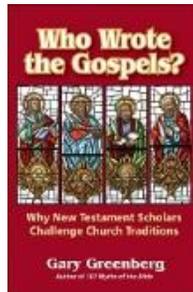


(Editorial Note: The following excerpt from *Who Wrote the Gospels?* is from a pre-publication version of the text and may contain some typos and some minor changes from the final printed version.)



[Buy this book from Amazon](#)

Chapter 1. The Problem of Gospel Authorship

Asking who wrote the four canonical Gospels may seem like an odd question. According to Church tradition the four authors were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This tradition further holds that Matthew and John were two of the Twelve Apostles, Mark was a secretary to the Apostle Peter and Luke was a companion of the Apostle Paul. All in all this Church tradition boasts quite a stellar cast of writers with a good claim to a reasonable amount of historical credibility, authors who were either eyewitnesses or intimate with eyewitnesses to the mission of Jesus and its aftermath. Most New Testament historians, however, question these identifications, arguing on the basis of historical evidence and logical assumptions arising from literary analysis of the texts that none of the four authors were intimates of either Jesus or of the Apostles.¹

In this book we will look at a number of the reasons why New Testament historians reject the Church traditions about the Gospel authors. As we will see below, the authors of each of the Gospels were anonymous and for the first couple of centuries of Christianity the identities of the authors were a mystery. It is only towards the end of the second century that Christian writers began to assign the traditional names to the authors and the evidence for such determinations was shaky at best. As early Christian scholars began to repeat the speculations of other Christian scholars the guesses became traditions and the traditions became accepted as fact.

While the sparseness of the evidence prevents us from connecting the Gospel authors with any particular historical individuals, there is enough evidence such that we can reject the idea that the traditional identifications carry any historical weight. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not write the Gospels, at least not the Matthew, Mark, Luke and John traditionally associated with the Gospels. Despite this conclusion, the traditional identities are so tightly woven into or cultural context and into all of our literature that it is nearly impossible to talk intelligently about the Gospels without using the names of the traditional authors. So for purposes of convenience, I will frequently refer to the authors as Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, or to the Gospels associated with those names. That should not be taken to mean that I accept those names as the proper identities. It is just a simple convention to avoid convoluted phrasing to refer to the authors or to the Gospels associated with those names.

In addition to the identity of a Gospel author, we are also concerned with other questions related to authorship. A major concern is the matter of sources. Did the author create his own text or did he copy large parts of his work from someone else, tinkering around the edges for literary or theological reason and perhaps rearranging the material for similar reasons? We also want to know if the Gospels as we have them are the Gospels as they were written. Did scribes along the way make significant changes to the text, adding to, deleting from, or rearranging the material as preserved in the copy the scribe worked from, and were those changes eventually incorporated into the Gospels as if they were part of the original Gospel text?

In scholarly circles almost all modern New Testament scholars believe that Mark was the first Gospel to be written and that the authors of both Matthew and Luke copied most of Mark into their own manuscripts, occasionally modifying or rearranging Mark's work for their own editorial purposes. Almost all such scholars also believe that Matthew and Luke, writing independently of each other, both copied another large amount of material from a yet-to-be-discovered written source that scholars nicknamed "Q", from the German word quelle, meaning source. These two sources make up the bulk of Matthew and Luke. In Chapter Two we will look at some of the evidence that explains why scholars believe Matthew and Luke copied so much from Mark and Q.

While scholars are quite confident about Matthew and Luke copying from Mark, they are deeply divided over the question of whether the author of John relied in any significant way on the other three Gospels. While they almost all believe that John had some written sources for some of his work, they are probably split down the middle as to whether the author of John knew any of the other Gospels, especially Mark. On a separate matter, most Johannine scholars believe that John is not the sole work of a single author. While they credit the vast bulk of his Gospel to an original author, they believe several portions of John were added at a later time, mostly by someone they refer to as the Redactor, believed to have been a devoted follower of the author. In Chapter Three we will look at some of the evidence that divides scholars over the matter of John's use of the other Gospels. We'll also look at some of the evidence for the use of earlier written sources as well as the idea that a Redactor made changes to John's Gospel. We will also look at evidence that John and Luke shared a common Passion source that may not have been known to Mark.

