How the Gospels came to be written: study guide

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

Rereading and highlighting feel productive but build little memory; testing yourself does. Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check, and come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the Synoptic lesson: which Gospel do most scholars think was written first?
2. From the canon lesson: who first insisted on exactly four Gospels, about 180 to 185 CE?
3. What does the label "Church tradition" mean on this site?

Key terms

The years before writing

- Oral tradition: Stories and sayings passed on by word of mouth before, and while, they were written down.

Why it matters: Why did retelling not stop once the Gospels were written?

- Mainly oral, not only oral: How the stories were passed on before the first Gospel: mainly by word of mouth, with some early written collections that are now lost (Brown) and some written notes (Carson, Moo and Morris). After Mark, written sources existed beside the retelling.

Why it matters: What difference does it make that some things were written down before Mark?

- Brown's 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).

Why it matters: Why does it help to separate what happened from how it was preached and how it was written?

- Form criticism: Sorting the Gospels' short units (parables, miracle stories, sayings) by form, to trace how churches used them before they were written.

Why it matters: Why can a story's form not show by itself whether the event happened?

Models of the retelling

- Memorization model: Birger Gerhardsson's view, as Carson, Moo and Morris report it, that Jesus' teaching was learned and handed on deliberately, as the rabbis passed on theirs. The site labels it Some scholars hold.

Why it matters: Why do even scholars who value memorization not adopt it whole?

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- Eyewitness testimony: Carson, Moo and Morris's view that eyewitnesses of Jesus, some of them hostile, were still alive while the stories circulated and could have challenged invented ones. The site labels it Scholars are split.

Why it matters: What do its critics answer?

- Memory research, read skeptically: Ehrman and Méndez's reading of the decades before the Gospels: the stories were told in Greek rather than Jesus' Aramaic, mostly by people who had never met an eyewitness, and they were changed, and some invented. The site labels it Scholars are split.

Why it matters: Why does the site not label this reading or its opposite as settled?

The evidence for authors

- Papias of Hierapolis: A bishop in Asia Minor, dated by the timeline to about 110 to 130 CE (disputed), the earliest writer to name authors for Mark and Matthew. His books are lost; Eusebius quotes them in his Church History, finished about 325.

Why it matters: What do we lose when his words reach us only through a later writer?

- Irenaeus of Lyon: A bishop who wrote Against Heresies about 175 to 185 CE, the earliest writer the site records naming Luke and John as authors.

Why it matters: Why do historians note how many years separate a report from the events it reports?

- Internal evidence: Clues inside a text itself (its language, its sources, the events it seems to know, what it says about itself), used to date it or to weigh who wrote it.

Why it matters: Why do scholars set internal evidence beside what later writers report?

Timeline

- 27 to 29 CE: Start of Jesus's public ministry. Dated between 27 and 29 CE. Carson, Moo and Morris think 28 or 29 likely, Brown gives about 29, and Ehrman and Méndez date the ministry from 27 to 30, with a question mark.
- 30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus (Most scholars agree). Dated to about 30 CE. Ehrman and Méndez say no one knows for certain, but scholars agree it was around 30; Brown, and Carson and Moo, give 30 or 33, and Carson and Moo find 30 slightly preferable.
- 32 to 36 CE: Paul's conversion to the Jesus movement (Most scholars agree). Dated between 32 and 36 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 50 to 52 CE: 1 Thessalonians (Most scholars agree). Written between 50 and 52 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 64 to 67 CE: Death of Paul in Rome (Most scholars agree). Dated between 64 and 67 CE, the date most scholars give. The date and manner rest on early tradition (1 Clement 5).
- 65 to 75 CE: Mark (Most scholars agree). Written between 65 and 75 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 70 CE: Destruction of the Temple (Nearly all scholars agree).
- 80 to 90 CE: Matthew (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 90 CE: Luke (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 90 to 100 CE: John (Most scholars agree). Written between 90 and 100 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 105 to 115 CE: Ignatius (Most scholars agree). Dated between 105 and 115 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 110 to 130 CE: Papias (Scholars are split). Dated about 110 to 130 CE, a date scholars dispute (positions run from about 100 to 130 to 140).

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- about 125: Papyrus 52 (John Rylands Papyrus 457) (Most scholars agree). Ehrman and Méndez date it about 125 to 150 and say scholars have typically dated it to about 125; Carson and Moo give about 125 as the usual date (about 130 in another chapter), and Brown about 135.
- 140 to 144 CE: Marcion's canon (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 140 and 144 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 150 to 165 CE: Justin Martyr (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 150 and 165 CE, a date scholars broadly accept. The range runs from his Apologies to his death, about 165.
- 175 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 175 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 315 to 325 CE: Eusebius, Church History 3.25 (canon list) (Most scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 315 and 325 CE, the date most scholars give.

