil.

How do we explain this? We can't say Luke used Matthew because of the Magi and many other things. The Q hypothesis arises because Luke must have known the source Matthew used. He didn't know Matthew, but he had his source. So, Luke had Q, but then there's material in Luke that's not in any of the other gospels, for example, the story of the visitation. Where did Luke get that information? Scholars say that there's a special Luke source, and that's called the L source.

For the material in Matthew that's not in Luke, for example, the Christmas star that the Magi follow, is only in Matthew. Matthew got that from another source called M, which is the Matthew source.

Two Source Solution is NOT a Solid Historical Foundation

The major view is the two-source hypothesis. Scholars, when they date the gospels, say Q had to come first, then Mark had to write, then Matthew, then Luke, and this took a long time.

But there are many of scholars who are critical of the Q theory and the two-source hypothesis. Probably the leading Q skeptic (as he calls himself) is a British scholar, now at Duke University named Mark Goodacre. His main book is called *The Case Against Q*. Another book edited by him is called *Questioning Q*. It now has an impressive list of famous New Testament scholars, like N.T. Wright, who are saying that Goodacre is right, Q doesn't exist.

The biggest problem with Q is that we've never found Q. It's a complete hypothesis. There's no known document of Q. It is a total scholarly fabrication to make a their theory work.

You can buy the dictionary of Q, the concordance of Q, the critical edition of Q, but these are just all the passages that are only in Matthew and Luke put together. There's no actual Q document. A copy has never found it. It is still a hypothesis.

Also, there are places where it seems Luke did know Matthew. For example, when Jesus is being mocked by the soldiers with them saying to him (Matt. 26:88), "Prophecy, who was it that struck you?" In the Q theory, that's supposed to be only in Mark, but it's not.

There are a couple of lines in Luke and Matthew that are identical with the *exact* same word order. So Matthew and Luke didn't know each other, but they copied Mark and added these same words in the exact same way? This is unlikely. So, it makes it difficult for scholars to claim that there is no evidence that Luke knew Matthew.

Goodacre asks why there are no Magi in Luke. If Luke knew Matthew, he would have included Magi. But Luke, who also wrote Acts, shows that in the book of Acts that people are trying to buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter, and there is a villain in Acts named Simon Magus, and he's a Magi. So Goodacre claims that Luke would not want to tell positive stories about Magi and make them look good, because by the time Luke was writing, there were Magi who were setting themselves up as rivals to Peter. This is a good reason Luke may have left out the Magi in his story.

E. P. Sanders, one the most well-known New Testament scholars says:

Of all the solutions to the synoptic problem, this one, the two-source, which remains the dominant hypothesis, is the least satisfactory.

Father Joseph Fitzmyer (Catholic University of America) says:

The history of synoptic research reveals that the synoptic problem is practically insoluble.

We will never know for sure how all of these evangelists learn from each other and how the stories were circulated, so to use this as a basis for dating the gospels is problematic.

The Ending of Acts of the Apostles

Finally, there's the issue of the ending of Acts. Luke is the same author of Luke and Acts. Acts is volume two to the gospel of Luke.

At the end of Acts, Paul is still alive preaching in Rome. Now throughout the book of Acts, Paul is shown to be like Jesus, Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, Paul is handed over to the Sanhedrin, and the Sanhedrin hands him over to Roman authorities. Paul works various miracles like Jesus, healing the lame like Jesus does. Can it be that Paul was martyred and Luke left that out? It would be the climax of the story if Paul had died like Christ.

Yet Paul's death not mentioned, probably because he's still alive. If that's the case, and if Acts is written after Luke, and Peter and Paul we know die in the sixties, it means Luke has to be a lot earlier than a lot of scholars want to put it, namely after AD 70.

Adolf Von Harnack, a famously skeptical scholar, nonetheless recognized the force of this argument. He said:

The concluding verses of the Acts of the Apostles, taken in conjunction with the absence of any reference in the book to the result of the trial of St. Paul and to his martyrdom, makes it in the highest degree probable that the work was written at a time when St. Paul's trial in Rome had not yet come to an end.

For these reasons the opinion of a growing number of scholars is that the gospels are written before AD 70.

The Genre of the Gospels

This gets us to another question relating to historical reliability, and that is the question of the genre of the gospels.

What kind of book is the gospel? How are we meant to read the gospel? Genre is a crucial question. Genre makes meaning possible. An error in genre leads to confusion. Recall how Orson Wells famously adopted the genre of news journalism in a radio broadcast making it sound like the world was being invaded, a result that was disturbing apparently to many people because of an error in genre.

Same thing holds for scripture. The Song of Solomon, a beautiful book in the Bible, is not meant to be read as a historical account.

What kind of work is the gospel?

The Genre of the Gospels – Genre is what makes meaning possible

The Second Vatican Council document, *Dei Verbum*, one of the most important Church documents in the history of the Church for studying scripture and for understanding divine

revelation explains that it is absolutely imperative that readers understand what genre the various books represent.

So, for example, Song of Songs is poetry. We've got to understand that. So, what are the gospels? Scholars have debated this issue for a long time.

The form critics say the gospels belong to **no genre**. It's its own genre. Now all philosophers of language would say that is logically impossible. Readers must have some sense of what kind of work they're dealing with to interpret it properly.

Other form critics said that the gospels are **folk literature**. People told stories around campfires for a long time and then finally somebody wrote it all down. But that doesn't work because the gospels are far more sophisticated than folk literature.

Some said it's a **novel** or historical fiction. It's like *Pride and Prejudice*. But the problem is that the gospels are making historical claims. Luke says at the beginning that his information comes from eyewitnesses. Fiction doesn't begin by saying it comes from the eyewitnesses.

