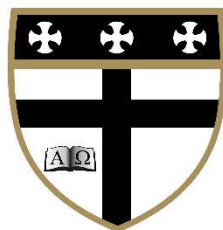


The Whitefield Seminary Papers

“Law & Religion Forum”

Volume 2, Apostolate Paper #31



A HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

**“Forensic Origin of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and
Luke”¹**

by

Roderick O. Ford, Litt.D., LL.D.

Copyrighted Material © 2022

¹ Roderick O. Ford, *The Apostolate Papers* (unpublished research papers, 2015 to 2022). www.roderickford.org.

“Forensic Origins of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke”



Introduction²

The origins of the four Synoptic Gospels have never interested me because, as an Evangelical Christian I was taught to accept them at face value-- this was in rural, northern Florida amongst many unlettered folk. After I matriculated to Morgan State University in Baltimore and became exposed to both Roman Catholicism and secular criticism and science, I was saved by the erudite writings of Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas, who also accepted the authenticity of the Sacred Scriptures both at face value and also while testing their soundness through analytical reasoning, philosophy, and science. And so, I found no need to address the subject matter of the follow paper: who wrote the Four Gospels and in what order? Why are there so many parallel passages within them?

This brief paper only covers the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke-- the Gospel of John is excluded since it was written decades after the first three Gospels and does not contain the same parallel Scriptures.

This paper is designed to provide a quick introduction to the topic while guiding the reader towards more definitive sources for further inquire.

² This paper is dedicated to the **Rev. John Wesley (1703 – 1791)**, Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford and principal founder of the Methodist Movement and the Methodist Church, and who once proclaimed: “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”

“Forensic Origins of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
1. Chapter One: Forensic Origin of the Gospel of Mark	4
2. Chapter Two: Forensic Origin of the Gospel of Matthew	6
3. Chapter Three: Comparing the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke	10
Conclusion	13

Chapter One: Forensic Origin of the Gospel of Mark

We turn first to the Gospel of Mark because, forensically and according to modern scholarship, it is considered to be the first Gospel that was written:

Up until the 19th century the gospel of Mark was traditionally placed second, and sometimes fourth, in the Christian canon, as an abridgement of Matthew; the Church has consequently derived its view of Jesus primarily from Matthew, secondarily from John, and only distantly from Mark.

However, in the 19th century, Mark came to be viewed by many scholars as the earliest of the four gospels, and as a source used by both Matthew and Luke. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke bear a striking resemblance to each other, so much so that their contents can easily be set side by side in parallel columns. The fact that they share so much material verbatim and yet also exhibit important differences has led to a number of hypotheses explaining their interdependence, a phenomenon termed the synoptic problem.

It is widely accepted that this was the first gospel (Marcan Priority) and was used as a source by both Matthew and Luke, who agree with each other in their sequence of stories and events only when they also agree with Mark. The hypothesis of Marcian priority continues to be held by the majority of scholars today, and there is a new recognition of the author as an artist and theologian using a range of literary devices to convey his conception of Jesus as the authoritative yet suffering Son of God.³

According to church tradition, a person named John Mark, who was a companion of the Apostle Peter, wrote the Gospel of Mark. It is suggested that he transcribe the teachings and reminiscences of the Apostle Peter.

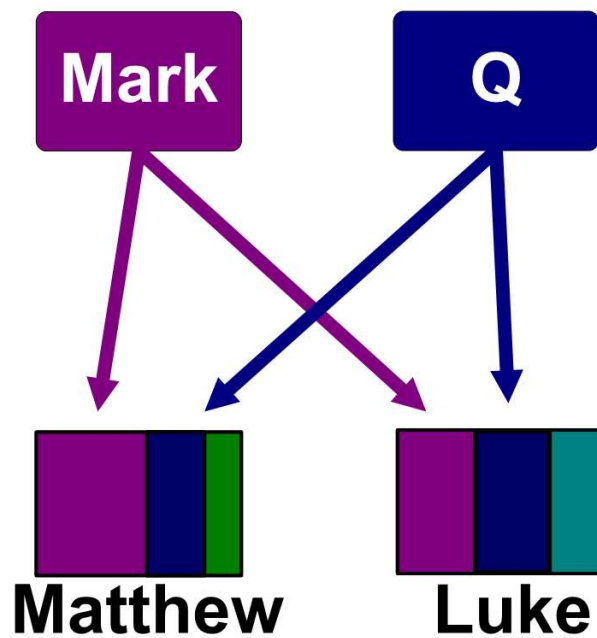
³ “Gospel of Mark,” Wikipedia (online encyclopedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Mark

However, modern scholarship has held that the Gospel of Mark was anonymously written.⁴

The objective of this paper is not to debate the authenticity of authorship, but rather to demonstrate how the three Synoptic Gospel of Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate to each other.

