

Arguments in Favor of The Traditional Identification of the Authors of the Synoptic Gospels.

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1. The relative veracity of Papias' witness

1. He was writing in 125 AD, having been raised as a Christian youth in the 80s
2. He claims he was taught by John ("the Elder") whom he says was the Apostle
3. That he has to identify the authors coheres with what we know about them originally having been written without internal attribution.
4. What he writes about Mark can be reconciled with what we see in the Gospel itself. Specifically:
 1. Chronological structure appears to be thematic, not temporal.
 2. Form-Criticism reveals that the segments appear to be rooted in a preaching genre, with disconnected vignettes being placed in a thematic structure that is conveyed chronologically.
 3. Peter is cited as being the source for the author's information, yet Peter is depicted in the most negative, least glossed-over, light.
 4. Mark, while written in Greek, is close to the "Aramaic layer" of the transmission of its contents. The Greek text is mostly not translational Greek, however there are features that show the translation-layer is not far removed from the composition-layer.
5. What Papias says about "Matthew" can be reasonably equated to what has been either discovered or inferred to be true about the Hypothetical Q Document. Hence, while Matthew didn't write the Canonical Gospel of Matthew in Aramaic, he may well have written (or was the direct source for) the original Aramaic layer/edition of Q, which was then translated into Greek by the time Paul used it when quoting Jesus in his letters.

2. The "Apostolic Obscurity" Argument

1. **Apostolic Identification Pressure:** If these Gospels' authorship were entirely unknown to the late 1st and early 2nd Century Church, then the pressure would have been great to assign them to a Disciple/Apostle. This would have been particularly true during the debate over their canonicity, which occurred sometime prior to the middle part of the 2nd Century. Apostolic authorship would have given them greater weight in this debate; if any way could have been found to claim that an Apostle wrote each of them, it would have happened ... unless the actual authorship was either known or strongly hinted at in the traditions then-available, hence making it difficult to shift the identity of the author from the traditionally identified person to an Apostle.
 - **Mark:** Logic dictates that this Gospel should have been assigned to Peter: (i.e., it was written in Rome, based upon his preaching about Jesus, soon after his martyrdom). Unfortunately, the known tradition in the first half of the 2nd Century, as conveyed to us by Bishop Papias, assigned it to John Mark, who

was not an Apostle (even though he was an eye-witness to at least some of Jesus' words and deeds in Jerusalem during Holy Week). Given that the very same tradition which identifies Mark as the author also claims that Mark's source for the Gospel was Peter's preaching, the pressure would have been incredible to shift the identity of the author of the Gospel from Mark to Peter and relegate Mark to "scribe" status. Given that Mark was the favorite Gospel of the Church in Rome, and given Rome's preference for St. Peter, the pressure to do re-identify the author as being Peter is magnified even further. This didn't happen, which raises the question "why not?" The most plausible reason would be if it was known by far too many people that Mark was the proximate author of the gospel, not just a scribe used by Peter, and that while he got his information for its content from "the great fisherman" / first "Bishop of Rome," he himself was organizer and final determiner of its content, structure, and wording: i.e., its author.

- **Luke:** This one is even more difficult than Mark because its author tells us, up front, that he isn't an eyewitness but a careful researcher who has read through previously written gospels and has spoken to those who were eye witnesses, etc., to the events in question, and that he has set out to write down "an orderly account" of the events as seemed best to him. No claim for Apostolic identity would have been possible. In particular, why would Luke's name be chosen for this Gospel, making it impossible to give it Apostolic weight and ensuring its canonical inclusion? If the names of the authors were being made up, certainly those who were doing the selecting could have chosen someone else who, while not a Disciple, was nevertheless an Apostle or close within the Apostolic continuum: for instance, Paul or Barnabas would have been excellent choices, rather than a fairly minor player in the New Testament story, like Luke. There must have been some historical weight – some kind of living memory or other form of authority – behind the identification which kept the interested parties from making an Apostolic claim for the authorship of this gospel. As it is, Luke's claim to Apostolic authority is rooted in his sources.
- **Matthew:** This is the Gospel that actually proves the point – the tradition assigns it to the Disciple/Apostle Matthew. Indeed, other than the Gospel of John, it's the *only* canonical Gospel for which it is claimed that a Disciple wrote it. However, here we have the most difficulty with what the source of this tradition tells us: Papias says that it was originally written in Aramaic, not Greek. The problem with this claim is that it is overwhelmingly obvious from even just a cursory read of the text in Greek that it couldn't have been drafted in Aramaic and translated into Greek because, linguistically, the text is compositional in nature, not translated. Additionally, an analysis of it relative to Luke and Mark indicate that the author used Mark as its chronological outline and another source (the same one as Luke) for the teachings of Jesus not found in Mark. If the Disciple Matthew had written it, none of this is likely. Hence, Papias cannot be talking about the canonical Gospel, which we