Some say it's Jewish Midrash, a genre of rabbinic literature containing Jewish Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, and compilations of homilies, but the gospels are more dissimilar to Midrash than they are similar.

A book was published a few years back by Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* He as well as others argued that the gospels were a form of **Greco-Roman biography**. Burridge initially wrote his book to debunk that theory, but he changed his mind in the course of his research for the book. Today, most important scholars say that his is the most influential book on the genre of the gospels written in the last year 30 years. For example:

This volume ought to end any legitimate denials of the canonical gospels biographical character. It has made its case. (Charles Talbert)

This book may produce a sea change in the problem of the genre of the gospels. (Christopher Tuckey)

There is little doubt that early Christian readers of the gospels did read them as biographies. (Graham Stanton)

Another book by Michael Licona, *What Are the Gospels?*, a very helpful book, looks at Greco-Roman biographies in comparison to the gospels.

Another book by Craig Keener, *Christobiography*, is a fascinating study of the gospels and ancient Greco-Roman biographies as well as the book by Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel*.

Much has been written on this, but suffice it to say Greco-Roman biographies have certain characteristics and the gospels all fall in line with them.

A Greco-Roman biography had to be written on a scroll. It can't take up two scrolls. It can't take up three scrolls. It takes up one full scroll. And that would be about 10,000 to 20,000 words, depending on the scroll size. The gospels are between 10,000 to 20,000 words.

The focus of a Greco-Roman biography is on a particular subject. They're not like the history of the Roman Empire. Suetonius wrote *The Lives of Caesars (The Twelve Caesars)* as individual biographies. The gospels have one particular subject, Jesus.

They don't give a comprehensive account of their subject's life. Today when we think of a biography – “and he was born in a log cabin.” That's not how ancient biographies work. They sometimes will tell you about the birth and childhood of a person, but if so, it's brief. The bulk of the work is on their public career with a relatively long treatment of their death. That's what is found in the gospels. Brief accounts of Jesus's childhood in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. The bulk of the gospels are Jesus's public ministry, and then a relatively long account Jesus's death. Compare the length of the passion narratives to the story of Jesus healing a leper. Healing the leper takes up four verses in Matthew's gospel where the passion narratives take up a couple of chapters.

Authorship. The author of a Greco-Roman biography is not a committee. One person writes the biography. The gospels are attributed to individuals. More on this later.

Who is the audience of a Greco-Roman biography? It's not just for a specific community, such as people who live in this one town. Greco-Roman biographies are meant to be widely circulated read by many different people. That's what we find in the gospels.

In Greco-Roman biography, the story does not necessarily follow historical chronology. They won't tell you, and then Caesar did this, and then the next day he did this, and the next day he did that. They might tell you all the things he did when he was in some city. Caesar might've gone to that city several different times, but for sake of organization the author lists all the things he did in that city. This is what we find in the gospels.

In the gospel of John, we know Jesus goes up to Jerusalem three times. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he only goes once. So, are the gospels unreliable? No, Augustine pointed out long ago that shouldn't create problems for us, because that's not the way the ancient writers were expected to write.

They were written always as part of a larger agenda. Why did Tacitus write? Why did Suetonius write? They wrote because they had larger agendas. Oftentimes political agendas.

Some people say gospels are biased and so they are not going to accept what the gospels say about Jesus. People want unbiased sources. If this were the case, we would know nothing about the ancient world because everything that's written about every single figure in the ancient world is written by someone who has a bias. They have an agenda. They are usually paid by the empire or by the political regime to chronicle the history. This is the case for all ancient writing. All ancient writers write with an agenda, and the gospels have an agenda.

John is very clear about his agenda. He's written these things that you may believe. Does that mean that John's not reliable? No, it means that he's writing as does every ancient biographer.

	Greco-Roman Biographies	The Gospels
Length:	10,000 – 20, 000 words (~ 1 scroll)	10,000 – 20, 000 words (~ 1 scroll)
Focus:	One particular subject (e.g., Caesar)	One particular subject – Jesus
Coverage:	Not a comprehensive account	Not a comprehensive account
Content:	Birth/childhood (if so, brief) Public career (bulk of the work) Death (relatively long)	Birth/childhood (brief, Matt 1-2, Luke 1-2) Public career (bulk of the work) Death (relatively long)
Authorship:	Individuals, not committees (e.g., Tacitus)	Attributed to individuals
Audience:	Not solely for a specific community	Not solely for specific communities
Chronology:	Material not always in historical sequence	Material not always in historical sequence
Purpose:	Written as part of a larger agenda	“Written so that you may believe (John 20:31)

Now the ancient Greco-Roman biography genre was understood to belong within the category of history. Biographies are not fictional. In ancient Greco-Roman literature, there are broadly three categories of literature:

- History (*historia*)
- Fiction (*plasma*)
- Myth (*mythos*)

Ancient writers understood what history meant. Cicero (1 Cent. B.C.) writes:

History denotes events that have happened.

Quintillion (late 1st cent. A.D.) writes:

We accept three kinds of narrative. Fable, found in tragedies and poems and remote not only from the truth but also from the appearance of truth; fiction made up by comedians as false but then it looks like the truth; and history, which contains the exposition of events that happened.

Greco-Roman biographies were understood as *historia*, history.

When we're confronted with the gospels, we're not being told stories about things that Jesus might have done, made up stories. They make historical claims by virtue of their genre

Greco-Roman biographies were often written as memoirs of eyewitnesses.

Recall what Justin Martyr said:

We gather together to read the memoirs of the apostles.

The early Christians understood the gospels as memoirs, as Greco-Roman biography.

The implications of the genre of the gospels is huge. The gospels are historical narratives. They're meant to be seen as historical.

