

APOSTLES AND APOSTOLIC MEN

In the records left by the ancient historians, a sharp distinction is made between two sets of gospel authors – the Apostles and ‘apostolic men’.

For 2000 years Christians have taught that ‘the Apostles’ referred to Christ’s companions - Matthew and John, while ‘apostolic men’ referred to Luke and Mark. These last two had to use secondary sources.

In Dei Verbum verse 7, we read that **the Apostles handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him and from seeing what He did. These** and ‘apostolic men’, committed the message of salvation **to writing**.

Verse 18 says the Apostles preached and, afterwards, they and ‘apostolic men’, handed on the four Gospels in writing.

Verse 19 stresses that the Gospels are an historical record of what Christ did and taught. It is difficult to see how this can be, unless at least some of the authors were eyewitnesses to Christ’s life.

Yet according to the Markan Priority theory, all the authors of the four Gospels had to use second or third-hand sources.

Quotations have been taken from the exact English translation on the Vatican website. Not from the translation by Austin Flannery.

THE ORDER OF COMPOSITION: Matthew-Luke-Mark-John.

Before the four gospels were bound together, they were listed and used in a variety of orders. A popular sequence was Matthew-Luke-Mark and John. We have records that theologians quoted the Scriptures in this sequence, and liturgical readings often followed this pattern. St. Jerome in his book, ‘Illustrious Men’, adhered to the same order. St Clement of Alexandria, successor to the bishopric of Mark, specifically stated that Matthew and Luke wrote first, so emphasising that Luke wrote before Mark.

St. Augustine explained that while the ‘received’ order was Matthew-Mark-Luke-John, the order of dignity was, Matthew-John-Mark-Luke. In his fourth book, he says that Mark developed the thoughts of Matthew and Luke, so confirming that Luke wrote before Mark.

ST. JEROME

Latin translations of the Gospels were made but, by the 4th century, there were many variations and errors. So Pope Damasus asked Jerome to make a new Latin translation, which would be used to standardise bibles used in the West.

When visiting the Middle East, Jerome found many collections of gospels had been bound together in the Matthew-Mark-Luke-John sequence. Realising it would be difficult to persuade those using them to change, and aware of the Pope’s desire for standardisation, Jerome adopted the Matthew-Mark-Luke-John order. In a letter to the Pope, Jerome referred to the order he had adopted as not being that to which the Pope was accustomed.

For nearly 1500 years, Western translators based their work on Jerome’s version and it came to be assumed that the Gospels had been composed in the Matthew-Mark-Luke-John sequence.

As methods of textual analysis developed, it became obvious that there were difficulties in accepting Jerome’s sequence as being the order of composition. In 1764 Henry Owen, an Anglican London vicar, suggested that the order of writing had been Matthew-Luke-Mark-John. At that time, Owen’s view was considered too revolutionary. Even so, his ideas spread slowly in Germany.

MARKAN PRIORITY

In the 19th century, liberal and secular scholars developed a theory that Mark wrote first (i.e. Prior to the others). The theory conflicted with all the evidence provided by the ancient historians. So supporters of the theory asserted that all the historians were in error.

During this period, Chancellor Bismarck, as part of his political anti-Catholic campaign, aimed to undermine the historicity of the Gospels. He made the teaching of the Markan Priority theory standard and compulsory in all German universities.

The Catholic Church condemned the theory and it was not taught in her educational establishments outside of Germany [For Pope Leo XIII's statement on the theory, see item G200].

English Protestant scripture scholars copied the German teaching and the theory spread to the whole English-speaking world. The Catholic upholding of the evidence of the historians was labelled as 'unscientific'. Many Catholics developed a sense of inferiority regarding this when faced by their Protestant and secular colleagues.

Following the Vatican Council greater freedom was allowed within Catholic educational establishments. Those Catholics wishing to be accepted as 'up-to-date' and 'scientific' by their liberal and secular colleagues, rushed to conform to Markan Priority theory. This rupture with Catholic tradition led to widespread doctrinal confusion and vague Catechetical programs.

DOM. BERNARD ORCHARD O.S.B.

Prior to Vatican II, Fr. Orchard (1910-2006), played a leading role in efforts to encourage greater Catholic interest in the Scriptures. In 1953 he was General Editor of: *The Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. As a pioneering venture it graced libraries throughout the Catholic World.

Shortly after Vatican II, in a pioneering step-forward in ecumenical relations, Orchard edited the popular Catholic CTS Bible of 1966. In 1969 he was a founder member of: *The World Catholic Federation for Biblical Apostolate* and its first chairman. Later he became chairman of its British equivalent.

Orchard was overjoyed at the treatment of Scripture at the Vatican Council. But his joy was cut-short when he saw many rushing into the wastelands of Markan Priority. In 1969 he was general editor of: *The New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. But authors deliberately ignoring the ancient historical evidence were writing key sections.

The whole of the Markan Priority theory rests on the apparent ‘poor’ Greek of Mark’s Gospel, so Orchard realised that he needed to find a reason for this apparent ‘poor Greek’. As a brilliant Greek scholar, he was in a good position to closely analyse Mark’s words.

One day he was pondering why the two scriptural errors in Mark’s Gospel had not been immediately corrected. It then came to him that the manuscript had not been revised because Mark’s Gospel was an accurate recording, in shorthand, of a series of talks. These had been delivered by Peter in Koine (common non-classical) Greek. The errors had not been revised because Mark had faithfully recorded the talks – warts and all.

Orchard also realised that Peter had been conflating (the merging of two streams into one) Matthew’s Gospel and Luke’s manuscript. This was close to the suggestion Henry Owen had put forward 200 years previously. By comparing the three Gospels verse-by-verse, Orchard could see how this was accomplished during a series of five talks.

With this insight in mind, re-reading the historians brought the situation more alive. Mark had written after Luke. But Clement of Alexandria reported that there had been an urgency to publish copies of the talks. This would have led to Mark’s Gospel being published before Luke’s. It would also explain why the Matthew-Mark-Luke sequence was sometimes used.

Orchard’s solution was in complete conformity with the internal evidence, the records of all the ancient historians and with church tradition. It also opened the way to explaining why the final verses of Mark appear disjointed. Also why archaeologists have found two versions of Mark’s Gospel.

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Version: 17th April 2009

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