In Chapter Four I will set forth my own arguments in support of the idea that John made use of a written source for his Passion account and made changes to his source material. We will also look at reasons to believe Luke also had access to a similar source. We will also explore the question of whether or not Mark knew this written source and made his own modifications.

A key problem in Gospel studies (and New Testament studies in general) is that we have no original copies of any book in the New Testament. Our earliest evidence for any textual content in the Christian scriptures dates only to the first half of the second century (a more precise date is difficult to determine) and consists of just a couple of verses from the Gospel of John.² For the rest of the second century we have only a handful of Gospel fragments.³ All-in-all, however, from the second to seventeenth centuries, we have over 3000 handwritten Greek manuscripts that contain, in whole or part, the New Testament.⁴ We also have over 2200 lectionaries containing handwritten portions of the New Testament in Greek.⁵ In addition we have some ancient copies of early handwritten manuscripts that translate Greek copies of the New Testament into other languages, including Old Latin, Old Syriac, and Coptic.⁶ We don't begin to see complete written copies of any of the Gospels until the fourth century.⁷

The problem we face is that with the exception of a handful of small fragments no two of those manuscripts are identical in the overlapping portions.⁸ The variations number in the hundreds of thousands, more than all of the words in the New Testament.⁹ To be sure, the vast majority of differences can be traced to copying errors and when these are accounted for we can reconstruct most of the underlying text that lay behind these many copies. But in several instances we can see that scribes made significant alterations to the text they were copying from. We know this because we have copies of manuscripts in which the texts preserving particular verses differ in significant ways that raise important questions about early Christian beliefs. The existence of such variants was well known even in ancient times and many of the early church fathers commented on the differences in the texts and made judgment calls about what they believed to be most reliable readings. But they didn't always agree with each other.

In Chapter Five we will look at how the Gospel text developed and some of the ways New Testament scholars deal with the conflicting manuscripts and try to determine which version of a textual passage most likely comes closest to the original Gospel text. We will see that in the first few centuries of Christianity scribes made a large number of alterations and changes to the Gospel texts, with many such changes having significant theological impacts. We will look at such issues as added or altered endings to the Gospels, new stories being added to the Gospels, text being changed or modified, and the impact of heresies on the transmission of the Gospel text. We will also see why New Testament historians reject the version of the New Testament known as the Textus Receptus, which underlies the King James Version of the bible, and why they propose an alternative textual reconstruction of the original Greek text of the New Testament.

The Anonymous Nature of the Gospel Authors

All four Gospels were originally written anonymously, with no identification of the author.¹⁰ Although Church tradition says that Matthew and John were among the Twelve Disciples of Jesus, neither of the two Gospels attributed to them makes such a claim. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, refers to the Apostle Matthew in the third person, with no indication that author and Apostle are one and the same (Matt 9:9, 10:3). John 21:24 claims as a source for the Gospel someone known as the "Beloved Disciple" but does not say who this person was. Elsewhere in the text we find several references to the acts of the Beloved Disciple but nowhere does the author of the Gospel of John give any hint that he and the Beloved Disciple are one and the same person. (See John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2.)

While the Gospel of John clearly distinguishes between Peter and the Beloved Disciple (John 21:20), and obviously rejects any connection between Judas Iscariot and the Beloved Disciple, it does not give us any direct evidence as to which of the Apostles or other disciples of Jesus we can identify with this revered individual.