today know as “Matthew.” How did this name get attributed to it? I propose that what could have happened to Mark, had there not been a stronger tradition regarding its true authorship, is precisely what happened to Matthew. During the later half of the 1st Century and on into the first quarter of the 2nd Century the author of the Gospel was unknown; however, it was known that a good portion of this Gospel – large sections of it, actually – were direct citations from something that an Apostle had written: what we now call “Q.” Hence, the Apostolic authority behind Q (i.e., the Disciple Matthew) got applied to the whole Gospel which quotes Q in the largest and most complete sections. Since there was no alternative tradition to override this appellation, the need to have an Apostle as author pushed the the whole Gospel to Matthew.

2. **The Continued Problem of Obscurity:** Given the above information, there remains the problem of the obscurity of the authors that were identified for each:
 - Two Gospels – Mark and Luke – are **not** assigned by the tradition to Disciple/Apostles. While it is true that Mark was an eyewitness, as a youth, to some of the events in the life of Jesus, and is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, in some of the letters of Paul, and in 1 Peter, he is otherwise an obscure and fairly unimportant character in the New Testament Church. Luke is an even more obscure player, not appearing by name in the Acts (although he is usually identified with the “we” passages) and known to us directly only through the letters of Paul (Colossians, Philemon, 2 Timothy).
 - While the Gospel of Matthew *is* connected by tradition to a Disciple/Apostle, it is **not** connected to a Disciple who was influential in the Gospel account or in the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, considering who Matthew was known to have been prior to his calling by Jesus – a Tax Collector and, hence, a collaborator with the Roman occupation – it seems even less likely that this particular name would have been chosen to serve as the authority behind the most Jewish of the Gospels *unless* there was some external reason behind the assignment. Why not assign this Gospel so a more influential character like James Zebedee or James the Brother of the Lord? Why not Andrew, or Philip, or Simon the Zelot, or one of the other Apostles ... someone with more “chops” and fewer negatives relative to a Jewish-Christian community in an exile resulting from the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans? If the name “Matthew” was picked in order to lend the Gospel some Apostolic weight, why not a Disciple with more gravitas and fewer negatives than this one? The choice of “Matthew” makes no sense unless there were a substantive reason (or at least a plausible rationale) for this particular Disciple being chosen.
3. **Community Need vs Historic Memory Argument:**

It is frequently claimed by current skeptical scholarship that the Gospels are products of different, isolated, early Christian communities; they wrote their Gospels from the

context of their own experiences, assigning to Jesus teachings which spoke to their circumstances and needs but which did not, necessarily, go back to the Rabbi from Nazareth. While attractive for those who wish to minimize a connection between an “historical Jesus” of their own fantasy and the Biblical Jesus of the Church, it is quite problematic given what we can tell about the documentary dependence of the Gospels and their geographical (and, hence, community) distribution.

