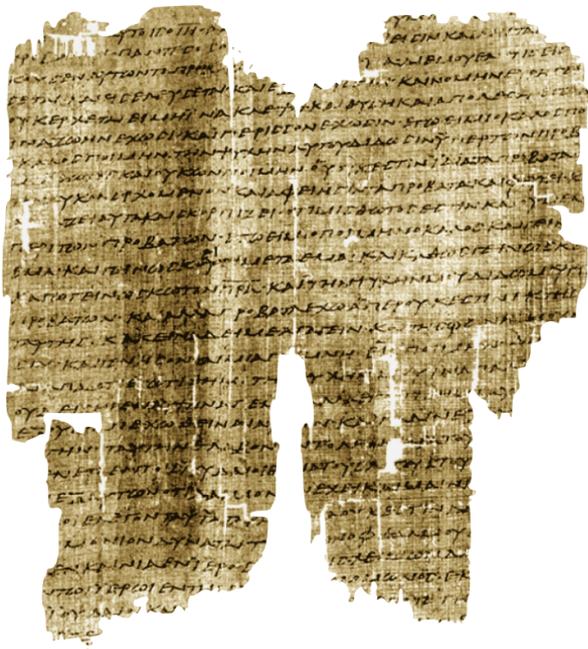


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The written gospels in the Bible

We just do not really understand today that in early civilisation hardly anything was ever written down. Paper virtually didn't exist and announcements about findings in writing are almost always about writing on stone or slate, and that is exciting because it is rare, very rare. What we really fail to understand completely is that when you are brought up, and live, in a spoken-word society people easily learn to quote things extremely accurately. Not only that, people remembered what was said extremely accurately. There was no other way of surviving in such a society.



By the time of Jesus Christ society had not changed much and the spoken word dominated everything. So why did the Gospels ever get written down? – Well there is a simple reason.

This picture shows one of the earliest fragments of Mark's gospel. What is written is Chapter 1. This part is Papyrus P137.

Another important aspect to know is that Greek was the international language (not Latin). Much as English or Spanish is often the international language today, so Greek was the international language then.

The Ancient Hebrew is nothing like modern Hebrew, and even 200 years before Jesus

Christ, the Jews themselves translated the Old testament scriptures into Greek because hardly anyone knew ancient Hebrew as a language, whereas Greek was the common trading language of the time and widely known and widely used.

In Synagogues and even in the Temple in Jerusalem parts of the services needed stating and things had become very difficult due to Hebrew not being the language of the time. So few people knew Hebrew that 200 years before Jesus Christ the Jews themselves had translated the whole of the Old Testament into Greek. That version is known today as LXX because the tradition is that it was done by 70 scholars. So it is not a surprise that later books in the Old Testament are written in Greek as well as the whole of the New Testament is also written in Greek. At the same time pronunciation marks had been added to the written Hebrew to help those who could read some words, to be able to give the reading in the Synagogue. Those pronunciation marks help us a lot today, but they were never originally there.

Even in the Bible we have a reference in John's gospel that indicates that Jesus Christ and his disciples are likely to have spoken Greek alongside their native Aramaic language. In the Gospel of John at chapter 12, in verses 20 to 26, we are told that Jesus and disciples met and talked with some Greeks. Greek was the common international language.

We know from the book of Acts and from the letters of the New Testament that the gospel of Christ, the good news (for that is what the word “gospel” means) spread beyond Judah and Israel into the whole Roman empire very quickly indeed.

It is believed that the first gospel to be written was St Mark’s gospel (sometime between 45AD and 55AD). St Mark, and those who knew St Mark, may have been, and were, still alive when it was written. St Mark's gospel also shows us that it was written in koine-greek for those who did NOT live in Judah and Israel. In Mark chapter 10 we read beginning at verse 46:

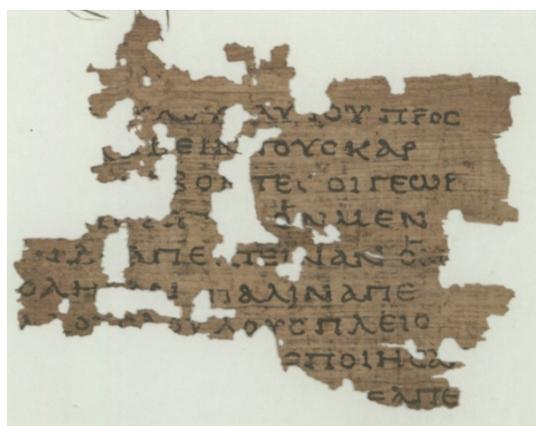
46 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging. 47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Notice that in the quotation it says: *Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”)* If you were a native of Judah or Israel you would already know that *Bartimaeus means “son of Timaeus”*, you simply would not need to be told that. So this, and other clues, show us that the reason Mark's gospel is written down is because it was going to be sent abroad to somewhere in the Roman Empire, perhaps even to Rome itself.