They're not like modern biographies. They're not going to give us everything in exact historical order.

In ancient Greek manuscripts, there are no quotation marks. When we see them in the gospels, we think that the gospels are giving us a video recorded message. As though they are *exactly* the words that Jesus said. No one in the ancient world thought that.

For example, at the Last Supper, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says,

“This is my blood of the covenant.”

In Luke's gospel and in first Corinthians, Jesus says,

“This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.”

So, are the gospels unreliable? They said different things, so we can't believe anything that they say. But it's the same basic idea. That's the way ancient writers wrote. They didn't think that they had to give you the exact words that someone spoke. They would give you an approximation, or as Augustine would say, they give you the sense of what Jesus taught.

When we read the gospels, we're going to see slight differences in phrases and historical order of events. We're also going to see that the gospels focus on Jesus's public life. Jesus lived for about 30 years in a quiet life with Joseph and Mary. We don't read anything about that in the gospels. Why is that? Is it because gospel writers were making everything up? No, it's because they're writing Greco-Roman biography. They weren't expected to tell long extended stories about Jesus' childhood.

The evangelists chief concern is to convey Jesus's teaching. That's what Greco-Roman authors, ancient biographers, did. They had to tell you what this famous person taught. The gospels are not meant to give the views of the early Church on some issue. They are meant to tell what Jesus taught.

Greco-Roman biographies were written for a particular setting.

In the ancient world, well-to-do people, when they would get together with friends for dinner, would usually need some form of entertainment after dinner. That was the standard practice in the ancient world. What they would often do is after the dinner is read a Greco-Roman biography.

The gospels are meant to be read within the context of a meal.

The gospels, from the beginning, are liturgical documents. The gospels are written to be read when the Church gathered to celebrate the Eucharist, because they're Greco-Roman biographies.

So, when reading the gospels, attention should be paid to little details that might stand out.

When reading, in a Eucharistic setting, that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Bethlehem means House of Bread. They lay Jesus in a manger, which is a feeding trough, because there was no room for him, in our English translation it says in the inn. It's a terrible translation. The word that's literally translated *inn* is the same word that's used for the upper room. What Jesus will do in the upper room is anticipated in what he does in Bethlehem as a child when he's put where the food goes. And when there is room for him in the upper room, he'll take the bread and he'll say, "This is my body."

Unfortunately, many Christians today as well as many scholars today, do not read the gospels as part of a Eucharistic celebration and so miss these connections.

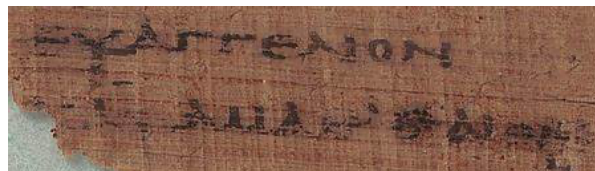
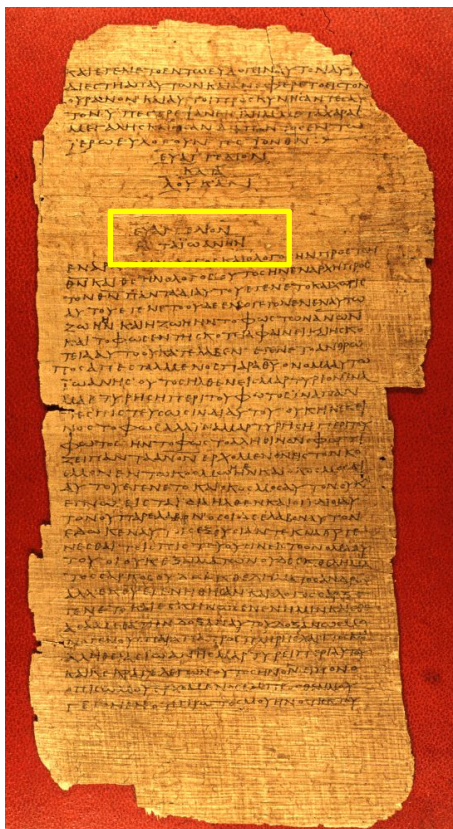
For example, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it to the disciples, and the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish takes place.

The next time Jesus takes bread, breaks it, blesses it, and gives it, is in the upper room – and again a miracle takes place, the miracle of "This is my body."

Rethinking Apostolic Origin

This leads us to think about the apostolic origin of the gospels. The claim is often made that the gospel titles were added later.

Here is the image of a gospel manuscript called papyrus 75. It's one of the earliest manuscripts Matthew's gospel. It says, EYAYEION MATΘAIOΣ, The Gospel According to Matthew.



We don't have any ancient manuscripts of the gospels that have no title. All of the archeological evidence supports the idea that the titles were always part of the manuscripts.

There is not a shred of manuscript evidence that the titles were added later.

Simon Gathercole¹, a New Testament scholar, has gone through all the manuscripts and wrote an extensive article published in a German New Testament studies journal. If you can read German, you can look it up. He's done the research.

If anybody ever tells you the gospels were circulated without the titles, you can tell them, have you ever studied the manuscript evidence? Because there is not a shred of manuscript evidence to support that claim. It's something one hears quite often, but that doesn't make it true.

Here's another fun one. This is the gospel according to John and one can see the title at the top. The title was not added later.



Suppose the gospel titles were added later. Suppose the gospels did circulate without the titles and were originally anonymous. How did *everyone, all over the world*, come to associate them with the same four people?

Why don't we have manuscripts that say that the gospel of Matthew is actually the gospel according to James, or the gospel according to Andrew? Why are all the manuscripts in agreement? All of them include the name of the apostle or author.