If any of the Twelve Apostles or one of their close associates had written a report about the activities of Jesus one would expect such a work to have become an instant classic in Christian circles, widely copied, distributed, and cited, and the author frequently mentioned by name by other Christian writers. Yet, on the basis of writings from the first four centuries of Christianity, it appears that as late as the last years of the second century, almost two centuries after the death of Jesus, the early Christian scholars could only guess at who wrote the four canonical Gospels. Only towards the end of the second century do we begin to see Christian

authors associate the canonical Gospels with the traditional authors. But those who made these identifications either utilized unreliable sources or simply asserted that the identification was correct without any evidence to support the allegation. Prior to that time Christian writers appear to have thought of these four Gospels generically as the “memoirs” of the Apostles,¹¹ without any specific attribution, and identified them by characteristics of the text, such as ‘the Gospels with the genealogies.’¹²

Moreover, in the first few centuries of Christianity these weren’t the only Gospels floating around. We have indications of over thirty different Gospels circulating, many falsely attributed to either Apostles or to other persons mentioned in the Gospels.¹³ Among the most important of these other Gospels, primarily due to their priority, were the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas, which may have been written contemporaneously with some of the canonical Gospels. The other non-canonical Gospels were probably written a century or more after the canonical Gospels.

The Gospel of Peter had been widely circulated in Syria and apparently read as scripture in some churches.¹⁴ During the second century Christians were openly debating its authenticity.¹⁵ At about the end of the second century Bishop Serapion of Antioch barred its use in churches, apparently because it came to be seen as containing heretical claims about Jesus.¹⁶ The Gospel of Thomas may have been highly popular in Gnostic Christian circles and may have been widely distributed in Christian communities. Most New Testament historians would date the authorship of these two texts to the early years of the second century or perhaps the last years of the first century,¹⁷ with a few scholars arguing that one or the other may have been written prior to the four canonical Gospels.¹⁸

The forgery of Gospels and letters and other writings in the name of Apostles and other figures from the time of Jesus appears to have been something of a cottage industry in Christian circles during the first few centuries. A handful of falsified documents may have even made their way into the New Testament. The large majority of New Testament historians, for example, only accept seven of the thirteen letters attributed to Paul as coming from his hand or having been written during his lifetime.¹⁹ The letters of Paul that scholars acknowledge as authentic include 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philemon, Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans.²⁰ These seven Pauline letters appear to be the earliest Christian writings that we know of, generally dating to the early 50s.²¹ A majority would also reject the claim that the letters attributed to Peter, James, and Jude came from their hand. ²²

The Evidence for Matthew and Mark

The identification in Christian tradition of Matthew and Mark as the authors of the respective Gospels attributed to them seems to derive from an unreliable claim from an early second century Christian writer named Papias. Our evidence about his attribution comes from the fourth century Church historian Eusebius.²³ While Eusebius cites Papias’s testimony favorably with respect to the Gospel origins, he appears to have little regard for the man’s intelligence, calling him a person “of very limited understanding.”²⁴

According to Eusebius, who claims to have copies of this earlier Christian’s writings, Papias set out to collect the traditions about the teachings of the Apostles.²⁵ He himself had never met any of the Apostles and he relied on oral traditions from the elders of his day for information,²⁶ suggesting that these various elders were unaware of any specific writings

attributed to the Apostles who knew Jesus. He mentions the existence of Christian writings but does not consider them as reliable as what the elders had to say about oral traditions.²⁷ This strongly suggests that these other known Christian writings were not attributed to the apostolic circle that knew Jesus.

Papias, says Eusebius, wrote that one of the elders told him about two texts, one written by someone named Mark, who was believed to have been “the interpreter of” the apostle Peter, and the other written by the Apostle Matthew. (The use of the word interpreter is odd and ambiguous and scholars aren’t sure as to what it means.) Eusebius quotes him, regarding this Mark document, as follows.

Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord’s discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.²⁸

Eusebius then says that Papias added the following remark about Matthew.

So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.²⁹

These two quotes comprise all of Papias’ known commentary on the alleged origins of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. A major difficulty with Papias’ description of Mark’s Gospel is that he describes it as “not in order”, referring apparently to the sequence of events in Jesus’ life, when in fact Mark’s Gospel is clearly presented in an orderly fashion. It seems unlikely that someone who had read the actual Gospel of Mark would think of it as disorderly.

