

CHRONOLOGY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

With time progressing downwards, below is a timeline on the datings of early Christian writings that:

- (a) show no definite awareness of any of the Gospels, in particular of Matthew; or
- (b) show an awareness of Matthew, as by quoting from it, but do not mention the name of it or any other gospel; or
- (c) show definite awareness of both Matthean text and its attributed name.

Rough estimates of the varying error bars are supplied (\pm _ years). The primary reference used is the comprehensive study by Arthur J. Bellinzoni, "The Gospel of Matthew in the Second Century," *The Second Century* (Journal), Winter, 1992, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 197-258. We start with Paul, and find no further Christian writings until about 95 CE. Watch for (a) changing to (b), and (b) changing to (c).

55 \pm 5 (a) Paul's Epistles

95 \pm 5 (a) *1 Clement* (contains some oral tradition and a couple of later insertions from Matthew)

114 \pm 3 (a) Ignatius (*Epistles* contain oral tradition and apparently a later insertion from Matthew; also, Matthew may contain several quotes from Ignatius)

117 \pm 17 (a?b?) *Epistle of Barnabas*

125 \pm 25 (a) *Letter from Mathetes to Diognetus*

125 \pm 5 (b) Aristides

130 \pm 5 (b,e) Papias: as relayed mainly by Eusebius, by which time it had long been heretical to believe that a Gospel was written by anyone other than the name attached to it.

130 \pm 10 (b) *Gospel of Peter*

130 \pm 30 (b) *Didache*

130 \pm 30 (b) *Gospel of Thomas*

135 \pm 3 (b) Polycarp (*Letter to Philipppians*)

135 \pm 15 (b) *2 Clement*

140 \pm 10 (a?b?) *The Shepherd of Hermas*

140 \pm 10 (b) *Gospel of the Nazoreans*

143 \pm 3 (b) Marcion (*Antitheses*)

145 \pm 5 (b) *Epistle of the Apostles*

150 \pm 25 (b) *Gospel of the Ebionites*

150 \pm 20 (b) *Gospel of Truth*, Valentinus?

155 \pm 5 (b) Justin

163 ± 12 **(b)** Ptolemy (*Letter to Flora*)

170 ± 2 **(b)** Tatian (*Diatesseron*)

170 ± 20 **(b)** *Protevangelium of James*

172 ± 2 **(c)** Apollinaris of Hierapolis

177 ± 1 **(b)** Athenagoras of Athens (*Plea on Behalf of Christians*)

182 ± 2 **(b)** Theophilus of Antioch

183 ± 5 **(c)** Irenaeus

185 ± 15 **(c)** *Muratorian Canon*

Special discussion is needed on the entries of *1 Clement*, Ignatius, and Papias. In my opinion there were two later insertions into *1 Clement*: at 13:2 and 46:8. These quote quite closely from Matthew while in all other places the similarities between the two are not close enough to be deemed due to anything but oral tradition. Bellinzoni references Koester and Hagner to conclude that the writer of *1 Clement* did not use any of the synoptic gospels.

Regarding Ignatius, it is at *Smyrn.* 1:1 // Mt 3:15 that the quotation from Matthew seems too close to be ascribable to oral tradition, and looks like a later addition (Bellinzoni suggested that it may represent “an Antiochian... revision”). Furthermore, the late dating of the Gospels indicated here allows that the writer of Matthew may have borrowed some from Ignatius's epistles.

In addressing Papias, I would first draw attention to the lack of any other mention of a Gospel by name until about 172 CE (by Apollinaris of Hierapolis), some 40 or 45 years after writings appeared that quoted from, or were aware of, the Gospel of Matthew. Nearly two generations later! How could this happen, if circa 130 CE Papias had written and spoken of Matthew and Mark as being the authors of the respective writings attributed to them, and if Papias was as influential as Eusebius portrayed him to be? I have not come across any NT scholars who've addressed this question. The most obvious solution, however, is that in his writings Papias had included statements to the effect that the Gospels had *not* been written by the names ascribed to them. For several decades subsequent writers would already know this, either on their own cognizance or due to Papias. Yet they would recognize great value in the Gospels and would wish to quote from them. So they utilized the Gospels but omitted their attributed names. However, by the time of Irenaeus, or the changeover from **(b)** to **(c)** above, it could be assumed that the Gospels first appeared so many decades earlier that it could be stated as Christian dogma that their authors had indeed been their namesakes of the first century. By this reasoning, Eusebius circa 300 CE was forced to extract sparingly and carefully from Papias's voluminous writings, and edit them as heavily as necessary, to preserve this suspected piece of theological commitment. It should go without saying that any other writings that divulged the truth of the late appearance of the Gospels would not survive Christian censorship.

Now it is well known that Eusebius considered Papias to be a man of little intelligence, and apparently quoted from him that “things from books did not benefit me as much as the sayings of a living & abiding voice” (*Hist. Eccles.* 3.39.4). Both considerations together are consistent with the present hypothesis of Papias having been a “whistle blower” against those who might claim the Gospels were written by their namesakes. Whistle-blowers are often downgraded by those who maintain a cover-up of the truth.

In the above chronology, the changeover from **(a)** to **(b)** occurs around 120 CE. This strongly indicates that the first Gospel appeared around that time. Although this date may seem late, it is the obvious conclusion, especially in view of the fact that, since the late 2nd century, theological commitment has continually tugged NT scholars towards belief in the earliest conceivable date for the first appearance of the Gospels.

Clement of Alexandria, in writing briefly about these matters circa 195-200 CE, either believed the orthodox view that the Gospels had been written by their namesakes, or knew this to be the view that should be expressed. So he adapted this orthodoxy to his knowledge of the tradition that (John) Mark in Rome had been Peter’s interpreter there, and that the two of them had a document with them that Peter allowed interested persons to read but that he did not urge forward. And so he telescoped the writing of the Gospel of Mark in the third decade of the 2nd century back to mid-1st century.

A reason for suspecting that Clement may have known that the Gospels were written much later than mid-1st century is that in Book 7 of the *Stromata* he wrote:

It was later, in the times of Adrian the king, that those who invented the heresies arose; and they extended to the age of Antoninus the elder, as, for instance, Basilides, though he claims (as they boast) for his master, Glaucias, the interpreter of Peter.

The term “interpreter of Peter” had more commonly been employed as meaning “the author of Mark.” This was supposed to have been John Mark, not Glaucias. As a contemporary of Basilides -- circa A.D. 120-140 – Glaucias would fit into the above Gospel-writing time frame. Hence this could be a backhanded way, if not an accidental slip, for Clement of Alexandria to have divulged a bit of the truth. Those who favor the early time frame can assume that in the translation from Clement’s Latin, “interpreter” should instead be “disciple,” though it seems to be a stretch to speak of someone being a disciple some 60 years after the death of the master.