As such, the modern forensic theory holds that the Gospel of Mark was the first and the primary Gospel, from which the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke utilized as a reference, as follows:

Two-source Hypothesis



⁴ Ibid.

Chapter Two: Forensic Origin of the Gospel of Matthew

According to the traditional teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church Fathers, the Gospel of Matthew was (a) written by the Apostle Matthew and (b) the first of the four Synoptic Gospels.

“The early patristic scholars **regarded Matthew as the earliest of the gospels** and placed it first in the canon, and the early Church mostly quoted from Matthew, secondarily from John, and only distantly from Mark.”⁵

“According to early church tradition, originating with Papias of Hierapolis (c. 60–130 AD),⁶ the gospel was written by Matthew the companion of Jesus, but this presents numerous problems.”⁷

However, according to modern scholarship (i.e., forensic research), the Gospel of Matthew “was written anonymously⁸ in the last quarter of the first century by a male Jew who stood on the margin between traditional and nontraditional Jewish values and who was familiar with technical legal aspects of scripture being debated in his time.”⁹

This view is based on three arguments: (a) the setting reflects the final separation of Church and Synagogue, about 85 AD; (b) it reflects the capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD; (c) it uses Mark, usually dated around 70 AD, as a source. (See R. T. France (2007), *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 18.) France himself is not convinced by the majority—see his

⁵ “Gospel of Matthew,” Wikipedia (online encyclopedia), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Matthew; see, e.g., James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (United States of America: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

⁶ “Gospel of Matthew,” Wikipedia (online encyclopedia), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Matthew; see, also, Chris Kieth, *The Pericope of the Adulteress in Contemporary Research. The Library of New Testament Studies. Bloomsbury Publishing* (United States of America: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

⁷ *Ibid.*; see, also, Dennis Duling, *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (United States of America: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁸ Delbert Buckett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁹ *Ibid.*

Commentary, pp. 18–19. Allison adds that "Ignatius of Antioch, the Didache, and Papias—all from the first part of the second century—show knowledge of Matthew, which accordingly must have been composed before 100 CE. (See e.g. Ign., Smyrn. 1; Did. 8.2.)" See Dale Allison, "Matthew" in Muddiman and Barton's *The Gospels* (Oxford Bible Commentary), Oxford 2010, p. 27.¹⁰

However, given the antipathy towards the Christian faith amongst many modern scholars, it is important that the Christian theologians, pastors, and Church leaders pay careful attention to the (a) sufficiency, (b) plausibility, and (c) certainty of the so-called forensic evidence which purports the Gospel's lack of authenticity, that is promoted in a variety of forms of modern scholarship on New Testament archaeology and historiography.

For instance, scholar R. T. France's *The Gospel of Matthew* highlights several reasons why the so-called forensic evidence may be merely conjecture and speculation, rather than hard, scientific proof, where he writes:

The current majority view that Matthew's gospel was written in the fourth quarter of the first century depends mainly on three arguments: (a) that its setting reflects the period of final separation between the church and the synagogue, probably around A.D. 85, (b) that it is written in the light of the experience of the Roman capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and (c) that it is dependent on the gospel of Mark, which some scholars also date after A.D. 70, others shortly before.

I have expressed my scepticism on the first point in the previous section. The second depends on the assumption that neither Jesus nor Matthew would have foreseen the events of the Roman war, so that the destruction of the temple could be mentioned only after the event-- though the substantial body of scholars who date Mark before A.D. 70 have clearly found this argument unpersuasive, and Matthew's language about the fate of the temple is not significantly more precise than that of Mark (see also below on 22:7 for the

¹⁰ "Gospel of Matthew," Wikipedia (online encyclopedia), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Matthew.

burning of the city, and p. 913 on the difficulty of identifying Matthew's 'devastating pollution' in the light of known historical events). Moreover, **there are a number of passages in the gospel [of Matthew] which presuppose that the temple is still standing** (see below on [Matthew] 5:23-24; 17:24-27; 23:16-22), and while it is of course possible that Matthew has preserved such sayings even after they have ceased to be applicable, in at least one case this would have been to risk significant misunderstanding by post-70 readers (see below p. 668, n. 15).