Explain it

In your own words: why does it matter that Papias's statement about Mark survives only in Eusebius's quotations?

Worked example: weighing Papias on Mark

How a historian weighs an early report of who wrote a Gospel, in four steps.

1. Source the report: Papias, dated by the timeline to about 110 to 130 CE (a date scholars dispute), passes on what "the elder" said. His books are lost; Eusebius quotes him in his Church History, finished about 325.
2. Read what it claims: Mark, "having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order," what he remembered of Jesus' words and deeds. Mark had not followed Jesus himself.
3. Set it beside other evidence: The Gospel itself does not name its author. Brown reports that some see a tradition within a few decades of Mark, while many dismiss the link with Peter, since Mark's Greek and sources do not read like a translation of one disciple's memories.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: That Papias said this is a historical claim anyone can check in Eusebius; whether what he said is true is what scholars weigh. The site labels John Mark as the author "Church tradition" and the view that the author is unknown "Most scholars agree", noting that some scholars accept Papias's link. A careful answer calls Papias the earliest source for the name, reached through a later writer, and says that scholars weigh him differently.

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Your turn: who wrote Matthew?

Papias also named an author for Matthew. The first two steps are done; write the last two before you open the answer.

1. Source the report: The same Papias, quoted by Eusebius, is the earliest writer to link this Gospel to Matthew, one of the Twelve.
2. Read what it claims: Matthew "wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language," and each reader interpreted them as well as he could.
3. Set it beside other evidence: What does the Gospel of Matthew itself show about its language and its sources?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What would you conclude, and how does the site label it?

Common misconceptions

Historians, journalists and courts weigh secondhand testimony by asking who reported it, when, and through whose hands the report reached us.

- A common assumption is that the Gospels were written down while Jesus was alive or soon after. On the dates most scholars give, the first Gospel was written about 35 to 45 years after the crucifixion. The site dates Mark to 65 to 75 CE, Matthew and Luke to 80 to 90 and John to 90 to 100, with the crucifixion about 30 CE, and Brown puts the written Gospels thirty to seventy years after Jesus' ministry and death. Carson, Moo and Morris (1992 edition) favor the late 50s for Mark. Paul's letters, from the 50s, are the earliest Christian writings that survive, and in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 Paul hands on what he says he received. The date of the oldest copy is a different thing: Papyrus 52, a scrap of John usually dated about 135, dates that copy, not the writing.
- Some people assume that everything about Jesus was passed on by word of mouth alone until each Gospel was written. Before Mark the stories were passed on mainly, not only, by word of mouth, and after Mark written sources existed beside the retelling. Brown says some early written collections, now lost, would have appeared in the middle of the preaching period, and Carson, Moo and Morris call the years before Mark a stage of "mainly oral" transmission that probably included some written notes; Paul's letters survive from the 50s. Once Mark was written, Matthew and Luke could use it as a written source, while the retelling went on into the 2nd century, as Papias shows.

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- Some think scholars agree, one way or the other, about who wrote all four Gospels. The site's labels differ from Gospel to Gospel. Most scholars agree that Matthew's author is unknown and used Mark, and most doubt that an eyewitness wrote John. For Mark, some scholars accept Papias's link. For Luke, scholars are split: the "we" passages in Acts and the steady early tradition are cited for Paul's companion, and differences between Acts and Paul's letters against him. Luke's opening does not settle it, since the writer does not give his name.

Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. On the dates most scholars give, which Gospel was written first, and about how long after the crucifixion?

A. Matthew, about 50 to 60 years after

B. Mark, about 35 to 45 years after

C. Mark, about 70 years after

Reason: How is the number worked out?

A. From the date of the oldest surviving copy of Mark

B. From the year 70 CE, the middle of the date range, read as the number of years since Jesus

C. From the date range most scholars give (65 to 75 CE), less the crucifixion about 30 CE

2. What are the earliest Christian writings that survive?

A. Paul's letters

B. The Gospel of Mark

C. Papyrus 52, the scrap of the Gospel of John

Reason: Why do they matter for the years before the Gospels?

A. Paul quotes the written Gospels, so they were already in circulation.

B. Paul hands on traditions he says he received, before any Gospel was written.

C. Paul followed Jesus during his ministry and wrote down what he saw.

3. Who proposed that Jesus' teaching was learned and handed on deliberately, as the rabbis passed on theirs?

A. Martin Dibelius

B. Rudolf Bultmann

C. Birger Gerhardsson

Reason: How does the site label this model, and why?

A. Some scholars hold: Brown reports that scholars differ on how much was memorized, and Carson, Moo and Morris accept part of the criticism of it.

B. Nearly all scholars agree: it is the standard view of how the tradition was passed on.

C. Church tradition: it is the Catholic Church's teaching on the three stages.

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4. Carson, Moo and Morris and Ehrman and Méndez both ask what eyewitnesses meant for the stories. How do their readings differ?