Closely related to the question of what text Papias referred to is the fact (noted previously) that there was probably in wide circulation at that time a Gospel of Peter. Since Papias claims that this Mark received his information from Peter, it is possible that the text the elder referred to was not canonical Mark but rather the Gospel of Peter. Without any references to the content there is no way to know whether this alleged Gospel authored by a Mark is canonical Mark, the Gospel of Peter, or some other document altogether. And, even if it is canonical Mark, we have no way to know if the author actually was an associate of Peter or just rumored to be a colleague.

Papias’ attribution of a Gospel to Matthew presents another difficult problem, the claim that Matthew wrote his text in Hebrew or Aramaic. It is overwhelmingly accepted among New Testament historians that the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote in Greek and that the text bears no indicia of having been translated into Greek from Aramaic.³⁰ As Bart Ehrman observes, “If our Matthew was a Greek translation of a Hebrew original it would be impossible to explain the verbatim agreement of Mathew with Mark in the Greek itself.”³¹ So, whatever text Papias is talking about, it is not the Gospel of Matthew as we now know it.

While it might be argued that Papias actually refers to an Aramaic translation of the Greek version of the Gospel of Matthew, and evidence indicates that Aramaic translations existed at some point in time (but almost certainly not before the second century), that seems unlikely since it should have been known that the text was originally written in Greek and translated into Aramaic, rather than the other way around. As with his references to a work by

Mark, here, too, there is no citation to any of the content of the written work so that it may be compared to what we now know as the Gospel of Matthew.

In sum, then, at the beginning of the second century we have an unidentified source giving Papias an oral tradition alleging that there were Gospels written by a Matthew and a Mark. But Papias never saw these written works, the description of their contents is inconsistent with what we know about the nature of the canonical Gospels, and Eusebius considers Papias to be something of a dunce. Despite these historical difficulties, this early Christian writer seems to be responsible for a trend developing in the late second century and continuing into the early third century to identify the authors of two of the canonical Gospels as Matthew and Mark, and to further identify Matthew as one of the Twelve Apostles and Mark as the secretary to Peter.

In the late second century, the Christian writer Irenaeus, repeats the claims made by Papias, that Matthew wrote his Gospel in the dialect used by the Hebrews and that Mark, the disciple and "interpreter" of Peter, wrote the other Gospel.³² But he doesn't tell us where he got this information from. His reference to Matthew being written in the Hebrew dialect and to Mark being the "interpreter" of Peter, that odd word also used by Papias, indicates that Irenaeus used Papias as his source.

Shortly thereafter, in the early third century, Origen, one of the most learned and respected of ancient Christian writers, says that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Aramaic and it was published for believers of Jewish origin.³³ (Aramaic was the language used by Hebrews in the time of Jesus.) He also identified a Mark, Luke and John as the authors of a Gospel. But, as with Irenaeus, he doesn't say where he got this information from. He does, however, indicate that in his own time it was the traditional view and he accepted it, which suggests that he was unaware of any direct documentation for this tradition.³⁴ He also adds the claim that this Mark was the one mentioned in Peter's second epistle as being his son, which claim seems inconsistent with Papias's tradition about just being a secretary to Peter.³⁵

This is the state of the evidence in the early third century for associating the Gospel of Matthew with the Apostle Matthew and the Gospel of Mark with an associate of the Apostle Peter. The evidence suggests that an undocumented oral tradition tracing to Papias and his contemporaries in a particular community became Christian dogma and with each subsequent mention of the claim by a Christian writer its authenticity became reinforced. The problem is that the validity of the claims by Papias, Irenaeus and Origen are historically questionable.

Luke

The author of Luke specifically says that at the time he began his effort many others had already set down orderly accounts of what had been "handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word." (Luke 1:2.) But he makes no particular claim that any of the Apostles had written a Gospel. In fact, his language suggests that the written sources he has come from persons other than the original witnesses and that these sources relied on oral traditions that may have been handed up by people who may have been eyewitnesses. If he did know of any writings by an Apostle, why wouldn't he specifically mention that source in order to add to his own credibility?