They sometimes say κατά, according to, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. If the titles were added later, how did they all get in agreement so fast? Why aren't there disagreements in the manuscripts about this?

Here's an even stronger argument. Why these people?

¹ Simon J. Gathercole, "The Titles of the Gospels in the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104 (2013): 33–76;

- The most Jewish of the four gospels is Matthew. Let's say that someone writes a very Jewish gospel so they could convince the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Now they need to come up with an apostle who's going to convince those Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Who should it be? Let's pick someone that all the Jews are going to like a lot. Let's pick a tax collector. I don't think so. That's the last person that you would have picked. Why not pick Peter? If someone is just making up names at this point, how does it come up to be Matthew?
- How about the second gospel? It's by Mark. Who the h--l is Mark? Was he one of the twelve? No, he was Peter's secretary. Then why not call it the gospel according to Peter?
- For the third one, are we going to convince everybody by naming it after someone who followed Paul, who wasn't even one of the 12 apostles?
- And the last one, the gospel of John. That's a good name, but he's never called John once in the whole story. If someone is going to make up the gospel name, wouldn't they try to tout it a bit more?

The heretical Gnostics gospels, written much later, do extensive namedropping.

Also interesting is that the gospels never address the big, burning debates in the early Church, like if Gentiles need to be circumcised. If you're just making up stories about what Jesus said, why did no one come up with the story that Jesus said, "And when Gentiles become Christians, they don't need to be circumcised." That would have been really helpful, because in the book of Acts, a huge debate over whether Gentiles had to be circumcised. Notice the restraint of the gospel writers - they never mention that. It would have been so easy to make that up, but they never do, because they're telling us what Jesus actually taught and they're being restrained and *not addressing* issues that otherwise would've been really helpful.

Jesus also says things that are quite surprising. In Matthew, Jesus says

Go nowhere among the Gentiles but go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.

And when a Gentile, a Canaanite woman, wants Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus calls her a dog.

"Hey, Gentiles, we really love you, here, read this gospel."

How does the gospel end? Jesus says,

Go and make disciples of all nations.

Maybe it would've been well helpful if Jesus didn't call the Gentiles dogs. But it's in there because he really said that, even though it would have been expedient to omit it.

Why are the gospels so anonymous in their content? Why doesn't Matthew ever come out and say, and by the way, that story about the tax collector, that was me?

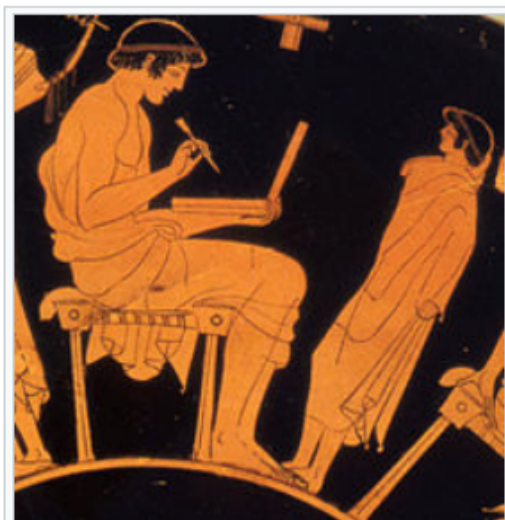
Why doesn't John come out and say, I am the apostle John, the son of Zebedee?

The gospels really try to sound a lot like 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, Judges. The gospel writers believe they're writing the scriptures of the new covenant.

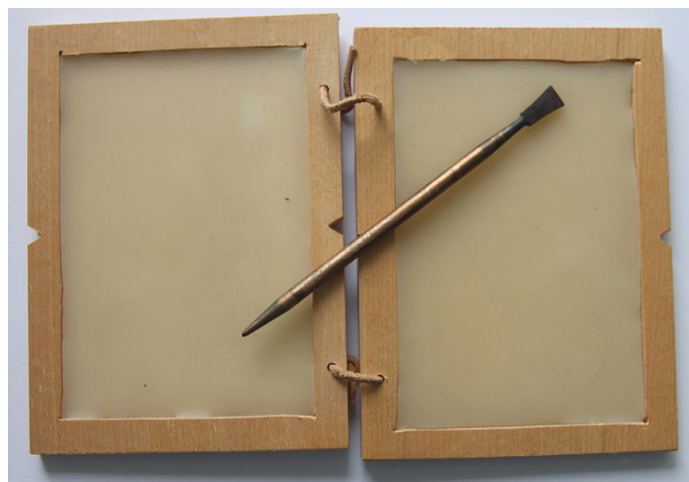
Does the author of 1 Kings ever come out and say, "I am Jeremiah, the author of these words"? No, those books are all told in an anonymous style. Why are the gospels anonymous? Because nobody knew who wrote them? No, to the contrary, everybody knew who wrote them. Why don't the authors ever identify themselves explicitly? Because they're writing scripture, and that's the way Jewish scripture reads.

So, who wrote the gospel?

As I said that before, the gospel writers would sometimes keep notes using a wax tablet.



Writing with stylus and folding wax tablet. painter, Douris, ca 500 BC (Berlin).



Wax tablet and a Roman stylus.

One would write with a stylus on a wax tablet. This might be what disciples did when they sat around Jesus when he taught. So, who's is going to take the notes? Fishermen, fishermen, fishermen, fishermen, fishermen, tax collector. It's obvious once you understand Matthew is a tax collector. One of the things he had to do was keep records. It makes sense that Matthew would be one of the people who would have been keeping notes. Also, in the ancient world, authors like Paul would use amanuenses. Paul wouldn't have had a pen in his hand when they he wrote his letters. It's one thing to keeps shorthand notes, but to write a whole work required sophistication. You had to write quite small. You had to have the right handwriting. You had to know how to use the stylus correctly. So, you would hire somebody with those skills.

