

A Brief Concerning Markan Priority

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Introduction

Among Bible scholars there has been a long-term, ongoing discussion concerning the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Many in academia insist the gospel of Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their basic outline. However, the same scholars suggest all of the Gospels were merely propaganda pieces written to address particular problems in the early church sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹

These suppositions have been embraced nearly 2000 years after the fact. Yet, the witness of those much closer to the actual events is completely different. The early church fathers insist that Matthew's Gospel was written first with the others following close behind.

Although the debate will not be brought to conclusion in this brief summary, perhaps a new look at the witness of the early church and the Gospels themselves will provide a first step toward a fresh perspective.

The Problem With Markan Priority

One of the reasons Many scholars eagerly embrace Markan priority is because they reject Matthew, the apostle of Jesus Christ, as the author of the gospel that bears his name. After all, they rightly question the idea that one of the apostles of Jesus, an eyewitness to and a participant in the events recorded in the Gospel, would use a secondary source as a basis for his own account. Therefore, Markan priority is "proof" that Matthew didn't actually write the Gospel bearing his name.²

Yet even when authorship of the first Gospel in the canon is attributed to Matthew, it is common to embrace the theory of Markan priority.³ Nevertheless, in the study of Scripture, it is best to begin with what we know and attempt to build from there rather than be guided by (scholarly) speculations. Thus, our first order of business is to touch on the things we know from history and the Bible.

¹ PBS. Accessed April 21, 2018. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/gospels.html>. These PBS videos were part of the assigned curriculum in a graduate course this writer took at Gonzaga University in Spokane Washington. The premise of the videos is that all of the Gospels were compiled by teams of editors and produced as propaganda pieces designed to address particular problems in the late first or early second century church.

²Ibid.

³R. Wayne Stacey, *The Synoptic Problem*, (Liberty University School of Divinity Slide Presentation: NBST 515-D10), slide 4.

Things We Know

One of the obvious facts available to us is that Matthew was one of the twelve disciples. He was called by Jesus sometime after most of the other apostles (Matthew 9:9, Mark 2:14, Luke 5:27) but was a witness to the bulk of what he wrote about. It is also true Matthew (Levi) was a tax collector and would have had ready access to writing materials and the skill to use them properly.

According to the early church fathers, Matthew's Gospel was written first and at least an early version of his gospel was written in Aramaic. In the "Fragments of Papias" (Papias lived 70-155), we read "Matthew put together the oracles [of the Lord] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could."⁴ In his report on this comment of Papias, the ancient church historian Eusebius "juxtaposes the present extract and an extract about Mark writing on the basis of the preaching of Peter" leaving little doubt "that Eusebius thought that Papius was referring to the activity that eventually produced the gospel of Matthew as known to Eusebius."⁵

Irenaeus (120-202), bishop of Lyons during the latter quarter of the second century, wrote,

Matthew also 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. After their departure, 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.⁶

Origen (185-253/54) was a Bible scholar who lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt. He wrote a twenty-five volume commentary on Matthew's gospel and said,

Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language. The second is by Mark, who composed it according to the instructions of Peter, who in his Catholic epistle acknowledges him as a son,

⁴ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1978), 155.

⁵ John Nolland, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: William B Erdmann's Publishing Company, 2005) 3.

⁶ Roberts et al, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 414

saying, 'The church that is at Babylon elected together with you, saluteth you, and so doth Marcus, my son.' And the third by Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, and composed for Gentile converts. Last of all that by John.⁷

Although it is not a popular view, some modern Bible teachers embrace the testimony of the early church fathers, saying Matthew "was responsible for an earlier collection of sayings of Jesus called the *logia*. In the actual writing of the gospel of Matthew, this provided the basic content material."⁸ This view should not be dismissed out of hand for "it is conceivable that Matthew, who was in all probability bilingual, himself translated his original work or republished it in an enlarged Greek edition."⁹ This would account for the presence of Matthew's Gospel in polished Greek form.

It is also true Matthew has been the first Gospel listed in the New Testament canon since the fourth century, further attesting to its privilege as the first Gospel account written. This was the view of Augustine of Hippo.¹⁰

If we accept the witness of Scripture and of church tradition, Matthew is the actual author of the Gospel bearing his name and therefore was an eyewitness to most of the reported events. This has significance for Luke's Gospel. "The beloved physician" compiled an account drawn (in part) from eye-witness testimony (Lk 1:1-2) and therefore would have undoubtedly used Matthew's Gospel as one of his sources. This explains the large number of similarities between the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew.

Speculations

The fact is, it is guesswork to say Mark's Gospel was written first. While it is true there is possible literary evidence suggesting this order of priority, "it seems to fly in the face of the statements of the earliest church fathers, who are almost unanimous in asserting that Matthew predated both Mark and Luke. . . . In short, to be valid, the Markan priority hypothesis would have to dismiss almost the entire patristic evidence."¹¹

The theory of Markan priority also rests upon the existence of Q; a conjectural early manuscript comprised of the sayings of Jesus. However,

⁷ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus: Bishop of Caesarea, in Palestine*, trans. Christian Frederic Crusé, ed. Isaac Boyle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), 245.

