

About the Gospels

When Were the Gospels Written?

Here's the logic used by scholars in their efforts to get a handle on just when the four New Testament gospels were written. It isn't an exact science, but most scholars agree with the following reasoning.

We can tell from Paul's known letters and from the book of Acts that Paul was writing his NT books in the middle of the first century. Although he did a lot of traveling in Christian enclaves, his writings say nothing that suggest he was aware of any of the gospels. Therefore, it is likely that the canonical gospels were written and circulated after Paul's death.

There are several reasons for concluding that Mark was written first. It was probably written around the time of the war with Rome, 70 CE. Both Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, so they must have been written after Mark was circulated outside the community where it was written. That puts them around 80 to 85 CE.

John was most likely written later, based on its advanced theological sophistication. It was probably written around 90 to 95 CE.

Therefore, our earliest known written accounts of Jesus' life didn't exist until some 35 to 65 years after his death. Yet we know that, meanwhile, Christianity was growing, spreading throughout cities in the Mediterranean region. The new religion wasn't growing by the thousands, but the seed was being planted by the dozens or hundreds in major urban areas all around the Mediterranean. That must have happened based on word-of-mouth conversions to the faith. But what, exactly, were people saying to each other and to prospective converts about Jesus, his life, his teachings, and why it was all so important?

With no written records to guide them, how were these earliest Christians able to all stay on the

same page theologically? They weren't. It was during this crucial embryonic phase of Christianity that myriad doctrines took root, many of which would later become known as *heresies*. It took 300 to 400 years for the competing versions of Christianity to congeal into what could be considered *orthodox* Christianity. It was a process by which those who gained power, authority, and influence were able to claim their own views as the correct ones, and the ones that would be adopted by the church hierarchy as official doctrine.

Things really began to come together when Constantine called a meeting of bishops to hash things out and come to some basic decisions. He realized that it was in his best interest politically to get all Christians on the same page. That was, after all, his primary reason for adopting Christianity as the official state religion in the first place.

Who Wrote the Gospels?

It's amazing how many people, even today, would answer that question with: Duh! Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each was purportedly a disciple of Jesus or a close companion of a disciple. Each was an eyewitness to the life and teachings of Jesus, giving us a first-hand account of what Jesus said, what he did, and where he went.

In fact, we don't know who wrote the gospels. Each was written anonymously, and each was later assigned a particular "according to" author's name based on someone's **opinion** or **conjecture** about the true author. They were motivated to do that because they wanted the gospels to be seen and accepted as authentic and reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. The original disciples were best positioned to provide that authenticity, so a disciple's name was attached to two of the books: Matthew and John. Mark was (the disciple) Peter's secretary. Luke was (apostle) Paul's traveling

companion. At least, that was the thinking from about 100 years after the books were written.

What early Christians didn't realize (and many people even today don't understand) is that eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable. People who see and hear the same event often interpret and remember it differently. If early Christians expected harmony and agreement between Matthew and John, they were surely disappointed, because the two narratives are very different in many important respects. For example, Matthew begins with Jesus' conception and birth; Jesus isn't portrayed as God or divine; and Jesus rarely talks about himself. John begins with Jesus as the incarnate Word of God, eternal, and creator of the universe; Jesus is portrayed as God; and Jesus rarely talks about anything other than himself.

But the truth of the matter is that the gospel of Matthew makes no claim that Matthew is the author. Not one of the synoptic gospels claims to be written by an eyewitness to the life and teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, no author would have ever called his work "The Gospel According To . . .".

Matthew was written in the third person, even the parts that talk about Matthew.

Matthew 9:9:

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

John doesn't say "I know . . .". He says "We know that his . . .".

John 21:24:

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true.

So, we know who didn't write the gospels. But who did?

We know that they were well-educated Christians who spoke Greek and most likely did not live in Palestine. That rules out the disciples, who were lower-class, illiterate laborers from the area of

Galilee. They spoke Aramaic, not Greek, the language in which the gospels were originally written. Although it may be possible that some of them became educated and learned Greek well enough to write the gospels in their later years, it is most unlikely. The disciples were preoccupied with spreading Christianity. Furthermore, they make no mention of having become Greek scholars.

(Although I often refer to the authors as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it's just a matter of conveniently identifying the specific gospel under discussion. It's not because I believe those guys are the real authors.)

Who Wrote the New Testament?

I have already discussed the authorship of the gospels. What about the rest of the 27 NT books?

Scholars are confident that they know the authors of eight NT books. Paul wrote seven of them (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). John wrote the book of Revelation. That is, someone named John was the author, but they don't know what John.

Some of the books came to be attributed to some famous person who did not, in fact, do the writing. For example, Hebrews doesn't claim Paul as its author, and Paul was almost certainly not the writer, but church fathers somehow came to believe Paul wrote Hebrews, and they therefore accepted it into the canon on that basis.