Paul does that. In Romans 16:22 we read:

I, Tertius, the writer of this letter greets you.

It's Paul's letter, but someone wrote it down for him. It's likely the same thing would have happened in the gospels.

The early Church Fathers say that Matthew wrote Matthew and believed Matthew wrote in Hebrew. Many used to disagree on this, but today, scholars are beginning to flip-flop. Craig Keener was an atheist, and he became a Christian studying Greco-Roman literature and the origins of Christianity. Today he is a really prolific Bible scholar. He and others now say that the best explanation is Matthew wrote Matthew.

There is one complication here we want to be aware of. That is the early Church Fathers tell us that Matthew wrote in Hebrew. Today, the only gospel of Matthew we have is in Greek.

Early Church Fathers such as Jerome and Origen tell us that there was a Hebrew Matthew. Irenaeus and others also talked about a Hebrew Matthew. When St. Jerome was having a hard time translating a verse in Matthew's gospel from Greek into Latin, he claims he went and looked at Hebrew Matthew. He had a copy of it – or something.

Origen and Jerome give quotations from Hebrew Matthew. What's interesting is there are things in Hebrew Matthew that are clearly not in Greek Matthew. For example, in Hebrew Matthew Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is his mother. This is strange, but it's also a clue.

While Matthew probably wrote something in Hebrew, we don't know exactly what it was, and we don't know if it's what Jerome had. So, here is a possible sequence of events:

- Matthew wrote first.
- Matthew wrote in Hebrew, but this has been lost.
- The Hebrew Matthew seems to differ from Greek Matthew.
- Could Matthew have translated his own gospel from Hebrew into Greek using Mark's gospel? Absolutely.

Peter is the one preaching in Mark's gospel. Did the person who wrote Greek Matthew respect Peter? Is there anything in the gospel of Matthew that might suggest that Peter is important? Yes, when Jesus says to him,

“I'll give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.”

There's a lot of unanswered questions here. Here is one possible theory:

There was a Hebrew Matthew that seemed to evolve. We also know that heretics ended up using a Hebrew gospel, and they probably added material to it. We don't know if everything that Jerome had in his Hebrew Matthew is from the original Hebrew Matthew, or if that's material that heretics eventually added to it. But we do know that Greek Matthew loved Peter and respected Peter, and so there's good reason to believe that when Hebrew Matthew was translated into Greek, whoever did that paid close attention to Mark's gospel because it's the preaching of Peter.

To further support this, recall Josephus, who we previously mentioned, originally wrote his history in Hebrew and later translated into into Greek. This seems to have happened with the

gospel of Matthew. Josephus was a Hebrew writer in a Greek world, and he gets his thoughts out first in Hebrew and then he wants to share them, but most people coming into the Church by the end of the first century in Rome and other places don't speak Hebrew.

If Josephus wants Gentiles to read his works it has to be translated into the lingua franca of the ancient world, which is Greek. So, the gospels are intended to be read by a wide group of people. So, Matthew would have wanted his work translated into Greek.

It's even possible that Matthew translated it himself after Mark had written Peter's gospel, and because Matthew loved Peter there is special deference to the Petrine gospel. It also explains why Matthew and Mark sound so similar, but all this is just a hypothesis.

None of this is *de fide* teaching of the Catholic Church.

The Fourth Gospel

When was the fourth gospel written? In the early part of the 20th century, scholars were beginning to say the gospel of John written in the late second century, long after Jesus, and they would compare the gospel of John with Gnostic literature, written much later, and they'd conclude that John is obviously from a later period. Then papyrus 52 (A.D. 125) was discovered, a shocking discovery. It was recently purchased by the Vatican, and now it has a new name, the Rylands Papyrus.



Papyrus 52 is dated to perhaps as early as A.D. 125, and that was shocking. One of the reasons scholars will say the gospels all have to be late is because it took a long time for a work to be circulated. If Papyrus 52 is dated to 125, which is scholars generally agree with, then it had to be written in the first century. The papyrus was found in Egypt, but it wasn't written in Egypt. It was written elsewhere and had to have sufficient time for it to be copied and widely circulated all the way down to Egypt. Now virtually all scholars will almost unanimously say the gospel of John is written sometime near the end of the first century between the 90s and the year 100.

This actually fits well with the early Church Fathers, say that the gospel of John is the last of the gospels written, and they generally agree that John wrote it at the end of his life. We know it's unlikely to have been written before A.D. 66 because in John 21, Jesus talks about what will happen to Peter. John says,

He said this to him to indicate the way he would die.

It seems that the author knows how Peter died and then Jesus's words were fulfilled. Peter dies in about 62 to 66, somewhere in there, but it's probably after 66. There are scholars that still want to date John early, but the vast majority of scholars date John to about 90 to 100.

Unanimous Church Testimony on the Apostle John

As you would expect, there are scholars who believe that the title has been added later and that the gospel was circulated anonymously.

The unanimous testimony of the early Church is that the fourth gospel is written by the apostle John.

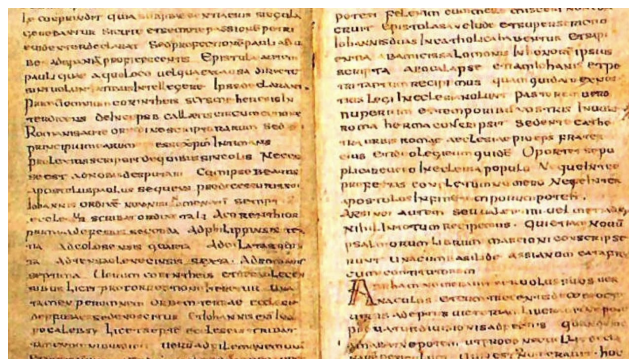
Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, the place where John the apostle, according to tradition, spent some time, wrote a letter to Pope Victor I in c. A.D. 190 and says:

For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the last day at the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and shall seek out all the saints. Among these John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and being a priest wore the sacerdotal plate.

