How the Gospels came to be written: student handout

Module 5: Gospel Origins, Oral Tradition, and Authorship.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: What happened between Jesus and the written Gospels, and how do scholars weigh the evidence for who wrote them?

Read each document's source note first. Documents C and D quote ancient texts in public-domain translations; the rest of each document summarizes pages of ExtantBible. Fill in the organizer with your partner.

Document A: The years before the Gospels

Source: The oral tradition section of What actually survives, citing Raymond Brown's An Introduction to the New Testament (1997) and Carson, Moo and Morris's An Introduction to the New Testament (1992); the composition dates on the four Gospels' book pages; and 1 Corinthians 15 on its chapter page.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of how Brown and Carson, Moo and Morris describe the years before the Gospels and of the dates scholars give, with a short excerpt from a letter of Paul written in the 50s CE, in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

Gospel	Date most scholars give	Years after the crucifixion (about 30 CE)	Other dates some scholars hold
Mark	65 to 75 CE	about 35 to 45	50 to 60 (Carson, Moo and Morris (first edition, 1992) favor the late 50s)
Matthew	80 to 90 CE	about 50 to 60	Before 70, most probably in the sixties (Carson, Moo and Morris; Brown reports that most who think the apostle wrote it tend toward a date before 70)

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Gospel	Date most scholars give	Years after the crucifixion (about 30 CE)	Other dates some scholars hold
Luke	80 to 90 CE	about 50 to 60	60 to 65 (Carson, Moo and Morris, and John A. T. Robinson as they report); the 2nd century (a minority, Brown reports)
John	90 to 100 CE	about 60 to 70	before 70 (John A. T. Robinson, as Carson, Moo and Morris report)

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve.”

1 Corinthians 15:3-5, Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

- Brown describes three stages: what Jesus said and did, the apostles' preaching about him, and the written Gospels, thirty to seventy years after Jesus' ministry and death.
- Before Mark, the stories were passed on mainly by word of mouth, but not only. Brown says some early written collections, now lost, would have appeared in the middle of the preaching period; Carson, Moo and Morris call these years a stage of "mainly oral" transmission that probably included some written traditions. After Mark was written, written sources existed beside the retelling, which went on into the 2nd century.
- Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings that survive: Brown dates seven of them to the 50s, before any Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 Paul hands on what he says he received (the excerpt, which goes on to appearances to more than five hundred followers, James and all the apostles); in 11:23-26 he hands on the words of the Last Supper, which Brown says were already established when Paul became a Christian, in the mid 30s.
- The dates rest partly on internal evidence, clues inside the Gospels themselves. In Mark 13 Jesus foretells that not one stone of the Temple will be left on another, which fits the Roman war in which the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE; Matthew 22:7 (a king's troops "burn their city") and Luke 21:20 ("Jerusalem surrounded by armies") seem to look back on it; and Matthew and Luke both used Mark, so Mark came first. Brown rejects the argument for an early Luke from the way Acts ends.
- A copy is dated separately from the writing. Papyrus 52, a scrap of papyrus with a few verses of John 18, is usually dated about 135 from its handwriting (Brent Nongbri argues it may be later). That date is for the copy, not for when John was written.

On ExtantBible: What actually survives: oral tradition

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Document B: Six models of the retelling

Source: The model cards in the oral tradition section of What actually survives: each gives who holds the model, its view, its critics and its label, citing Brown, Carson, Moo and Morris, Ehrman and Méndez, and the Catholic documents.

A summary by ExtantBible (2026) of six models of how the stories were passed on, from the form critics of the 1920s to Ehrman and Méndez (2024), with the label the site gives each.

Model	Who	What it claims	Label
Form criticism	Dibelius and Bultmann, from about 1920 (as Carson, Moo and Morris report)	Short separate units, each shaped by how churches used it	Scholars are split
Memorization	Birger Gerhardsson (as Carson, Moo and Morris report)	Jesus' teaching learned and handed on deliberately, as the rabbis passed on theirs	Some scholars hold
Eyewitness testimony	Carson, Moo and Morris (1992)	Eyewitnesses, some hostile, were still alive and could have challenged invented stories	Scholars are split
Memory research, read skeptically	Ehrman and Méndez (2024)	Most storytellers had never met an eyewitness; stories were changed, and some invented	Scholars are split
Catholic teaching, three stages	Pontifical Biblical Commission (1964), Dei Verbum (1965)	Jesus, the apostles' preaching, the Gospel writers who selected and explained it	Church tradition
Historical reliability view	Craig Blomberg (as Carson, Moo and Morris report), and Carson, Moo and Morris	Careful study gives solid grounds for trusting the Gospels as history	Some scholars hold

- Critics: Brown notes that a story's form cannot by itself show whether it happened. Carson, Moo and Morris, who stress memorization, still accept the criticism that Gerhardsson's model treats the early churches like the schools of the rabbis; Brown says only that scholars differ on how much was memorized.

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- Brown reports that most modern scholars do not think the evangelists were eyewitnesses. Ehrman and Méndez add that eyewitnesses themselves are often wrong; Carson, Moo and Morris read the same decades the opposite way, so the works cited here disagree directly.
- Brown notes that the three-stage approach came from scholarship before the Catholic Church adopted it, and calls the same stages the view of most middle-of-the-road scholars.
- A label says how widely scholars hold a view, not whether the view is true.

