

The Composition of the Gospels

Attestation from the Early Church

The Gospel According to Matthew

Matthew compiled the oracles [*logia*] of Jesus in the Aramaic language, and everyone translated them as well as he could. (Papias, c. A.D. 60-130, as quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39, A.D. 324)

Matthew . . . issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome and laying the foundations of the Church. (Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* 3, A.D. 180)

Tradition says that [Matthew was] led to write only under the pressure of necessity. For Matthew had begun by preaching to Hebrews; and when he made up his mind to go to others too, he committed his own gospel to writing in his native tongue [i.e., Hebrew/Aramaic], so that for those with whom he was no longer present the gap left by his departure was filled by what he wrote. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.24)

I have learned by tradition that the Gospel according to Matthew, who was at one time a publican and afterwards an Apostle of Jesus Christ, was written first and that he composed it in the Hebrew tongue and published it for the converts from Judaism. (Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on Matthew*, c. A.D. 245)

[Pantaenus, an Alexandrian scholar,] went as far as India, where he appears to have found that Matthew's gospel had arrived before him and was in the hands of some there who had come to know Christ. Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them and had left behind Matthew's account in the actual Aramaic characters, and it was preserved till the time of Pantaenus' mission. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 5.10)

[The evangelists] did not write the gospels at the same time, for they did not receive this mandate as Moses did with the tablets [i.e., directly from God], but as the prophet had said, "I will give them a covenant not like this, but I will put my law in their minds and I will write it in their hearts" [Jer 31:33]. Opportunities both summoned and wrote them. Matthew the Hebrew wrote his, and behold it was turned into Greek. (Ephraim the Syrian, A.D. 306-373, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, I, 1-3)

The Gospel According to Mark

... at which nevertheless he [Mark? Peter?] was present, and so he placed [them in his narrative]. (*Muratorian Fragment*, c. A.D. 170)

When, at Rome, Peter had openly preached the word and by the Spirit had proclaimed the gospel, many who were present urged Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been said, to write it all down. This he did, making his gospel available to all who wanted it. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 6.14)

So brightly shone the light of true religion on the minds of Peter's hearers that, not satisfied with a single hearing or with the oral teaching of the divine message, they resorted to appeals of every kind to induce Mark (whose gospel we have), as he was a follower of Peter, to leave them in writing a summary of the instruction they had received by word of mouth, nor did they let him go till they had persuaded him, and thus became responsible for the writing of what is known as the Gospel according to Mark. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 2.15)

Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord, however not in order. For Mark neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but later, as I said, heard Peter, who used to give his teachings in the form of anecdotes with no intention of providing an ordered arrangement of the *logia* of the Lord. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong when he wrote down

some individual items as he recalled them from memory. For he made it his one concern not to omit anything he had heard or to falsify anything. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.39)

When the divine word had made its home among them [the Christians in Rome], the power of Simon [the magician] was quenched and immediately destroyed, together with the man himself. And so greatly did the splendor of piety illumine the minds of Peter's hearers that they were not satisfied with hearing once only, and were not content with the unwritten teaching of the divine Gospel, but with all sorts of entreaties they besought Mark, a follower of Peter, and the one whose Gospel is extant, that he would leave them a written monument of the doctrine which had been orally communicated to them. Nor did they cease until they had prevailed with the man, and had thus become the occasion of the written Gospel which bears the name of Mark. And they say that Peter when he had learned, through a revelation of the Spirit, of that which had been done, was pleased with the zeal of the men, and that the work obtained the sanction of his authority for the purpose of being used in the churches. Clement in the eighth book of his *Hypotyposes* gives this account, and with him agrees the bishop of Hierapolis named Papias. And Peter makes mention of Mark in his first epistle which they say that he wrote in Rome itself, as is indicated by him, when he calls the city, by a figure, Babylon, as he does in the following words: "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, greets you; and so does my son Mark" [1 Pet 5:13]. And they say that this Mark was the first that was sent to Egypt, and that he proclaimed the Gospel which he had written, and first established churches in Alexandria. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 2.15)

Mark, who was also named stubby-fingers, on account that he had in comparison to the length of the rest of his body shorter fingers, was a disciple and interpreter of Peter, whom he followed just as he heard him report. When he was requested at Rome by the brethren, he briefly wrote this gospel in parts of Italy. (*Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Mark*, c. A.D. 200.)