John was a priest, and he wore priestly vestments.

He also sleeps at Ephesus.

This is the Muratorian fragment. It's dated somewhere mid second century, perhaps a bit later. In it we read:



The fourth of the gospels is that of John, one of the disciples. To his fellow disciples and bishops who had been urging him to write, he said fast with me from today to three days, and what will be revealed to each one let us tell it to one another. In the same night it was revealed to Andrew, one of the apostles, that John should write down all things in his own name while all of them should review it.

So, according to the Muratorian Canon, all the apostles would review what John wrote. This is another ancient testimony that it was the apostle John who wrote it.

Does this work with what we see in the gospel? John 1:14 says:

And the word became flesh and dwelt among **us**. **We** have beheld his glory.

That sounds like the Muratorian fragment. John wrote everything in his name, but the other apostles who were still alive looked at it and signed off on it.

John 19 is also interesting. It refers to Jesus being pierced on the cross:

He who saw it has borne witness. His testimony is true and he knows that he tells the truth that you may also believe.

So John's gospel is written on the basis of eyewitness testimony. Now, many people point something out that the author doesn't say, *I bore witness to this. I am telling the truth.* The author says *he*, and on the basis of this, some people claim that maybe the fourth gospel is written on the basis of the Apostle's testimony, but somebody else wrote it down. What about this?

Well, in another important scene from John 21:18-23, Peter and the apostles go fishing. Jesus appears to them. They realize that it's Jesus on the shore. Peter jumps into the water swims to be with Jesus. Jesus asks him three times,

"Do you love me?"

Then Jesus says to Peter:

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.)

Then the other apostles show up and we read:

Peter turned and saw following them **the disciple whom Jesus loved**, who had lain close to his breast at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?"

This is a very important verse. Peter sees the beloved disciple.

What has just happened? Jesus just prophesied how Peter will die. Right after this, Peter looks at the beloved disciple and says:

When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about this man?"

Jesus said to him,

"If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!"

So, Peter asks Jesus, is this guy going to die too? How is it going to happen?

And Jesus says, if he lives until the second coming, what's that to you? Just follow me.

And then the saying spread abroad among the brethren that this disciple was not to die.

One can get some inside information what the apostles were saying amongst themselves, like “This disciple is not going to die.”

Yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but if it is my will that he remained until I come what is that to you?

Verse 24 reads:

This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things, and **who has written these things**; and we know that his testimony is true.

So, the witness of the fourth gospel is the beloved disciple. That's clear in John 21. Look at the words:

... and who has written these things ...

It's *very* important. The claim of John 21 is not just that the gospel is based on things John said, but that he's the actual author of the gospel.

John Fills Out the Synoptic Accounts

So, who is this author? It is the beloved disciple, John, but how do we know that? The fideist answer is “Because St. Irenaeus said so!” But let's work through the text carefully. First, the fourth gospel fills in details that are left unstated by the other gospels.

For example, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem during his public ministry only one time. Yet there are hints, in Matthew and Luke in particular, that Jesus goes up more frequently than that (Matt 4:25; Luke 22:39). For example, in Luke 22 it says that Jesus went to the Mount of Olives *as was his custom*. This seems to imply Jesus went up to Jerusalem multiple times for Passover (as required for Jews who could) and regularly went to the Mount of Olives after that.

- In John, Philip and Andrew are the ones named at the feeding of the multitude. They're the ones that bring the bread and the fish to Jesus. It doesn't say in the synoptic gospels who brings the food to Jesus (6:7-8).
- In John 12, we read that the woman who anoints Jesus is named Mary, and that Mary is Lazarus' sister (12:3). We don't read about that in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- In the story of the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus is arrested in the garden, we read in the other gospels about how Peter sliced off the high priest's servant ear and Jesus healed him. John tells us that the name of the high priest's servant was Malchus. And John is the one who says it was Peter who did that (18:10).

It seems to many scholars that John expected his audience to have read Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, there's a scene after Jesus is preaching in the temple, some people say, in John 7, “Could he be the Messiah?” And somebody says, “The Messiah has to be born from Bethlehem, so he can't be the Messiah.” Well, we know he was born in Bethlehem. How do

we know that? John doesn't tell us that. That only works if John knows that you've read the other gospels. So it seems as though John is filling in details.

John Has Detailed Knowledge of Jewish Culture and Geography

John, in the fourth gospel, has this detailed knowledge, very explicit and very subtle, of the significance of Jewish culture and geography.

- Purification rites (2:6)
 - When Jesus is at the wedding feast at Cana, he works a miracle because of the jars that were there for the purification rites.
- Libation ritual at the feast of tabernacles (7:37)
 - The Feast of Tabernacles involves these certain water rituals in the temple, which seemed to be alluded to in John's story.
- Pollution regulations regarding the Passover (18:28; 19:31-42)
 - There are pollution regulations regarding Passover. You have to wash before you go up to Jerusalem, and John is aware of that.
- Attention to Feasts in general

It's the major festivals that drive the narrative in the gospel of John. All the major turning points are around these major Jewish feasts and what happens on the feast.

For example, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem during the feast of Tabernacles and he says:

I am the light of the world.