Some books were written by someone with the same name as a famous person. They didn't claim to be that famous person or any other specific person of that name. For example, James was undoubtedly written by somebody named James, which was a very common name at that time (and, of course, still is). Church fathers somehow came to believe it was James the disciple, brother of Jesus, even though the book makes no such claim. That particular James was certainly not the author, but church leaders decided he was, so James made it into the canon.

Some books claim to be written by someone other than the true author. They intentionally adopt the

name of a famous person, hoping to add credibility to their work, or to sell more copies. One word for this practice is *pseudipigraphy*, meaning writing that goes under a false name. Many scholars prefer that term because it makes them sound smart, and because it's a convenient euphemism for fraud. Technically, pseudipigraphy doesn't necessarily indicate intent to defraud, but if it's an innocent act, we usually call it a *pseudonym* or a *pen name*, like Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens.

Pseudipigraphy of the malignant variety was common in the ancient world. That's apparent from the fact that the Greeks and Romans talked about it. A lot. So did early Christian authors. One might tend to get the impression that, if it was so common, it probably wasn't considered a big deal. If everybody did it, it might very well be that nobody really intended to fool anyone. But, that's not the case at all. Whenever it was discussed, it was soundly condemned, and it was considered a huge problem. People **did intend to deceive**, and they often succeeded.

One motivation for fraud was profit. A copy of a book had to be done manually, and of course mistakes were easily made in the process. Copies of books sometimes were very different from each other and from the original. So, when putting together a library, the officials much preferred to get their hands on an original rather than a copy. They were willing to pay good money for an original. *Originals*, therefore, would often start popping up all over the place. But, since early Christian writings were not bought and sold on a market, such greed was not the motive for Christian pseudipigraphy.

Sometimes, a man would create a forgery in order to make a group, opponent, or enemy look bad. It could be an effective way of getting revenge. Just write something that would obviously be embarrassing, damaging to one's reputation, or heretical and claim to have found it. Slander and smear campaigns are nothing new. The same technique could be used to oppose a particular point of view. It was not uncommon in early Christianity to adopt a false identity in order to combat a false teaching or another forgery. Fraud was also used to trick people into believing prophecies. You write about a recent historical event, but you present it as though it had been

written much earlier. Using that technique, prophecies always came true, just as predicted. Or, one might become a pseudipigrapher just for kicks, or to see how much he could get away with.

On the other hand, one might forge a document out of respect, admiration, or support for a particular person or point of view. If forgery could be used to make someone look bad, it could just as easily be used to make him look good. A student of a well-known and respected philosopher would often write a treatise in the name of his teacher, not to deceive anyone, but simply as a matter of humility. The thinking was that anything the student might produce was really merely an extension of the teachings of his master, and therefore it was a matter of good manners to give credit where due.

Among the most common motivations for forgery in early Christianity was the desire to provide authoritative support for the faith in areas where it was perceived to be lacking. For example, in Colossians 4:15-16, Paul (or whoever the author was) talks about a certain letter that he wants the Colossians to read.

Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

There was no known "letter from Laodicea" in existence, and it was presumed by early Christians to have been lost. So, in the second century, a couple of forgeries turned up. Similarly, early Christians were concerned that the gospels shed no light on Jesus' early years. So, in the second century, forgeries popped up to fill in the gap. The most famous of them was written by "Thomas", thought by some to have been Jesus' twin brother, and it offers interesting insight into the adventures of Jesusberry Finn, starting at age five.

Prior to the fourth century, there was no orthodox Christianity as we know it today. There were lots of competing versions of Christianity, each with its apologists, each struggling to become the adopted official body of Christian doctrine and practice. Probably the most efficient method available to them was forgery. Write a book, claim it was written

by an apostle, and hope others accepted it as authoritative. More authoritative, at least, than a competing version of Christianity with no apostolic foundation, pseudopigraphic or otherwise. So, every group made sure they had such writing(s), because they didn't want to be left out in the cold. In those early years, there were forgeries out the wazoo.

Peter, Philip, James (brother of Jesus), Thomas, and Nicodemus each had his own gospel. Luke may have written the canonical book of Acts, but it wasn't the only Acts. There were also the Acts of John, Paul, and Thecla. There was a 3rd Corinthians. There was a letter written by Peter to James opposing Paul. There was a series of letters written back and forth between Paul and (Roman philosopher) Seneca. We have in the canon the apocalyptic book of Revelation, written by (someone named) John. But there were plenty of other apocalyptic works, including one attributed to Peter and one attributed to Paul. (Peter's apocalypse almost made it into the canon).

How many forgeries made it into the New Testament canon? Who knows? There is plenty of reason to think that some did. How would the early Christian leaders have known whether a writing was a forgery or not? How can we know?

Surprisingly, perhaps, we are in a better position to detect pseudopigraphy today than those early Christians were. Modern analysts consider style, vocabulary, theological points of view, ideas, and perspectives, among other things. Do these aspects match the alleged author's known writings? We have vastly more data to work with today, and vastly more efficient tools to use. They aren't necessarily definitive or foolproof, but they are generally very reliable. They allow us to examine each NT book and make an educated guess about who did, or at least who didn't, write it.