

Last week we looked at the bibliographical test for ancient documents relating to the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We found that no documents of ancient history have better evidential accuracy (that is, we have the documents as they were written) than the New Testament texts. This week we are going to look at the internal and external tests for ancient documents. The internal test for documentary reliability asks this question: What do the texts claim for themselves?

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John claim to have been written by witnesses or eyewitnesses of the events described. Or written by close associates of eyewitnesses based on careful research. For example from Luke's gospel the writer tells of his careful research: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, 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, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4, ESV)

Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus and eyewitnesses of the events they describe. Luke the physician accompanied Paul on his journeys. Mark was an associate of the disciple Peter. The connection to be original apostles is very strong. In the face of these claims, and no external argument against them. We must follow Aristotle's dictum that the benefit of the doubts is to be given to the document itself, not arrogated by the critic to himself.

The external test for documentary authenticity looks for sources outside of the texts in question to confirm what those texts say about themselves. Since it is possible for a document to make claims that are not true; external confirmation is therefore an important way to eliminate the possibility. Fortunately, the New Testament has many such external confirmations available.

Papias of Hierapolis (ca 130 A.D.), based on information obtained by John the elder (John the apostle) tells us that Mark very carefully recorded what the apostle Peter told him. Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp of Smyrna, was himself a disciple of John writes, "Matthew published his gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, when Peter and Paul were preaching the gospel in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure (that is their death which occurred time of the early and persecution and 64-65), Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter's preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast, himself produced his gospel, while he was living in Ephesus in Asia." (Add. Haer. 3.1)

An article of this size does not allow the inclusion of the many external documents that are important to the authors of the New Testament. You are encouraged to research for yourself these claims on the Internet.

These conclusions about the authorship of the New Testament documents allow us to date the writing of these documents before 70 A.D. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in that year. The documents do not speak of this very important event. There is also of fragmented John's gospel that must be dated at the end of the first century (100 A.D.). The biblical scholar Harnack uses the following reasoning to date the Gospels. Paul died in 64-65 A.D. the book of Acts does not mention his death and would have done so if he had already died. The gospel of Luke, which is part one of the book of Acts and referred to in the preface of Acts

as having been written earlier, must've occurred after the writing of the gospel Mark. This gospel was used as a source for Luke's and Matthew's gospel. All of which occurred later than Jesus ministry which ended around 30 A.D. From this reasoning we determine that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written within a 35 year period following Jesus' crucifixion.

His argument can be summed up with the following diagram: (> signifies "must have occurred before")

The Book of Acts > Gospel of Luke > Gospel of Mark *all after* Jesus Ministry – 30 A.D.

To be sure, this evidence merely allows for us to date the documents and determine their authorship. How much weight should be given to them, that is, how accurate are they and what they say will be taken up in my next article.

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