Luke asserts that he decided to investigate matters and prepare an orderly account for someone named Theophilus, so that he may know the truth. (Luke 1:3-4.) Who this Theophilus was, we don't know. His name may have been a metaphor for the Christian movement or the

Christian reader of his text.³⁶ Luke doesn't name his sources nor tell us when he is citing a source. Tradition holds that Luke was a companion to Paul but the author of Luke makes no such claim and never says that he got any particular information from Paul.

Despite the lack of any noted association with Paul, the New Testament Acts of the Apostles, almost universally accepted as written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, includes some passages that led early Christians to believe that the author was a traveling companion of Paul. At several points in Acts the author uses the term "we" when talking about some activities of Paul.³⁷

This use of "we" has led to the idea that Luke was with Paul at the time these events occurred and was writing a first-hand account of what took place. In 2 Tim 4:11, one of the disputed letters attributed to Paul, the author, allegedly Paul, says that "Only Luke is with me." In Col 4:14, another disputed letter attributed to Paul, the author identifies Luke as "the beloved physician." This led to the tradition that the author of Acts was Luke, the beloved physician who was with Paul.

On the other hand, the "we" passages may simply reflect the author's verbatim quotes from one of the sources he refers to and from which he took the "we" passages. One problem that most New Testament historians have with the idea of Luke being a companion of Paul is that much of what the author of Acts says about Paul conflicts with what Paul himself says about the same matters as reflected in Paul's letters.³⁸ The author of Acts seems to have had no knowledge of Paul's letters or any intimate knowledge of Paul's works from personal observation.³⁹ He appears to have even misunderstood Paul's theology.⁴⁰

If the author of Luke-Acts knew Paul it would seem that the acquaintance was casual at best. The author of Luke, therefore, would seem to be somewhat removed from the Apostolic circles that emerged after the death of Jesus. If he were a companion of Paul, the many errors he makes with respect to Paul's career and teaching suggest that he should be read cautiously at best with regard to his accounts of Jesus. If he were not a close companion of Paul, that should make us even more wary.

To this we should add that Paul gives no indication that he himself had any personal knowledge of Jesus' life prior to the crucifixion. One can search his letters and find almost nothing about Jesus prior to his death. Paul may therefore be an unreliable source about Jesus' life and if Luke relied on Paul for the life of Jesus he would only have been receiving second- or third-hand information at best.

John

As noted above, John 21:24 suggests that the Beloved Disciple was the source of the Gospel text but that the Gospel does not identify who the Beloved Disciple was. His identity is one of those interesting issues that Johannine scholars like to kick about.

The first evidence we have connecting the authorship of John with the Apostle John appears in the late second century, from the aforementioned Christian writer Irenaeus. In the passage in which he seems to rely on Papias for the claim that Matthew and Mark wrote the respective Gospels attributed to them (see above), he also makes the claim that the Beloved Disciple was named John, but he doesn't say how he knows this.⁴¹ Nor does he quite say that this disciple was the Apostle John, although it would be hard to imagine that Irenaeus did not believe this to be the case. Nevertheless, by the fourth century this identification had become widely

accepted among Christians.⁴² As Origen said, it was the tradition in his time (third century) and he accepted it.

In considering the possibility that the Apostle John may have been the Beloved Disciple, we should note that the Gospel of John never refers to the Apostle John by name. Some might argue that the author didn't need to mention the Apostles name since he referred to him as the Beloved Disciple. There is reason to reject that argument. In the Synoptic Gospels the Apostle John is identified as one of the sons of Zebedee. In John 21:2 the evangelist makes a casual offhand remark to the presence of the "sons of Zebedee" and some other disciples without any hint that one of the sons of Zebedee (i.e., John) was the Beloved Disciple.