Probably the influential reason for dating Matthew toward the end of the century is **not a specific argument from the text of Matthew itself but a presumed order of composition of the gospels combined with a relative dating scheme which is widely adopted in current scholarship, but which has few if any fixed points....** As for the wider dating scheme, **I believe there are sound reasons for questioning the consensus**, and for exploring an alternative scheme which takes its cue from the lack of reference in the book of Acts to any events later than A.D. 62, even though the Neronian persecution in Rome in A.D. 64/65 had such major implications for the church in Rome and was the probable cause of death of both Peter and Paul, the two key figures of the book. In my commentary on Mark I have noted the patristic tradition that Mark's gospel was written while Peter was still alive, that is, not later than the early sixties. While there is probably an element of guesswork in such traditions, such a dating would tie in with the proposal that the main period of the writing of the Synoptic Gospels was in the sixties (a period when, incidentally, **it is more likely that the apostle Matthew would still be active** than in the fourth quarter of the century). **A pre-70 date for Matthew remains a minority view, but one which has been strongly supported**, and which is usually dismissed **not so much by specific arguments** as on the basis of a **preferred overall dating scheme**. The issue is **not of great exegetical importance** for most of the gospel, but it does clearly affect one's assessment of the anti-temple theme which is such a prominent emphasis in Matthew. In the commentary that follows **I shall favor the possibility that the gospel was, as**

Irenaeus declared, written in the sixties, while the temple was still standing.¹¹

The Reformed Theological view need not take a position, because, and Professor R. T. France has stated, the question of when the Gospel of Matthew was written, and by whom, is “**not of great exegetical importance.**”¹² However, the traditional view that the Gospel of Matthew was written by the Apostle Matthew himself, perhaps during the sixties, has strongly scholarly support as well.¹³

¹¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (United States of America: Eerdmans, William B. Publishing, Co., 2007), pp. 18-19.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Chapter Three: Comparing the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke

The majority of scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was the first gospel to be composed, and that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were then composed, in that order. The common passages of Scriptures contained within these three Gospels have thus led to the following three hypothesis:

I. The M Source Hypothesis

There is the “**M Source**,” which contains Christ’s sayings and general descriptions that are unique to, and exclusively found in, the Gospel of Matthew.

This means that within the Gospel of Matthew, at least hypothetically, there is material that not found in the Gospels, to wit:

Likely content of M Source

Parable	Chapter	Verses	Number of verses
Parable of the Tares	13	13:24–43	20
Parable of the Hidden Treasure	13	13:44	1
Parable of the Pearl	13	13:45–46	2
Parable of Drawing in the Net	13	13:47–52	6
Parable of the Unforgiving Servant	18	18:21–35	15
<u>Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard</u>	20	20:1–16	17
Parable of the Two Sons	21	21:28–32	5
Parable of the Ten Virgins	25	25:1–13	14

“M source, which is sometimes referred to as M document, or simply M, comes from the M in ‘Matthean material.’ It is a *hypothetical textual source* for the Gospel of Matthew. M Source is defined as that '**special material**' of the Gospel of Matthew that is neither **Q source** nor **Mark**.”¹⁴

¹⁴ “M source,” (Wikipedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M_source.

It is important to note that this “M Source” is a hypothesis only.¹⁵

II. The Aram M or Proto-Matthew Source Hypothesis

In addition, the Gospel of Matthew has 600 verses in common with the Gospel of Mark, which has only 661 verses total.

The argument in favor of the “M Source” is that there is material in the Gospel of Matthew that is not found in any other Gospel.

However, the “Aram M” or “Proto-Matthew” hypothesis holds that it is not likely, or possible, to separate the “M Source” materials in the Gospel of Matthew from those 600 verses found in common in the Gospel of Mark.¹⁶

This means that if the Gospel of Mark was written first, and even modern scholars agree that it was written during the 60s, then the “M Source” within the Gospel of Matthew is authentic material from the 60s, since it parallels the Gospel of Mark.

Again, the “Aram M” source or the “Proto-Matthew” source is a hypothesis.

III. The Quelle or ‘Q’ Source Hypothesis

Finally, there is a “**Quelle or ‘Q’ Source**” which contains Christ’s sayings and general descriptions of circumstances and events surrounding his ministry. These consist of 220 verses.

The “Q Source” is quoted or shared between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke-- but *not contained* in the Gospel of Mark.

“This ancient text supposedly contained the logia or quotations from Jesus. Scholars believe that an unknown redactor composed Greek-language proto-

¹⁵ Ibid. (“In *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (1924), Burnett Hillman Streeter argued that a third source, referred to as M and also hypothetical, lies behind the material in Matthew that has no parallel in Mark or Luke.”)

¹⁶ Ibid. (“Throughout the remainder of the 20th century, there were various challenges and refinements of the [M Source]. For example, in his 1953 book *The Gospel Before Mark*, Pierson Parker posited an early version of Matthew (Aram. M or proto-Matthew) as the primary source. Parker argued that it was not possible to separate Streeter's "M" material from the material in Matthew parallel to Mark.”)

