

When were the Gospels written?

Exactly twelve months ago I tackled the question of why the four Gospels appear in the order they do in our Bibles. At the same time, I promised to return to a number of other related questions, such as who wrote them, and when. The question of 'when' actually needs to be dealt with before we can address the question of 'by whom', although there is actually no very definite answer to either of these questions.

In answering the question 'when?' we need to understand how we try to work out the chronology and so end up with dating-brackets within which each of the Gospels is likely to have been written. The answers, in other words, are arrived at by deductive reasoning – though this makes the dating of the Gospels no different from the dating of almost all surviving writings from this period. The BC/AD dating method did not exist at the time: it was not invented until the sixth century, and it was several centuries beyond this before it was generally adopted. Most texts were written and circulated in manuscript without any indication of date associated with them; and even documents which needed to be dated for legal reasons did so using relative dating. So, for example, something might be dated as occurring in a particular year of the reign of Emperor such-and-such, or since the founding of the city of Rome. In consequence, most of the dates we 'know' from the first millennium (and of course from earlier) have had to be worked out in relative terms, and then clues within the text are used to try to pin them down to the specific year-counting system that we use today. It's a tricky business, compounded by the fact that at different times, in different places, and sometimes in one place for different purposes, the year began on different dates (think, for example of 1 January, versus the start of the UK tax year on 6 April).

With the Gospels, the first thing that had to be done was to work out the order in which they were written. Nineteenth-century scholarship demonstrated that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke each independently made use of the text we know as the Gospel of Mark. So that means that Mark came first. The author of John's Gospel may have known the other three (the Synoptics), but did not use them in the way that Matthew and Luke used Mark. All this helps – a bit! Then there are various analyses to be made of the texts themselves: for example, their references to specific events, and to cultural and historical circumstances and assumptions that can be related to what we know about from other texts which might, in themselves, gives us better dating clues, simply because they provide us with more circumstantial and chronological give-aways.

Of course the analyses are very involved and – as you would expect when dealing with conjecture – not everyone agrees on everything. But a common view of modern scholars is that Mark was written probably in the late 60s, Matthew and Luke in the late 80s, and John around 90-110. That being so, it will be immediately obvious that the dates themselves call into question the traditional assumptions about authorship, since while one could imagine that someone writing in the late 60s might have known Jesus in their adulthood, that is hardly imaginable for anything written much later. So, clearly, authorship is something to be dealt with on another occasion.

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