

“A Brief on the Authorship of the Synoptic Gospels”

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Introduction

There are some critics that suggest that the Synoptic Gospels...Matthew, Mark and Luke, were not written by the aforementioned Men of God. Some contend that Source Criticism explains the authorship of Matthew, contending that the Gospel of Matthew was borrowed from the Gospel of Mark and penned by another. Also, some Biblical Scholars declare that Matthew was the author of one of the saying sources---viz., usually referred to as Q (from the German, Quelle, 'source').¹ Objections against Markan authorship include claims of geographical errors and historical errors. Critics of Lukan authorship include Matthew's critique listed above coupled with the claim of spurious interpretations of Luke 13, which describes the destruction of Jerusalem. However, despite all this banter, there are solid reasons for identifying Mathew, Mark and Luke as the original authors of the Synoptic Gospels.

1 – Zondervan New International Dictionary (Zondervan Publishing House, 1987) p. 631

Evidence of Matthean Authorship

External evidence for authorship comes from the direct testimony of second-century writer Papias. “*Matthew made an arrangement of the oracles in the Hebrew language, and each translated them as he was able...*”. Subsequently, the fact that Eusebius, who quotes Papias on this matter,² discussed issues related to the composition of the canonical Gospels. Moreover, Papias’ fragments assert that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark are based on eyewitness testimony.³

Astoundingly, there is reason to surmise authorship based on evidence that predates the argument of Papias. According to Hengal, “It is inconceivable that the Gospels could circulate for up to 60 years, and then in the 2nd century, suddenly display unanimous attribution to certain authors”.⁴ Hengal asserts that as soon as Gospels were publicly read in the read church, it became crucial for them to be named.

There is internal evidence also. If Matthew was a tax collector, and as suggested by his alternate name a Levite, the content of his Gospel fits with what his expected life experiences would be. A Levite like Matthew would normally be a Pharisee, and would receive training for Temple service. In line with this, Matthew shows signs of proper Jewish religious training: His "rich use" of OT quotes; his use of typology; his concern with Jewish issues. But because there would be room for only so many Levites at the

2 – Zondervan New International Dictionary (Zondervan Publishing House, 1987) p. 631

3 – Papias – Expositions of the Oracles of the Lord, ca 140 A.D.

4 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 66

Temple, someone like Matthew might be forced to seek employment elsewhere -- and if he found work as a *tax collector*, he would be rejected by his Pharasaic cohorts.

Matthew also shows through his writing that he is a Hellenized Jew: he has good Greek style, and would appear to be "at home" in the Roman world. Again, this fits right in with the idea of Matthew the tax collector as our seminal author.

Matthew reflects the vocabulary and interest of personal authorship, there are certain touches that point to the figure we know as Matthew. The story of the fish and the coin would have been of special interest to Matthew as a tax collector. Matthew does use a technical monetary term in 22:15-22 where Mark [12:13-17] and Luke [20:20-6] in parallels use a common one.

Matthew has a subtle use of self-identification. In the story about a publican called to follow Jesus, the publican is called "Levi" in Mark and Luke, but "Matthew" in Matthew; in the same vein, Mark and Luke refer to "his house" whereas Matthew refers to "the house", as one would when writing of their own house in a third-person narrative context.

Evidence of Markan Authorship

Once again from Papias himself, there is direct testimony of the authorship of Mark. Between 110 and 130 AD, the following statement was recorded by Papias, whose words are passed on to us by the church historian Eusebius: *Mark indeed, since he was the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately, but not in order, the things either said or done by the Lord as much as he remembered. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed Him, but afterwards, as I have said, [heard and followed] Peter, who fitted his discourses to*

the needs [of his hearers] but not as if making a narrative of the Lord's sayings'; consequently, Mark, writing down some things just as he remembered, erred in nothing; for he was careful of one thing - not to omit anything of the things he heard or to falsify anything in them. Backing up Papias' statement is the fact that Mark's Gospel is constructed around Peter more than any other Gospel. Mark was not an eyewitness but obtained his information from Peter.⁵ Mark's Gospel has the character of an eyewitness account. As would be expected if the material found its source in an eyewitness, the use of incidental details and characters matches the way an eyewitness account would be composed. Moreover, Mark's Gospel lacks order, reflecting the occasional nature of Peter's preaching.⁶