Gospel. The name Q, coined by the German theologian and biblical scholar Johannes Weiss, stands for ‘Quelle’ (German for ‘source’).”¹⁷

Quelle Source

(220 Verses)

Gospel of Matthew

Gospel of Luke

Hence, the Gospel of Matthew shares 220 verses with the Gospel of Luke-- which are, again, not found in the Gospel of Mark.

Again, it is important to note that the “Q Source” is only a hypothesis.

¹⁷ “M Source,” *Wikipedia* (online encyclopedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M_source

CONCLUSION

Now the pouring out of the Holy Ghost on the Day of Pentecost, and thereafter, was designed to “bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”¹⁸ As a Reformed Theologian and a born-again Christian, it is my firm belief that this passage of Scripture is an accurate description of what happened to Christ’s several apostles and disciples. The Early Church wanted to know everything it could about the Messiah, his message, and mission; and so Christ’s sayings and deed were etched in memory and recorded on scripts. This is also likely when one considers the following Jewish tradition in vogue during the time of Christ:

Yeshua and the Oral Law

In Jesus’ day, a disciple was not allowed to commit his rabbi’s teachings to writing. David Bivin enlightens us:

It may surprise us that **a disciple of a sage was not permitted to transmit in writing the words of his master.** A rabbi’s teaching was considered ‘**Oral Torah**’...and as such its transmission in writing was strongly prohibited. It therefore seems likely that Jesus’ first disciples would not have dared preserve his teaching in writing, **but would have transmitted it orally.** Rather than compromising Jesus’ words, this was more likely key to preserving them accurately for future generations.

Such patterns of memorization make the ‘Q Document’ theory unnecessary: the teachings and miracles of Yeshua would have been **committed to memory by his followers,** and **these memorized portions** would have served as anchor texts for the Gospel writers.

The **memorized teaching of the early rabbis was considered “Oral Law”** and supposedly passed down by Moses—even though it was spoken by rabbis who lived centuries after Moses. Michael L. Brown summarizes the Orthodox Jewish belief: ‘Moses

¹⁸ John 14: 26 (“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”)

not only received the entire Hebrew Bible on Mount Sinai, he received the entire Mishnah⁷ and Talmud.’

We may think it absurd that Moses received the help of rabbis who lived more than 1500 years later—but that is nonetheless the belief. Such convictions, however, were still being formulated in the first century.

During the time of Jesus, not all Jews viewed the teachings of the sages as oral Torah.⁹ Even in modern times, Karaite Jews believe the entire Tanakh (Old Testament) while rejecting the Talmud (the oral Torah reduced to writing) as authoritative.¹⁰ In a sense, Karaites are the Jewish equivalent of “Sola Scriptura” evangelicals, but their Scriptures are, obviously, limited to the First Testament.

Nehemia Gordon, himself a Karaite, suggests that Yeshua embraced the Karaite viewpoint regarding the Scriptures, rejecting ‘the traditions of men’ as authoritative.

Jacob Neusner suggests that the Oral Law (beginning with the Mishnah, the most ancient part of the Talmud) gained this level of authority only after it was finally written down:

I refer to the Mishnah, a philosophical law code that reached closure about 200 C.E. and soon afterward was represented as part of the Torah God had revealed to Moses at Sinai. This component of the Torah represented revelation that was orally formulated and orally transmitted. The advent of the Mishnah in circa 200 demanded that people explain the status and authority of the new document. The Mishnah rapidly was accorded the status of the authoritative law-code of Judaism...

I suspect that Yeshua’s viewpoint regarding the Oral Law is similar to that of Dr. Louis Goldberg:

First, as already noted from Hillel’s and Ishmael’s rules of hermeneutics, a good part of the Oral Law

reflects sound interpretations of the Written Law and can be used appropriately on many occasions when seeking to enhance the witness of Messianic Jews.

Second, some features of the Oral Law can be adapted by believers to express a scriptural faith.

And third, certain elements of the Oral Law go far beyond and are even contrary to the Written Law.

Since the Talmud did not even begin to be written down until the second century (while **memorized tractates** date back to 200 B.C.), and since the Gospels were penned much earlier (in the first century), we can draw a conclusion: the early believers considered Jesus' teachings authoritative Scripture.¹⁹

And so, I conclude this Paper with no significant change in my earliest views about the authenticity of the New Testament, as when I was a child in rural, northern Florida-- that is to say, that the authors who composed the four Synoptic Gospels did so accurately; that the New Testament is trustworthy; and that this written "Oral Torah" of Christ was divinely inspired, transcribed, and preserved for future generations.

The End

¹⁹ Ed Vasichek, "Jesus and His Disciples: Rabbinic Schools, Oral Law, and Distinct Callings – Discipleship in the Original Jewish Context, Part 5," <https://sharperiron.org/article/jesus-and-his-disciples-rabbinic-schools-oral-law-and-distinct-callings-discipleship>