1. Form-critical Analysis of the pericopes within the Jesus teachings indicate that they reflect a cohesive collection, not the creation of various independent communities. The order of their distribution in both Matthew and Luke is consistent between the two Gospels, indicating that they are quoting from the same (or substantially the same) document that has the teachings in a coherent order. Reconstruction based upon a comparison between Matthew and Luke relative to the teachings not found in Mark makes it clear that this teachings source, long called “Q” by New Testament Scholarship, shows internal indications of having been written:
 1. In Aramaic.
 2. Over a short period of time;
 3. By, mostly, a single author, although this wouldn’t preclude editorial work by later scribes/translators;
 4. With a thematic intent – i.e., as an aid to missionary activity.Further, this “Sayings Source” shows signs of having been translated from Aramaic into Greek by no later than 50 AD; it was available to Paul, who quotes it selectively in Romans and in 1 Corinthians in the early/mid 50s.
2. Mark was written by a single Jewish-Christian but for a Gentile-Christian community, most probably in Rome. The author was familiar with Greek, but not in a sophisticated way. His use of vocabulary and grammar suggests that Greek is not his mother tongue, and that most of his source-material was in the form of discrete sermons related in both Greek and Aramaic. The use of Aramaic is very close to the surface in this Gospel, with several instances where phrases, place names, measurements, and time references are given in Hebraic formats, in Aramaic words or with Aramaic idiomatic phrasings.
3. Luke was written by a single gentile-Christian for a Gentile-Christian community in Greece or Asia Minor. Redaction and form-critical analysis has demonstrated that minimal secondary editorial work is indicated and that it was written in a fairly short period of time. The author knows Greek so well that it would appear to be his mother tongue, and has an interest in relating the account in ways that gentile readers living in a gentile world can understand. The use of Greek is mostly compositional in nature, however elements of Aramaic usage (colloquialisms, idioms, and word-order convention) can be identified particularly in the birth narratives and in the accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances.

4. Matthew was written by a single Jewish-Christian for a Jewish-Christian community in Antioch or, possibly, Damascus. This author is very familiar with Greek, and yet Aramaic elements find their way into the text in the form of multiple sources, including word order and colloquialisms, specifically in the birth narrative which appears to be reflective of translational (rather than compositional) Greek.

With all of this in mind, is it really reasonable to conclude that the communities within which the Synoptic Gospels (and Q) were written widely distributed and of a diverse character? Yes: one was in Rome, one was in Greece/Asia Minor, one was in Antioch/Damascus, and one was in Palestine; two were Gentile-Christian communities, while the other two were a predominately Jewish-Christian and communities. There would be an understandable level of distrust and discomfort between the Gentile and the Jewish-Christian communities, and the temporal needs of the Q community may have been rather different from the temporal needs of the latter 3 communities in which the Synoptic Gospels were written. All of this being said, it must be remembered that probably just a single author wrote the majority of each Gospel, that two of these authors used written documentation that came from different communities, and yet they trusted these documents (Q and Mark) sufficiently to use them as the basis for their works. That does not reflect the setting which skeptical scholars paint of the 1st Century New Testament Church. The Gospel communities may well have used their source materials, providing interpretation or “spin” based upon their needs, but it is exceedingly unlikely that they made up these stories. Similarly, the community within which Q was originally written had its needs, and those needs can be derived from an analysis of what they wrote in producing Q ... and what this shows is a strong evangelistic drive, and a need to ensure that the content of the message maintained fidelity to that which the founder of the community – Jesus – proclaimed. The message about Jesus didn’t need to be written down, for that was in the oral kerygma ... but the teaching by Jesus needed writing down so that those teachings would not be lost and traveling preachers could convey them to people who had never heard it for themselves. A similar need arose for the story about the life and ministry of Jesus following Peter’s death, and this occasioned Mark’s writing down of the teaching/preaching of Peter about Jesus. The next step was to take the teaching *of* Jesus (Q) and the teaching *about* Jesus (Mark) and put them together; that is what Matthew and Luke did, each independent of the other.

Summation: The tradition doesn’t do with Mark what we would expect it to do if the identification of the authorship was entirely made up, and while it tried to do it with Matthew the choice of Apostle doesn’t fit with the expectation, nor does what it does with Luke make any sense relative to the pressure then-present to assign Apostolic authorship to canonical books. Hence, historical weight should be given to the Papias tradition on the authorship of the Synoptic Gospels; the trend among hyper-skeptics to deny the tradition really must be weighted against the strength of the tradition in the face of the compelling reasons which existed to assign them differently.