What do Jews do the feast of Tabernacles? They light all the menorahs, the candelabra, in the temple, and it's said you could see it from everywhere it was so bright. John knows the rituals in the temple, and he relates it as the backdrop to what Jesus is doing, but it's never stated explicitly. If you know the Jewish source and the Jewish feasts, on reading the words of Jesus in John it all comes together. John is very sophisticated in his use of this Jewish imagery.

In John 18, Peter is outside the high priest's courtyard. It says that the beloved disciple went to the door. We haven't established that the beloved disciple is John yet, but let's be methodical. It says the beloved disciple went to the gate and spoke to the high priest's servant, and she knew him, and he got in and then he let Peter in the high priest's courtyard. Recall Polycrates said that John was a priest. How did John know the high priest's servant? In fact, John knows the priest's discussions. He tells us what the high priests were saying amongst themselves. How can he know this? So, who is the author of the fourth gospel? It's somebody who really knows ancient Judaism, a Jewish follower of Jesus.

John Has Geographical Details Not in Other Gospels

There are also geographical details in the fourth gospel that have the kind of precision you don't see in the other gospels.

- John is aware that there are two cities named Bethany (1:28; 12:1). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it talks about Bethany but doesn't identify which one. John clarifies which one he's talking about.
- Jesus is baptizing in Aenon near Salim (3:23). Not just on the other side of the Jordan. John very clear about where he is in the region.
- Cana in Galilee – John very specific about which Cana (2:1; 4:46; 21:2).
- He talks about the Sea of Galilee, but he calls it Tiberius, which was another name used for the Sea of Galilee (6:1; 21:1).
- He talks about Sychar near Shechem (4:5).
- He talks about Mount Gerizim, and he knows that there's a well near Mount Gerizim (4:12).
- He knows that Ephraim is “near the wilderness” (11:54).



Of particular interest is John talks about the Pool of Siloam (9:4). The gospel of John is the only ancient work that talks about a pool at Siloam. And Siloam, as John says, means “sent”. So, in the story, what happens in John 9, a blind man is washed in the pool of Siloam. So, he's washed in the sent. Jesus says he is the one that the Father sends.

In the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, scholars claim John doesn't know what he's talking about. Siloam/sent is just theological poetry because there was no pool there. It's just theological imagery of baptism. You're washed in the pool of the sent. Well, in the early 2000s, archeologists actually uncovered the ancient the Pool of Siloam, and John now looks really good on history.

The Society of Biblical Literature is the largest guild of biblical scholars, a professional society of biblical scholars who meet once a year. There was time when people would say, “John just made up everything. You can't trust him.” Now there's a whole movement in Society of Biblical Literature called *John, Jesus, and History*. A large part of what they do is look at new archeological discoveries in Jerusalem and John keeps looking better and better.

“The Beloved Disciple” as John

What about the beloved disciple being John? Why do we think that? Again, some people say that it's made up.

First, in John 21, the beloved disciple is named as the author, but many scholars think John 21 was a chapter that was added later to the gospel because chapter 20 seems to end the gospel.

There's no manuscript evidence that it was ever added to the gospel.

And in fact, there are frequently epilogues in ancient works, so this is not uncommon to have a conclusion followed by an epilogue.

So again, some scholars say that the beloved disciple is not the apostle John.

- Some think it's another John in the early Church known as the Presbyter John or the elder John. We mentioned him earlier when discussing Papias.
- Some think that the author is actually Lazarus, because in John 11:3 Lazarus is called "*the one whom you love*, Lazarus, has died." So, the beloved disciple is Lazarus, not John apostle.
- Some suggest it's Thomas.
- Some suggest it's Andrew.
- Some have said it's Mary Magdalene.
- Some suggest it's the rich young man who comes to Jesus in Mark's gospel because it says, "Jesus looked at him and loved." Therefore, he must be the beloved disciple.

These are all wildly speculative and ignore the external evidence.

For example, one thing we do know is that the beloved disciple is one of the twelve. He's there at the Last Supper, where Jesus speaks of the twelve as those that he has chosen. See John 13:18; 6:70.

In John 13, those who are with him are those whom he has chosen, the Twelve. He is one of the seven mentioned in John 21:1-2, where John, son of Zebedee is among them:

After this, Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberius and he revealed himself in this way. Simon Peter, Thomas, called the twin, Nathaniel of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together.

So, we know the beloved disciple cannot be Lazarus or Mary Magdalene or the rich young ruler or somebody like that because it's one of the twelve apostles. Secondly, in John 21, the beloved disciple is there, the one who leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper.

We know it can't be Simon Peter because it's the beloved disciple who lets Simon Peter into the high priest courtyard.

We know that Jesus had a circle of three disciples that were especially close to him, Peter James and John, and it would make sense that the beloved disciple be one of those three.

They're the only ones present for many of Jesus' miracles. Jesus leaves the others outside and he only takes these three when he performs the healing at the ruler's house, at the Mount of Transfiguration, and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Also, throughout the gospel of John, we don't have frequent references to James and John. The absence of James and John, sons of Zebedee, is striking. We have the beloved disciple instead of James and John.

- The clincher is, throughout the gospel of John, the beloved disciple is often paired with Peter. Who lets Peter in at the high priest courtyard? The beloved disciple.
- Who runs to the tomb with Peter on Easter Sunday? The beloved disciple.

- Who is it that goes to prepare the upper room for Jesus for Passover? Only two disciples go together to prepare the lamb and prepare the upper room. Peter and John.
- Throughout the New Testament, Peter's constant companion is John, the son of Zebedee.
- In Acts 3, two apostles go up to the temple to pray together. All the twelve are presumably friends, but only two of them go up together, Peter and John. When the apostles are arrested and they have to stand before the Sanhedrin in Acts, two apostles step forward and speak for all the apostles, Peter and John.
- When the apostles find out that Samaritans have been baptized but haven't yet received the Holy Spirit because they haven't received the laying on of hands, two apostles go together to the Samaritans, Peter and John.