Throughout Mark, Peter is given top billing. He is the first of the disciples to be mentioned; he is portrayed as being in Jesus' inner circle, and there are many instances where Peter is the only individual to stand over and against Jesus. In terms of proportion, Peter is mentioned more times per page in Mark than in Matthew or Luke. He is also the most "true to life" character in the Gospel other than Jesus. There are also many personal touches reflecting Peter, including the frequent and incidental mention of his house (5 times in Mark); phrases such as "Simon and his companions" (1:36) and Andrew being identified as Simon's brother (1:16); and the direct address to Simon by Jesus (14:37). Many third-person verses, if shifted to first- or second-person, would fit right in the

5 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 92

6 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 92

mouth of Peter. (1:29, 5:1, 5:38, 6:53-4, 8:22, 10:32, 11:1, 14:18)

Literary analysis of Mark indicating that someone very like Peter (as we conventionally recognize him) was behind it: Mark's Gospel has a limited vocabulary (1330 words) and was written in "man on the street" Koine Greek; the rhetorical devices used are few in number and are the sort that would be used by someone who was uneducated; and, it bears an uncomplicated sentence structure: "Its sentences are made like the speech of the less educated men, upon whom the niceties of logically subordinated ideas are largely wasted." Furthermore, one who is desperately conspiracy-minded might suggest that all of this could be faked, but this would suggest a literary artistry beyond what the author of the second Gospel evidences otherwise (i.e., faking being uneducated).

Importantly, in addition to the aforementioned points, nothing in the second Gospel stands in the way of accepting the earliest tradition that identifies John Mark as the author. The weight of the decision stands on the external evidence.⁷ The Church Fathers accentuate the fact of Markan authorship.

Evidence for Lukan Authorship

The idea of Luke as the author of the Gospel of Luke has varied points. Luke, the beloved physician, is particularly noted for the use of medical language. Even though this argument has its critics, it is not discarded nor completely discounted.⁸

7 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 94

8 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 114

Also of note are the "we" passages in Acts. According to scripture, (Acts 16:10-17, Acts 20:-5-15, Acts 21:1-18, Acts 27- Acts 28 coupled with Col 4:14, II Tim 4:11 and Philemon 24, Luke is without a doubt the traveling companion referred to. Luke's "we"-statements are included in land journeys and sea journeys.

The style and development of the Gospel of Luke points to a writer that possesses education, a writer familiar with the Greek culture, a writer acquainted with the Jewish tradition and most of all a writer of the Christian faith. This also conveys a writer of tremendous versatility, academia and spirituality. Luke is a Physician. Luke is a Gentile Christian. Luke is a Disciple of Jesus. Subsequently, the language of The Gospel of Luke starts out Classical Greek, the next two chapters are strongly Hebraic and the later chapters then shift to Hellenistic Greek that constantly reminds the reader of the Septuagint.⁹ These points are accentuated by the following statement... 'this versatility points to a man of no mean competence.'¹⁰

9 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 115

10 – An Introduction to the New Testament (Zondervan Publishing House, 1992) p. 115

Conclusion

With all the powerful arguments used to support Apostolic authorship of the Synoptic Gospels, great emphasis should also be given to the overwhelming affirmations given by the early Church Fathers. For example, Tertullian, the "Father of Latin Theology" (ca. 160-225), witnesses to the authority of writings in the Western church and stressed the criterion of apostolicity. In his writing against Marcion, he clearly distinguishes gospels of apostolic origin and gospels written by disciples of apostles. He writes: "Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us; whilst of apostolic men, Luke and Mark renew it afterwards." His "New Testament canon" included the four gospels. Irenaeus referenced Markan Authorship.¹¹ Justin Martyr references Markan Authorship.¹² The period immediately following the passing of the Apostles is known as the period of the Church Fathers. Many of these men walked with the Apostles and were taught directly by them. Six church leaders are commonly referred to in church history: Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp and Papias.¹³ Polycarp and Papias, for instance, are considered to have been disciples of the Apostle John. In addition to Polycarp and Papias, other early church leaders such as Barnabas, Hermas, Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Justin Martyr all support traditional Apostolic authorship of the Synoptic Gospels.

11 – Irenaeus (Against Heresies, 3.1.1)

12 – Justin Martyr (Dialogue with Trypho, 106.3)

13 – (Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, 37)

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