A. Carson, Moo and Morris see stories invented by communities; Ehrman and Méndez see stories kept by eyewitnesses.

B. Carson, Moo and Morris see eyewitnesses who could have challenged invented stories; Ehrman and Méndez see storytellers who had never met an eyewitness, and stories changed.

C. Both see stories kept by eyewitnesses; they differ only on when the Gospels were written.

Reason: What does this show about the evidence?

A. Carson, Moo and Morris are labeled Church tradition, so their reading is the one the site accepts.

B. The question is settled in Ehrman and Méndez's favor, since their book is the more recent.

C. The works cited here read the same decades in opposite directions, so the site labels both "Scholars are split".

5. Papias is the earliest writer to name authors for which Gospels?

A. Mark and Matthew

B. Luke and John

C. All four

Reason: How does his statement reach us?

A. Only through quotations by Eusebius, since Papias's books are lost.

B. In his own five books, which survive complete.

C. Through Irenaeus, who copied out all five of his books.

6. Papias wrote that Matthew "wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language." What do most scholars say about our Matthew?

A. It is a word-for-word translation of a Hebrew original.

B. It was written before Mark, as its place first in the New Testament suggests.

C. It was written in Greek and used Mark as a main source.

Reason: What follows for Papias's report?

A. Nothing follows: a 2nd-century report outweighs anything the text itself shows.

B. Either Papias was mistaken or he meant another work.

C. Everything Papias said is proved false, including what he said about Mark.

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7. How were the stories about Jesus passed on before the first Gospel was written?

A. Mainly by word of mouth, with some early written collections that are now lost

B. Only by word of mouth: nothing was written until Mark

C. Mainly in written Gospels that have since been lost

Reason: Who says so?

A. Papias, who says he preferred books to the living voice.

B. No one: no ancient or modern writer describes these years.

C. Brown, and Carson, Moo and Morris, who call it a stage of "mainly oral" transmission that probably included some written notes.

8. Which statement is a historical claim rather than a statement of belief?

A. The Gospels are true because they are inspired.

B. Papias, as Eusebius quotes him, said Mark was Peter's interpreter.

C. The Gospels cannot be trusted because they are religious texts.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. It can be checked against a surviving source.

B. Most scholars agree that Mark was Peter's interpreter.

C. It agrees with church tradition, which the site labels as reliable.

Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
About how many years passed between the crucifixion and each Gospel, on the dates most scholars give?	Mark about 35 to 45, Matthew and Luke about 50 to 60, John about 60 to 70.
How were the stories passed on before Mark, and after it?	Before Mark mainly by word of mouth, with some early written collections now lost; after Mark, written sources existed beside the retelling, which went on into the 2nd century.
What are Brown's three stages?	What Jesus said and did; the apostles' preaching about him; the written Gospels.
What does Paul hand on in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7?	What he says he received: Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, and his appearances.
What is form criticism?	Sorting the Gospels' short units by form, to trace how churches used them before they were written.
Who proposed the memorization model?	Birger Gerhardsson, as Carson, Moo and Morris report.

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Question	Answer
Who argue that eyewitnesses, some of them hostile, could have challenged invented stories?	Carson, Moo and Morris (1992).
Who argue that most storytellers had never met an eyewitness?	Ehrman and Méndez (2024).
Who is the earliest writer to name authors for Mark and Matthew?	Papias (about 110 to 130 CE, disputed), as quoted by Eusebius.
Who is the earliest writer the site records naming Luke and John as authors?	Irenaeus, in Against Heresies, about 175 to 185 CE.
For which Gospel are scholars split on the author?	Luke (whether Paul's companion wrote it).
What is internal evidence?	Clues inside a text itself (its language, sources, the events it seems to know) used to date it or weigh who wrote it.
What does Luke 1:1-4 say about the writer's sources?	Many had already composed accounts; he investigated what the first eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down, and does not name himself.

Answers

Warm-up

1. Mark.
2. Irenaeus.
3. Church tradition is the usual term for what early Christian writers reported about the books. Most modern scholars don't rely on it alone.

Why it matters

- Oral tradition: Most Christians heard texts rather than read them: Brown notes that letters like Paul's were read aloud. So the stories went on being told after the Gospels were written, into the 2nd century; Brown and Ehrman and Méndez both point to Papias, who still sought out what the followers of Jesus' disciples were saying.
- Mainly oral, not only oral: It means the years before the Gospels were not a blank of pure word of mouth: Paul's letters survive from the 50s, and Brown and Carson, Moo and Morris both think some written collections existed early. But those collections are lost, so how much was written, and what, has to be inferred.
- Brown's three stages: Each stage could shape the material: the preaching was translated from Aramaic into Greek, and the writers chose and arranged what mattered to their own readers. Separating the stages lets a historian ask at which stage a detail took its form.