The reference in John 21:24 to the Beloved Disciple being the source of the Gospel's information seems to speak of the Beloved Disciple in the third person, suggesting that there is a distinction between the author of John 21:24 and the Beloved Disciple. In Johannine studies it is commonly accepted that the author of John 21, the final chapter in that Gospel, is not the author of the preceding chapters.⁴³ We'll discuss this point further in Chapters Three and Five.

When Were the Gospels Written?

If we can't be sure who wrote the Gospels, it would be helpful to know when they were written. Were the authors personally familiar with the events or did they have to rely on earlier sources for their information? If the latter, then how good were these sources? Were they written close in time to the events in question, before several competing traditions and theologies developed, or on a later occasion, after a wide range of conflicting views emerged? Once the link to the traditional identity of the authors is broken, these questions become more difficult to resolve. The best evidence would be written copies of some portion of each of the Gospels that could be dated or citations to the Gospels by some author whose writing can be dated. Extant evidence of this sort, however, leaves a very wide range of possible dates for authorship.

As mentioned above our earliest written evidence for the Gospels is a tiny fragment of John dating to the early half of the second century. This suggests the latest possible date for that writing of that Gospel. We don't begin to see evidence for the existence of the other Gospels until about the last quarter of the second century and early third century. Our earliest complete Gospels date to the fourth century.⁴⁴ While we don't have evidence associating the Gospels with particular authors until about the end of the second century, references in the Patristic literature suggest that the texts themselves were in circulation earlier than that point. How much earlier is the problem to be resolved?

In establishing a latest possible date, one criterion used by many scholars is the absence of any reference to the great Jewish revolt of Bar Kokhba at about 132 C.E. and the devastating impact on the Jews when the Romans eventually put down the rebellion and barred the Jews from Jerusalem, their holy city. Given the hostility of Christians towards Jews who didn't accept Jesus, it seems highly likely that if Gospel authors knew about the rebellion they wouldn't have missed the opportunity to mention the result as a punishment of the Jews by God. The absence of such references suggests to many scholars that the Gospels were almost certainly written before this revolt.

As to the earliest likely date scholars have tried to use certain themes and literary relationships to narrow the time frame. For Matthew, Mark and Luke, one of the chief criteria for dating the Gospels involves the issue of whether the Gospels contain references to the Roman

destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. Mark 13:2 records a prophecy by Jesus, to wit, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” A variation of this prophecy also appears in Matt 24:2 and Luke 21:6. In addition, Matt 22:7 has Jesus say, “The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city.” In Luke 19:43 Jesus says, “Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side.”

These passages suggest to most New Testament historians that these three Gospels were probably written during or after the destruction of the Temple. But some scholars dispute these interpretations and argue that if the Gospels were written after the destruction of the Temple, the authors would have made more explicit reference to the destruction. This latter group argues for a pre-70 C.E. date for all of the Gospels. Raymond Brown, one of the most respected Christian scholars, however, has observed that while there are occasional attempts to move the Gospel dates earlier none of the proposals have gained much of a scholarly following.⁴⁵ For some time those who connected Mark to the Jewish revolt against Rome were unsure if he wrote during the revolt or after the Temple’s fall. Brown observes that there is a growing tendency to date Mark after 70.⁴⁶ As to Matthew and Luke, the overwhelming majority of scholars accept that Matt 22:7 and Luke 19:43 refer to the destruction of the Temple and tend to date Matthew and Luke from around 75 to 85.

Another criterion proposed by scholars for dating the Gospels focuses on the emphasis in the Gospels on the conflict between the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus, which suggests that the author’s were writing in the post-Temple period when the Pharisees emerged as the dominant intellectual group among Jewish teachers and probably became the chief intellectual Jewish opposition to Christianity. In the time of Jesus there were other intellectual groups flourishing, including the Sadducees and the Essenes, both of which were wiped out during the Jewish revolt.

The Sadducees, had they survived, would have almost certainly opposed Christianity. Yet they are virtually invisible in the Gospels. Mark and Luke mention them just once, both describing the same minor incident. John doesn’t mention them at all. Matthew has only a little additional material to add. We don’t know enough about the Essenes to know how they would have reacted, but they were an ultra-orthodox Jewish group.