So over and over and over again it's Peter and John. In the gospel of John, it's Peter and the beloved disciple. The beloved disciple has to be one of the twelve. He has to be one of the seven, and among the seven, one of the two sons of Zebedee. That leaves Peter, James and John. It's clearly not Peter. James is the first apostle to die according to Acts, so he's not around to write the fourth gospel. So, by process of elimination, the most likely author is John. And that's why we call it the gospel according to John.

Presbyter John Theory

One other theory already mentioned that has ancient roots is the Presbyter John theory.

So Papias talks about another John, and some scholars believe that the early Christians got the two Johns confused. The author was the Presbyter John, but they confused him with the apostle John, and that's why in the gospel of John, when we talk about the testimony we read, "His testimony is true. He has seen it." He's speaking in the third person. You might start feeling a little uncomfortable if I started speaking in the third person about myself. That's because in our culture, we don't do that. We don't use the third person to refer to ourselves. That's not the way it was in the first century.

First of all, we know John 21:24 says that the gospel, the text, is actually written **by** the disciple who Jesus loved. It doesn't work that it's this other John who took the testimony of the apostle John. It's not what John 21:24 says.

Secondly, the fact that Papias mentions the apostle John and then Presbyter John doesn't mean that there are two Johns. It could be the same John. He's referring to the fact that the apostles are the elders versus those elders who still living. The writings of Presbyter John are appended to this document for you to read if you so wish.

Eusebius claims they are two separate people. Papias never says that they're two separate people. And Papias never says that the Presbyter John is a separate person who wrote the gospel according to John.

The use of the third person is strange to us, but that's how Paul talks about himself. Josephus talks about himself that way. So, although it's strange to us, it wasn't strange then, and it's

what scholars refer to as *illeism*², referring to yourself in the third person, and is common in ancient Greco-Roman literature.

Other Objections

Other objections to apostolic authorship is that nobody mentions the gospel of John until the second century. Maybe it's because the gospel of John was written by John at the end of his life in the nineties. Maybe it's because the gospel John started to be used by the Gnostics, which does seem to be the case. So maybe you could understand why the orthodox Christians might be a little nervous about using the gospel of John.

Irenaeus says he was a hearer of Polycarp, and Polycarp knew John. So, Irenaeus is really interesting because he tells us that the gospel is written by the apostle John, and Irenaeus knew somebody who knew John, and scholars say that it's unlikely that Irenaeus is simply guessing when he says that.

Some say other stories from the Synoptics about John the son of Zebedee isn't in the fourth gospel. But there are stories in the fourth gospel about the son of Zebedee that are in the Synoptic gospels. Why might the author leave such material out? Maybe because he had so much material to work with because he was the actual apostle.

Some say, John couldn't have written this because he didn't know Greek. That's not true. As a Galilean he spoke Greek as well as Aramaic. It's not a problem that a Greek gospel is attributed to a Galilean.

This is especially the case if he was a priest, if John was a priest, he probably would have had some literacy. Even so, he still would have used a scribe. Paul could read, but Paul still used Tertius to write his letters. So, no matter what, John the apostle, even if he could read and write, he still would've had somebody else help him write the gospel.

People point to tensions in the text, but these tensions in the text could mean that the gospel isn't polished, like one written by a fisherman.

People say it's too late to be written by John. As we already saw, it was probably written in the nineties. If John is a mid in his mid-teens in about A.D. 27, he would be in his early eighties or in his mid-nineties, which is old, but not impossible. There were other people who lived that long. Cato the Elder, a famous writer, served with undiminished memory in the Senate in Rome until A.D. 86. The philosopher Priscus trained students past the age of 90. Isocrates wrote a famous work at the age of 94. So, it would be notable, but it wouldn't be impossible.

We conclude that the gospels are probably written in the first century. They are probably written by people who have access to eyewitness testimony or themselves are eyewitnesses.

² **Illeism** (from Latin *ille* meaning "he, that") is the act of referring to oneself in the third person instead of first person. It is sometimes used in literature as a stylistic device. In real-life usage, **illeism** can reflect a number of different stylistic intentions or involuntary circumstances.

The gospels are reliable Greco-Roman biographies that are meant to be read within the context of the Church's liturgy.

Next, we examine the structure of the gospels in greater detail.

Appendix: Eusebius: Papias on the “Presbyter John”

[Papias] says: “But I shall not hesitate also to put down for you along with my interpretations whatsoever things I have at any time learned carefully from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those that speak much, but in those that teach the truth; not in those that relate strange commandments, but in those that deliver the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and springing from the truth itself. If, then, any one came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice.”

It is worthwhile observing here that the name John is twice enumerated by him. The first one he mentions in connection with Peter and James and Matthew and the rest of the apostles, clearly meaning the evangelist; but the other John he mentions after an interval, and places him among others outside of the number of the apostles, putting Aristion before him, and he distinctly calls him a presbyter. This shows that the statement of those is true, who say that there were two persons in Asia that bore the same name, and that there were two tombs in Ephesus, each of which, even to the present day, is called John's. It is important to notice this. For it is probable that it was the second, if one is not willing to admit that it was the first that saw the Revelation, which is ascribed by name to John. And Papias, of whom we are now speaking, confesses that he received the words of the apostles from those that followed them, but says that he was himself a hearer of Aristion and the presbyter John. At least he mentions them frequently by name, and gives their traditions in his writings. These things we hope, have not been uselessly adduced by us. (Eusebius, E.H., 3.39.3–7; NPNF2, 1:17–72)