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- Form criticism: A form shows how churches used and retold a story (in preaching, teaching or debate), not whether the event took place. Brown makes this point, and Carson, Moo and Morris add that form critics gave too little weight to the people who handed the stories down and to eyewitnesses who could have challenged invented ones.
- Memorization model: Carson, Moo and Morris, who stress the importance of memorization, still accept the criticism that the model treats the early churches like the schools of the rabbis. Brown says only that scholars differ on how much was memorized.
- Eyewitness testimony: Brown reports that most modern scholars do not think the evangelists were eyewitnesses, and Ehrman and Méndez argue that most storytellers had never met an eyewitness and that eyewitnesses themselves are often wrong.
- Memory research, read skeptically: Ehrman and Méndez and Carson, Moo and Morris draw opposite conclusions from the same period, and no source the site cites measures which reading prevails. The label records how widely each reading is held; it does not rule on which is true.
- Papias of Hierapolis: We cannot read the rest of Papias's books to check the context; we have only what Eusebius chose to quote, about two centuries later, and Eusebius thought Papias of very limited understanding. Papias himself reports what the elder said, so the claim is at second or third hand.
- Irenaeus of Lyon: The longer the gap, the more hands a report may have passed through before it was written down. Irenaeus wrote roughly 75 to 105 years after the dates most scholars give for Luke and John, so historians ask where his information came from and weigh it with other evidence.
- Internal evidence: Because the two can disagree: Papias says Matthew wrote in Hebrew, but our Matthew is in Greek and uses Mark. Luke's opening (1:1-4) shows a writer who investigated what eyewitnesses handed down rather than one who claims to be an eyewitness, and Matthew 22:7, where a king's troops burn a city, is one clue for dating Matthew after 70 CE.

Explain it

Papias's books are lost, so we have only the lines Eusebius chose to quote in a work finished about 325, two centuries later, and cannot read them in their context. Papias was himself reporting what "the elder" said, so the claim reaches us at second or third hand, and Eusebius thought Papias of very limited understanding. Historians therefore treat it as an early but indirect report, to be weighed with what the Gospel itself shows.

Your turn: who wrote Matthew?

3. Set it beside other evidence: Our Matthew is written in Greek and uses Mark as a main source. The great majority of scholars hold that it was written in Greek, so Papias was either mistaken or meant another work.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Most scholars agree that an unknown Greek-writing Jewish Christian who used Mark wrote it; the link to Matthew the apostle is labeled Church tradition. Name Papias as the source of the tradition, explain why most scholars set it aside, and do not claim to know who the author was.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. The site counts from the crucifixion, about 30 CE, to the date range most scholars give for Mark, 65 to 75 CE, so about 35 to 45 years. A date in CE is not a count of years since Jesus, and a copy (such as Papyrus 52, a scrap of John from about 135) dates only the copy. Matthew stands first in the New Testament, but most scholars date it to 80 to 90 and think it used Mark.

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2. Answer A, reason B. Brown dates seven of Paul's letters to the 50s, before Mark (65 to 75). In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and 11:23-26 Paul hands on what he says he received, so they show tradition being passed on before the Gospels. Papyrus 52 is a later copy of John, from about 135, not an early writing.
3. Answer C, reason A. Gerhardsson proposed the memorization model, as Carson, Moo and Morris report. Even Carson, Moo and Morris, who stress memorization, accept the criticism that it treats the early churches like the schools of the rabbis. Dibelius and Bultmann were form critics, and the three stages labeled Church tradition are a different model.
4. Answer B, reason C. The site's model cards say the sources cited here disagree directly, and no source the site cites measures which reading prevails. Both are labeled Scholars are split. That label measures how widely each view is held, which is a separate question from whether it is true, and a book is not right just because it is newer.
5. Answer A, reason A. Eusebius's Church History, finished about 325, preserves what we have of Papias. Irenaeus mentions Papias's five books (Eusebius quotes him saying so), but the books themselves are lost; Irenaeus, about 175 to 185, is the earliest writer the site records naming Luke and John.
6. Answer C, reason B. The great majority of scholars hold that our Matthew was written in Greek; its use of Mark and its Greek are the main arguments against authorship by an eyewitness apostle. That is internal evidence weighed against Papias's report, and it bears on his statement about Matthew, not automatically on what he said about Mark.
7. Answer A, reason C. Brown says some early written collections, now lost, would have appeared in the middle of the preaching period, and Carson, Moo and Morris speak of "mainly oral" transmission before Mark; Paul's letters also survive from the 50s. Papias said the opposite of the first reason: he valued the living voice above books.
8. Answer B, reason A. A historical claim can be checked against the sources: anyone can read what Papias said in Eusebius. Whether Papias was right is a separate question, and most scholars treat the author of Mark as unknown. The other two statements are judgments people make on other grounds.

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