





The Composition of the New Testament

How We Got the Bible

Winter Sessions 2025–26



Extrabiblical Sources Relevant for the Composition of the Gospels

- Papias (ca. 100–140 AD)
- The Muratorian Canon (170–300 AD)
- Clement of Alexandria (150–200 AD)
- Irenaeus (ca. 175–190 AD)
- Origen (ca. 240 AD)
- Eusebius (ca. 300–320 AD)
- Anti-Marcionite prologues (2nd–3rd cent. AD)



What the Extrabiblical Sources Tell Us

- There are four Gospels.
- Mark's Gospel is based on Peter's preaching.
- Luke was the companion of Paul.
- Matthew and John are the disciples from the Gospels.
- John wrote last.
- Matthew was written in the "language of the Hebrews."



Was Matthew Originally Written in Aramaic? Probably Not

- Many of Matthew's OT quotations are from the Greek Septuagint.
- Matthew does not read like "translation Greek."



Was Mark Based on Peter's Preaching?

- Mark is most critical of the twelve disciples.
- In places, Mark focuses on Peter where the other Gospels speak generally of the disciples. (weak)
- Peter calls Mark “my son” (1 Pet 5:13).



“When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, ‘How did the fig tree wither at once?’”

Matthew 21:20

“And Peter remembered and said to him, ‘Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered.’”

Mark 11:21



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Was Luke Paul's Companion?

- Luke, the writer of Luke-Acts, was a companion of Paul.



Was Luke Paul's Companion?

⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 16:8–10



Was Matthew Jesus' Disciple?

- Only in Matthew is Levi called “Matthew.”
- There is no other well-known early Christian named “Matthew.”



Was John Jesus' Disciple?

- The “Beloved Disciple” appears several times in John’s narrative (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20–24)



“This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.”

John 21:24



“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.”

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.



[3] for he speaks as follows: “And I shall not hesitate to append to the interpretations all that I ever learnt well from the elders and remember well, for of their truth I am confident. For unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from truth itself; [4] but if ever anyone came who had followed the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord’s disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples, were saying. For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice.”

Eusebius (on Papias), *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.3–4



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Were the Gospels Originally Anonymous?

- The consistency of their names is evidence in itself.
- Matthew, Mark, and Luke are unlikely names.



Was John Written Last?

- John is aware of Peter's death.



¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)

John 21:18–19a



“Every morning when I have breakfast, I thank God that I don’t know when the Gospels were written.”

Malcom Muggeridge, British Satirist



An Argument for Early Dating

- Acts stops during Paul's house arrest because that's when Luke finished writing.
- Luke is earlier than Acts.
- Luke depends on sources, including at least one other Gospel (Matthew or Mark or both).



¹ Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1–4

1. “Eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” handed down the material.
2. “Many undertake to compile a narrative of the things that were accomplished.”
3. Luke writes his “orderly account.”



“There is considerable evidence that oral and written cultures existed side by side in the ancient world, particularly since writing tended to be used as a help to memory rather than an autonomous and independent mode of communication.”

Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40.



“The Gospel traditions bear witness to a strong and widely prevalent concern among the first Christians to *remember* Jesus, to celebrate their memories, to retain them in appropriate forms, to structure their traditions for easy recall, but above all to remember.”

James D. G. Dunn, *The Living Word*
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 34.



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Questions?



The Order of Paul's Letter-Writing Ministry

- Galatians
- 1 & 2 Thessalonians
- 1 Corinthians
- Imprisonment in Ephesus: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians
- 2 Corinthians
- Romans
- Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy



Paul's Undisputed Letters:

- Romans
- 1 & 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- Philemon
- 1 Thessalonians

Paul's Disputed Letters:

- Ephesians
- Colossians
- 2 Thessalonians
- 1 & 2 Timothy
- Titus



“It therefore seems that, in Palestinian literature no less than Hellenistic, there was a class of pseudonymous writing which aimed to mislead the reader about its authorship, and often succeeded in doing so. The oldest works of this kind seem to be the apocalypses and other “revelatory” books cherished ... such as 1 Enoch, the Testament of Levi, Jubilees, and the Qumran Temple Scroll Such works unmistakably involve pretence [sic], and so do not come within the scope of any convention of pseudonymity which the Jews can be shown to have reckoned acceptable. ”

Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1985), 354.



“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.”

2 Thessalonians 2:2



Arguments in Favor of Pseudepigraphy

- The theology of these letters is said to be different than that of the undisputed letters.
- The church structure presupposed in some of these letters seems to be more advance than what existed in Paul's day.
- The style and vocabulary do not match the undisputed letters.



“The argument from style, which has been used to determine the authenticity and inauthenticity of certain letters, can no longer be considered valid.”

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 34; also E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 141–55.



Questions