Mark, however, used to follow Simon, when they gained ground in the city Rome, so that they were perfectly recorded and, lest they come to oblivion for a very long time, the faithful persuaded Mark, and he wrote whatever he learned. (Ephraim the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron*, 1:1-3)

The Gospel According to Luke

Since many already have endeavored to compose an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were entrusted to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed appropriate that I too, who have been following everything closely from the start, should write an accurate and well-organized account for you, honorable Theophilus, so that you might know the certainty of those words by which you were catechized. (Luke 1:1-4 PJB)

The third book of the Gospel is that according to Luke. Luke, the well-known physician, after the ascension of Christ, when Paul had taken with him as one zealous for the law, composed it in his own name, according to [the general] belief. Yet he himself had not seen the Lord in the flesh; and therefore, as he was able to ascertain events, so indeed he begins to tell the story from the birth of John. (*Muratorian Fragment*)

Luke was an Antiochene Syrian, a doctor by profession, a disciple of the apostles. Later, however, he followed Paul until his martyrdom, serving the Lord blamelessly. He never had a wife, he never fathered children, and died in Boetia [region west of Athens] at the age of eighty-four, full of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, although gospels had already been written—indeed by Matthew in Judaea but by Mark in Italy—moved by the Holy Spirit, he wrote down this gospel in the parts of Achaia [southern Greece], signifying in the preface that the others were written before his, but also that it was of the greatest importance for him to expound with the greatest diligence the whole series of events in his narration for the Greek believers. (*Anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke*)

Luke, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him. (Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1)

[Luke] wrote for Gentile converts the Gospel praised by Paul. (Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book 1)

As for Luke, in the beginning of his Gospel he himself states the reasons which led him to write it. He states that since many others had more rashly undertaken to compose a narrative of the events of which he had acquired perfect knowledge, he himself, feeling the necessity of freeing us from their uncertain opinions, delivered in his own Gospel an accurate account of those events in regard to which he had learned the full truth, being aided by his intimacy and his stay with Paul and by his acquaintance with the rest of the apostles. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.24)

The Gospel According to John

The fourth of the Gospels is that of John, [one] of the disciples [*ex decipolis*]. To his fellow disciples and bishops, who had been urging him [to write], he said, “Fast with me from today for 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 [*ex apostolis*], that John should write down all things in his own name while all of them should review it. And so, though various elements may be taught in the individual books of the Gospels, nevertheless this makes no difference to the faith of believers, since by the one sovereign Spirit all things have been declared in all [the Gospels]: concerning the nativity, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection, concerning life with his disciples, and concerning his twofold coming; the first in lowliness when he was despised, which has taken place, the second glorious in royal power, which is still in the future. What marvel is it then, if John so consistently mentions these particular points also in his Epistles, saying about himself, “What we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears and our hands have handled, these things we have written to you?” For in this way he professes [himself] to be not only an eye-witness and hearer, but also a writer of all the marvelous deeds of the Lord, in their order. (*Muratorian Fragment*; trans. by Metzger)

The Gospel of John was revealed and given to the churches by John while still in the body, just as Papias of Hieropolis, the close disciple of John, related in the *exotericis*, that is, in the last five books. Indeed he [Papias] wrote down the gospel while John was dictating carefully. But the heretic Marcion, after being condemned by him because he was teaching the opposite to him [John], was expelled by John. But he [Marcion] had brought writings or letters to him [John] from the brothers which were in Pontus. (*Anti-Marcionite Prologue to John*)

Papias says: “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. . . . And Papias, of whom we are now speaking, confesses that he received the words of the apostles from those who followed them, but says that he was himself a hearer of Aristion and the presbyter John. (Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* 3.39)

*this is pure conjecture by Eusebius, and contradicts what he says below, that Papias was a hearer of the presbyter John; it is the presbyter/disciple John, not the apostle/son of Zebedee, who is the evangelist.