This lack of reference to the Sadducees is especially puzzling because the Sadducees were in control of the priesthood at the time Jesus was executed and if the Jewish Chief Priest urged Pilate to crucify Jesus, as all of the Gospels allege, that priest would have been a Sadducee. Although the author of Luke hides the fact in his Gospel that the Chief Priest and his circle were Sadducees, he lets slip in Acts that the Chief priest and his allies belonged to that sect (Acts 5:17.) If the Sadducees played such a major role in the prosecution of Jesus, as alleged in the Gospels, it is astounding that they are virtually ignored in the Gospel accounts. This absence of Sadducees in the Gospels, together with the emphasis on Pharisees as the opponents of Jesus, suggests that the Gospels were written after the Sadducees were gone from the scene and the Gospel authors had little idea who they actually were, a time frame suggesting a post-Temple period.

Dating the Gospel of John is more difficult because we don’t have any clear chronological landmarks cited, such as the Temple destruction. The tendency is to argue that the enhanced nature of its theology and Christology and themes such as the expulsion of Christians from Jewish synagogues and the absence of any Jewish groups other than the Pharisees and priests suggest a post-70’s environment. John, for example, is the only Gospel that explicitly identifies Jesus as a deity present at the Creation (John 1: 1-3). Another question that scholars

raise is whether or not the author of John knew the other Gospels. If he did then John would have to be dated after at least one of the other Gospels. The broad scholarly consensus is that John dates to about 90-110 C.E.

Where Were the Gospels Written?

Tradition places the authorship of Mark in Rome. Though possible, this view probably reflects the unreliable report of Papias concerning Mark as a secretary to Peter in Rome. A number of scholars have suggested Syria or the northern Transjordan.⁴⁷ A few scholars have suggested the Galilee but Raymond Brown, in his survey of the evidence, finds the argument unconvincing.⁴⁸

As to Matthew, most scholars would probably place its origin in Antioch, in Syria, a city that had a very large Jewish population.⁴⁹ Luke's special interest in Paul's activities (as reflected in Acts) suggests that Luke probably addressed Pauline churches in Greece or Syria, where Paul conducted his missions.⁵⁰ As to John, the majority of scholars would probably place it in the Greek city of Ephesus, with some suggesting a Syrian locale.⁵¹

The broad scholarly consensus is that none of the Gospel authors wrote from Judea or Galilee or addressed themselves directly to persons from those areas.

Summary

The evidence that the authors of the four canonical Gospels were Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, two of whom were allegedly apostles of Jesus, one of whom was a secretary to Paul, and one of whom was a close companion of Paul, rests on extremely shaky and highly unreliable historical grounds. With the exception of Papias' untrustworthy account about a Matthew and a Mark, we have no indications prior to the end of the second century that Christians had identified the four canonical authors with specific individuals. Papias' evidence is almost worthless. It is based on an oral tradition that there existed written texts by a Matthew and a Mark. Papias never saw the texts and gives us no quotes from either text for comparison with the existing Gospels. Further, what he does tell us about the content is at odds with what we know about both texts. Finally, Papias' credibility as a reliable scholar is called into question by the one person who cites his account, the fourth century Christian historian Eusebius, who considered Papias rather dim-witted.

As to the identities of the authors of Luke and John there are no credible historical accounts that tell us how these two names came to be associated with the authorship of the two Gospels attributed to them. The "we" passages in Acts, which appear to be quotations from an external text, gave rise to the belief that the author was a companion to Paul, and there is a Luke mentioned as a companion of Paul in one of the disputed letters attributed to that Apostle.⁵² Another disputed letter of Paul also refers to a Luke as "the beloved physician" but we don't know if that is the same Luke mentioned in the other letter.⁵³ And in one of the accepted letters of Paul there is a reference to a fellow-worker named Luke but, here to we don't know if this Luke is one and the same as the other Lukes mentioned.⁵⁴ However, the author of Luke-Acts doesn't seem to have any direct knowledge about Paul and his writings about Paul are frequently at odds with what Paul says in his own letters. The Gospel of John, in a passage of questionable

authorship, cites an unidentified individual, the Beloved Disciple, as the author. Who this individual was is unclear but internal textual evidence suggests he was not the apostle John.