⁸ Myron S. Augsburger, *The Communicator's Commentary: Matthew*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 11.

⁹ R. V. G. Tasker, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew*, vol. 1, 24 vols., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 15.

¹⁰ Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background in Message, 2nd Edition*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2003), 120.

¹¹ Lea and Black, *The New Testament*, 122.

*Q is no more, after all, than a figment of scholarly imagination (i.e. a hypothesis). Not one scrap of manuscript evidence has turned up which can plausibly be thought of as part of this document in any of its recensions. The three supposed stages by which it came into its final form, visible in Matthew, reflect suspiciously closely the theological and history-of-religious predilections of one strand within modern New Testament studies, rather than any hard evidence within the first century.*¹²

So, it is scholarly speculation that insists Matthew and Luke used Mark's Gospel and Q to write their own. Again, this in spite of the witness of the early church and the lack of manuscript evidence for Q.

Reasonable Assumptions From What We Know

It would have been natural for at least one of Jesus' disciples to write about him soon after his death, resurrection and ascension. The obvious candidate for this task is Matthew. It is possible Matthew kept record of his years with Jesus and wrote the first Gospel account soon after the events (possibly as early as AD 35-40).

It has long been assumed that "the person responsible for penning [the Gospel of Matthew] has Jewish concerns in view."¹³ If Matthew intended to write for a primarily Jewish audience it is reasonable to assume his original account was written in Aramaic. This would locate his Gospel early in the life of the church.

The fact that over 90% of Mark appears in Matthew and 50% in Luke is often cited as "proof" that Matthew used Mark as his source. However, Luke, drawing from Matthew as one of his sources, would tend to quote his account directly since it was written by one of the men close to Jesus. It is also reasonable to suggest Mark used Matthew's Gospel (abbreviating the account) as he was writing later, for a church transitioning to a predominately Gentile make-up. Mark did not simply repeat Matthew's verbiage but (as traditions suggests) focused on Peter's perspective.

It is also important to remember the Gospels are different views of the same story. Just like a sculpture observed from different angles will result in different reports about its appearance, likewise, the four Gospels provide a four point perspective on the ministry of Jesus. "All of this, we believe, was orchestrated by the Holy Spirit."¹⁴

¹² N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 438.

¹³ Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), 21.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth, 2nd Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 115.

Proposed Solution to the Synoptic Problem

In the absence of hard evidence suggesting Markan priority or the reliance of Matthew and Luke upon Mark and Q, it is proposed the gospel accounts were produced in the order they appear in the New Testament canon. Thus, Matthew wrote his Gospel first followed by Mark and Luke. This reflects the Augustinian position rather than the Griesbach hypothesis.¹⁵

The shared wording of Matthew and Mark is just as easily explained as a borrowing by Mark from Matthew as it is the other way around. The “rough Greek” of Mark is understood by anyone who has read the class assignments of novice scholars who source their material from an Encyclopedia, rewording it in their own vernacular to avoid the charge of plagiarism. This is not to suggest Mark was attempting a clandestine piracy of Matthew. Rather it suggests a reason Matthew’s Greek appears more polished than Mark’s. Mark read Matthews account, considered Peter’s oral history and wrote a Holy spirit inspired Gospel in his own words. In any case, there is nothing in the shared wording of Matthew and Mark or the quality of the Greek in either account that demands Markan priority.

Another objection to Matthean priority is Mark’s failure to include a nativity story, the sermon on the mount and the Lord’s prayer. Supposedly this suggests Mark could not have used Matthew’s account as a source for his own; if he had, why would he leave out this important information? However, this is to engage in the psychoanalysis of Mark at a distance of some 2000 years. There are a number of reasons Mark might have decided to leave out these events in his “digest” of the gospel, not the least of which is the fact he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to do so. Thus it remains plausible Mark drew upon Matthew’s account and the reminiscence of Peter to produce his fast paced, “cliff notes” version of the gospel.

In the final analysis we accept the fact that “no overarching hypothesis is possible in solving the synoptic problem.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, this should have no bearing on our confidence in the reliability of the New Testament. Regardless of when each Gospel was written, regardless of who relied upon whom, we stand firm in the assurance of God’s word.

Conclusion

One complaint of the “man in the pew” is that members of academia are overly concerned with scholarly trivialities. Most nonspecialists claiming Christ as Lord and Savior could not care less who wrote the first Gospel account. However, those who engage in teaching the word must wrestle with these seemingly “ivory tower” questions.

¹⁵ Mark Strauss, “What Are the Synoptic Gospels And Where Do They Come From?” *Zondervan Academic Blog*, September 19, 2017, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/synoptic-gospels/>.

¹⁶ Lea and Black, *The New Testament*, 126.

As Paul instructed his protégé Timothy, “be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). If pastors and teachers hope to correctly teach the word of truth they must have considered all facets of the text. Moreover, it is important the “man in the pew” understands some of this information as well. Therefore, the pastor and teacher who is diligent to present himself approved to God will come to grips with these issues, understand them well, and then present his findings to those under his care in a fashion that is both understandable and profitable to its hearers.

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