

THE GOSPELS ARE HISTORICAL

An introduction to the booklet:

THE AUTHORS OF THE GOSPELS

During the last century the Markan priority theory, which claims that Mark wrote prior to the other gospel writers, came to dominate the teaching of Scripture. This theory has led to widespread doubts regarding the historical reliability of the gospels.

These doubts have led to the growth of Modernism and Fideism within the Catholic Community, thereby weakening the effectiveness of the Church's mission. In the Protestant world it has caused a division into liberal and fundamentalist wings. The ordinary Christian in the pew knows that something is wrong when those in positions of leadership preach in an uncertain, evasive and hesitant manner, about faith, morals and order.

When the author asked himself why the certainties had been eroded, he found the answer in the failure of many educators to uphold the historic truth of the Gospels. So, despite the statements made in the Doctrinal Constitution Dei Verbum of the Second Vatican Council, a hesitant attitude has come to permeate the classroom.

The examination of the way a Gospel has been written, sources used, the form of the writing and its background is known as Literary Analysis. The Church encourages this analysis and it is widely agreed that borrowing took place between the Gospel writers. It is also logical to accept that a person copying another will improve the Greek literary form (the quality of writing) rather than corrupt it.

But theories which develop from such understandings, are not necessarily correct.

The Markan priority theory is the best known of these, so let us examine what it asserts.

Those supporting this theory say that as Mark's Gospel is in 'poor' Greek compared with that of Matthew and Luke, it must have been written first (i.e. prior to the others).

They say next that if an eyewitness companion of Jesus, such as Matthew, wrote a Gospel, he would not have based it on copying from the work of a non-eyewitness such as Mark who had second and third hand information. They say that this indicates that the apostle Matthew did not write "Matthew's Gospel". Similarly, it may be shown that Paul's secretary, Luke, did not write what we call "Luke's Gospel". This logic discredits the reliability of the early historians because they all clearly report that the apostle Matthew wrote the first Gospel. So their evidence that the apostle John was author of the last Gospel cannot be trusted.

Opponents of Markan priority have pointed out many of its fallacies. But by clinging to the Matthew-Mark-Luke-John order, adopted by Jerome for his 4th century 'Vulgate' Latin translation, they find themselves in conflict with the valid findings of literary analysis. So while Markan priorists reject the historical evidence, the supporters of Jerome's sequence reject the findings of literary analysis. In this apparent battle between 'history' and 'science', most students are attracted to Markan priority because it appears to be based on 'science'

For various reasons a third way, which claims the order of writing was Matthew-Luke-Mark-John, was pushed to the side in the debate between the other two. We will examine this third way later, but here we will point out three reasons why the Markan priority theory should be challenged.

Firstly, every early historian states that Matthew wrote the first Gospel. Any theory, however clever, must be doubted when it is unable to face the challenge of history.

Secondly, it conflicts with the doctrinal teaching of the Church regarding authorship.

Thirdly, the whole Markan logical edifice is balanced on a presumption. This presumption is that the Gospel of Mark was carefully thought out in the author's room and composed by him in his best Greek style.

If a different scenario more consistent with history, doctrine and literary analysis replaces this presumption, the theory loses its foundation.

So let us turn to the alternative third explanation based on the records of the historians who lived before Jerome, on a careful use of modern literary methods and in conformity with doctrine. This explanation is the oldest in Christianity, and has been confirmed by recent studies. It claims the order of writing to be Matthew-Luke-Mark-John.

Most modern books are written by Markan priorists, so fail to provide the historical, literary and doctrinal evidence supporting this third (or Clementine) way. Supporters of Jerome's sequence do provide quotations from the early historians but are selective.

One of the aims of *THE AUTHORS OF THE GOSPELS* is to fill this gap.

For example: Clement of Alexandria lived 200 years nearer to the events than did Jerome. Basing his remarks on the earliest sources he taught that: "the first written were those having the genealogies", and "John, last of all". Other Fathers of the Church - Ireneaus - Tertullian - Jerome, Augustine of Hippo (in his later years), - and the authors of the Muratorian Fragment and the Ambrosiaster document all used Clement's order.

Those who held the view that Mark wrote third persevered in their research. From Literary analysis and the ancient historians they developed the scenario of Peter giving a series of talks. In these he quoted alternatively from Matthew and Luke and thereby blended them together like two streams conflating into one. Peter's secretary Mark, in response to repeated requests, issued copies of his unedited verbatim shorthand transcript. This is what we now know as Mark's Gospel. According to Clement of Alexander, Peter was indifferent to its distribution until he saw its beneficial effects.

From Clement we know that Mark issued his transcript to meet an urgent demand. We can see how Luke's Gospel could have been written pre-Mark but published after it. When Jerome wrote his: 'Prologus Quattuor Evangeliorum', he records that the Gospels were **Published** in the Matthew, Mark, Luke order. But, when writing his history: 'Of Illustrious Men', Jerome places them in the Matthew, Luke, Mark order (i.e. in order of **writing**). It should also be remembered that in Jerome's covering letter to the Pope, regarding his vulgate version, he had to explain why he had placed the Gospels in an unfamiliar order.

The last twelve verses of Mark's gospel do not appear in some of the oldest surviving copies and they are written in a different style. This has been a source of puzzlement. Now if we accept the accounts of the historians and the above scenario, there are good grounds on which to solve the puzzle. These last verses look like the answers to questions asked following Peter's talks. From Clement of Alexandria's description of the production of Mark's gospel, we know that Mark issued a second edition after Peter gave his approval. If the answers were included in one edition only, this would provide a reason why two versions, one with and one without the final verses/ answers, have been found.

Some of the pioneers of scriptural research in the 18th century concluded from literary analysis that Mark had written third. This was becoming accepted in German academic circles until political pressure made the state universities exclusively teach Markan priority. In this manner Markan priority became established in Germany before spreading to English speaking countries.

In the early churches the Sunday Gospel readings were continuous. A reading continued from where it had stopped the previous week. In the Western church the multiplicity of special feast days has obliterated the order used. But, even with some rearrangements to suit feast days, the original pattern may still be seen in the liturgies of the Eastern churches. Matthew is read from Pentecost till the feast of the Holy Cross in September; Luke from then till Lent when Mark is used. John is read on the Sundays from Easter till Pentecost. Details of this, based on the Byzantine Liturgy, are provided on this web site's Documentation section. The Russian, Greek, Antiochan and some Syrian Churches follow, with small variations, the same pattern. So the early churches were very familiar with this order.

The booklet: 'The Authors of the Gospels', sets out the evidence for the above in more detail. It also has chapters on Acts, a Hebrew Matthew, Anti-Judaism, how the Church has combated Markan priority, recent statements from Rome and leading Catholics, an outline of how the Markan theory undermined catechesis in America and England and the ecumenical hope for the future.

'The Authors of the Gospels'
is available free on this website

A printed A5 version is available from CIHIC, 757 Borough Road, CH42 6QQ
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