It is widely accepted among New Testament Historians that the Gospels were originally written in Greek, from outside of Palestine, sometime between the years 65-110. Who wrote the Gospels remains an open question, but the evidence available shows that none of the authors were witnesses to what happened or had any direct connection to the apostolic circle of Jesus.

[Buy this book from Amazon](#)

¹ Brown 1994b, 109.

² John 18:31-34, 37-38.. Comfort dates the fragment to 110-125 (Comfort, 69.) Brown proposes a date of about 135 (Brown 1994b, 50.) Some scholars would date it to just the first half of the second century and others don't think that such a narrow time frame is sufficient. [EhrmTxt 56]. In scholarly literature this fragment is categorized as P⁵².

³ Comfort .31.

⁴ Brown 1994b, 48.

⁵ Brown 1994b, 48.

⁶ Comfort, 91.

⁷ Aland, Chart 5A, Chart 6 D-G.

⁸ Ehrman 1993, 27.

⁹ Ehrman 1993, 27.

¹⁰ Mays, J. L., Mark 1:1.

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dial*, CVI; ECF 1.1.6.3.0.106.

¹² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 6:14, citing the writings of Clement who wrote around the end of the second century or early third century.

¹³ These include *The Gospel of Peter*, *the Gospel of Thomas*, *the Gospel of Mary*, *the Infancy Gospel of James*, *the Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, *the Gospel of Bartholomew*, *the Gospel of Matthias*, and *the Gospel of Judas*.

¹⁴ Brown 1994a, 1341.

¹⁵ Ehrman 2003a, 15.

¹⁶ Ehrman 2003, 16.

¹⁷ See, for example, Ehrman, 2003b, 20, 32)

¹⁸ Crossan,,24, 26.

¹⁹ See, for example, Brown 1996, 5-7, 726, 749, 762.

²⁰ See, for example, Brown 1996, 5; Ehrman 2000, 262.

²¹ See, for example, Brown 1996, 5.

²² See, for example, Brown 1996, 5-7, 726, 749, 762.

²³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.14-16.

²⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.13.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.3

²⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.2

²⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.4

²⁸ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.15.

²⁹ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 3.39.16.

³⁰ Brown 1996 , 210.

³¹ Ehrman 2009, 287, ch 4 n 7.

³² Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.2.1; ECF 1.1.7.1.3.2.

³³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 6:25.4-5.

³⁴ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 6:25.4-5.

³⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 6:25.4-5.

³⁶ Theophilus means God-lover.

³⁷ See Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:8-18, 27:1-28:16.

³⁸ Brown 1996, 268.

-
- ³⁹ Brown 1996, 324.
- ⁴⁰ Ehrman 2000, 138.
- ⁴¹ Irenaeus, Haer. 3.2.1; ECF 1.1.7.1.3.2.
- ⁴² Anchor Bible Dictionary, sv. “John, Gospel of.”
- ⁴³ See Brown 2003, 192-196 for some discussion of this issue.
- ⁴⁴ These are the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus.
- ⁴⁵ Brown 1994a, 4 n 1.
- ⁴⁶ Brown 1994a, 4 n 1.
- ⁴⁷ Brown 1996, 162.
- ⁴⁸ Brown 1996, 162.
- ⁴⁹ Brown 1996, 172.
- ⁵⁰ Brown 1996, 226.
- ⁵¹ Brown 1996, 334.
- ⁵² Tim 4:11. Most New Testament scholars doubt that Paul wrote this letter. (Brown 1996, 654.)
- ⁵³ Col 4:14. Most New Testament scholars doubt Paul wrote this letter. (Brown 1996, 600.)
- ⁵⁴ Philem 24.