On ExtantBible: What actually survives: oral tradition

Document C: The earliest reports: Papias and Irenaeus

Source: Eusebius's Church History 3.39 and Irenaeus's Against Heresies 3.1.1, in public-domain translations, with the Papias section of What actually survives and the timeline entries for Papias and Irenaeus.

Primary sources: Papias (writing about 110 to 130 CE, a date scholars dispute) as quoted by Eusebius in his Church History (finished about 325 CE), in McGiffert's translation (1890); and Irenaeus, Against Heresies (written about 175 to 185 CE), in Roberts and Rambaut's translation (1885).

“This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them.”

Papias, quoted by Eusebius, Church History 3.39.15, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890).

“So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.”

Papias, quoted by Eusebius, Church History 3.39.16, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, vol. 1 (1890).

“Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, 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, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885).

- Papias was a bishop at Hierapolis in Asia Minor; the timeline dates him about 110 to 130 CE, a date scholars dispute. He collected what the followers of Jesus' disciples were still saying, valuing "the living and abiding voice" above books, which shows retelling going on after the Gospels were written. His five books are lost: we have only what Eusebius quotes, about two centuries later.
- Papias reports what "the presbyter" (the elder) told him. Eusebius read Papias as naming two Johns, the apostle and a "presbyter John" whom Papias heard himself, and thought Papias "of very limited understanding."

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- Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon in Gaul, wrote about 175 to 185 CE. In the same passage he says that Matthew wrote "among the Hebrews in their own dialect" and that Mark was "the disciple and interpreter of Peter." He is the earliest writer the site records naming Luke and John as authors.
- Scholars weigh these reports differently. Some see in Papias a tradition within a few decades of Mark; many dismiss the link with Peter. The great majority hold that our Matthew was written in Greek, so Papias was either mistaken or meant another work.

On ExtantBible: Timeline: Papias

Document D: What the Gospels themselves show, and the four verdicts

Source: Luke 1:1-4 on its chapter page, and the Authorship sections of the four Gospels' book pages, citing Brown (1997).

Primary source: the opening of the Gospel of Luke (written 80 to 90 CE on the dates most scholars give), in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain); then a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the four Gospels' authorship sections.

Gospel	Traditional author (Church tradition)	Earliest writer to name him	The view most scholars take, with its label
Mark	John Mark, Peter's interpreter	Papias, about 110 to 130 CE	The author is unknown; some accept Papias's link (Most scholars agree)
Matthew	Matthew, one of the Twelve	Papias, about 110 to 130 CE	An unknown Greek-writing Jewish Christian who used Mark (Most scholars agree)
Luke	Luke, Paul's companion and a physician	Irenaeus, about 175 to 185 CE	Divided on whether Paul's companion wrote it (Scholars are split)
John	John son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve	Irenaeus, about 175 to 185 CE	Doubt that an eyewitness wrote it; the work of a community (Most scholars agree)

“Many have undertaken to compose an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by the initial eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

Luke 1:1-4, Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

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- Mark and Matthew do not name their authors, and Luke's opening does not give the writer's name; the writer does not claim to have seen the events: he says many had already composed accounts, and that he investigated what the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down. Ehrman and Méndez read the opening as mentioning earlier written accounts, themselves based on stories Christians told.
- Matthew is written in Greek and uses Mark as a main source; most scholars count these as the main arguments against authorship by an eyewitness apostle. Many doubt Papias's link between Mark and Peter because Mark's Greek and sources do not read like a translation of one disciple's memories. Mark also explains Jewish customs for readers who were not Jews (Mark 7:3-4).
- For Luke, the "we" passages in Acts (told as "we", as in Acts 16:10) and the steady early tradition are cited for Paul's companion; differences between Acts and Paul's own letters are cited against him. For John, most scholars see a community that shaped the Gospel in stages, reflecting late first-century events such as followers of Jesus being put out of the synagogue (John 9:22).

On ExtantBible: Luke, chapter 1

Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	On the dates most scholars give, about how many years passed between the crucifixion and Mark, and between the crucifixion and John? How were the stories passed on before Mark, and after it?	
2.	What did Paul hand on that he says he received, and why does it matter for the years before the Gospels?	
3.	Name two models of the retelling, who holds each, and the label the site gives it.	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
4.	How does Papias's statement about Mark reach us, and how does that affect how historians use it?	
5.	Who is the earliest writer the site records naming Luke and John as authors, and about how long after those Gospels were written did he write?	
6.	Why do most scholars think Matthew the apostle did not write our Matthew?	
7.	What does Luke 1:1-4 say about where the writer's information came from?	
8.	Name one clue inside a Gospel (internal evidence) that scholars use to date it or to weigh who wrote it, and say what it suggests.	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, answer the central question. Cite at least three documents by letter, say how many years passed before at least one Gospel and how the stories were passed on in that time, and explain how one authorship claim is weighed against what the Gospel itself shows, with the label the site gives it.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Sourcing: Says who made each report, when (with the date range the site gives), and how it reaches us, for example that Papias survives only in quotations by Eusebius, written about two centuries later.	
	Chronology: Places the crucifixion, Paul's letters, the four Gospels, Papias and Irenaeus in order, states the years between the crucifixion and at least one Gospel, and says that before Mark the stories passed on mainly by word of mouth while after it written sources existed beside the retelling.	
	Weighing interpretations: Describes at least two models of the retelling or two authorship positions, with the evidence each uses (including at least one clue inside a Gospel) and the label the site gives it.	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes each view to those who hold it ("Carson, Moo and Morris argue", "most scholars agree") and keeps historical claims apart from statements of belief.	

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