Modern languages also have far, far more words today than ancient languages. So it is that there are less than 6000 words in the ancient Greek of the New Testament whereas there are over 200,000 English words in use in the English language today. The ancient Greek of the Bible is called “koine Greek”. Mark's gospel uses very few words for the gospel text. It is also likely that the end of Mark's gospel was added later, but there is a logical reason for that as well.

So, yes, Mark's gospel is probably the earliest to be written because it was written to be sent. If we look at the letters of the New Testament which is the early correspondence of the Church throughout the Roman Empire, we discover that the letters do tell us about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, but they don't tell us much about Jesus' life before the crucifixion. So it is that whomsoever was going to receive the gospel according to St Mark almost certainly already knew about the resurrection, but did not know about the life of Jesus Christ prior to the crucifixion. Therefore, Mark's gospel tells us all about Jesus' ministry in Galilee, Israel and Judea, but nothing much beyond the crucifixion. Therefore, it is very likely that Mark's gospel was written to fill the gap, and the resurrection text got added later when the gospel started to be copied.

This papyrus is one of the earliest fragments we have of Matthew's gospel. This is P104 and it shows Matthew chapter 21 verses 34 to 37.



Now just as there are clues in the gospel of St Mark to show us who the intended reader was, so it is that there are clues in Matthew's gospel.

For the other 3 gospels there is a different, but common reason. In a society where the spoken word was dominant then once the witnesses of the events themselves started to die of old age (or other reasons) then transmission of the gospel fell to those who knew the witnesses. During the period when these witnesses were still living, but also beginning to die out that the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John are all individually written down. In spite of not being written together they, nonetheless, are all written down first at a similar time, generally between 65AD and 100AD. That common reason is further encouraged by the reality of sending copies of the gospels to other churches.

It is in Matthew's gospel we read items directly for Jewish people. It is likely that Matthew's gospel was written for those in Judah. The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel at chapter 1 starts with Abraham. In Luke's gospel, it is different, because we are told of the Ancestry of Jesus going back to Adam. Jewish people start with Abraham whereas foreigners, i.e. Romans and others, start with Adam and Eve!

We know exactly for whom Luke's gospel was written. The gospel starts in Luke chapter 1 with a dedication to Theophilus. The same dedication to Theophilus is in the very first verse of the book of Acts as well. Luke wrote both the Gospel and the Book of Acts. Indeed if you count the number of words in Luke's gospel and the number of words in the book of Acts then you find they are the same. It is likely that St Luke wrote them on two scrolls and gave them to Theophilus.

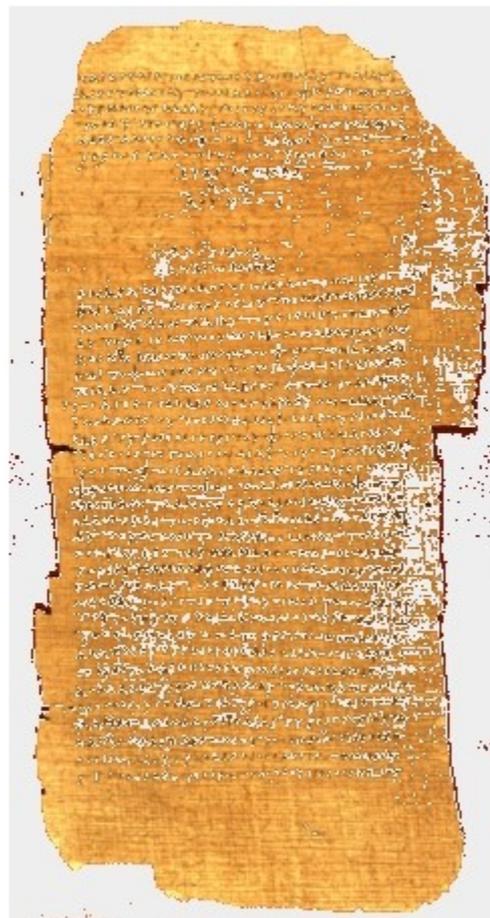
This is one of the earliest fragments of St Luke's gospel. It is Papyrus P75 and it shows Luke chapter 14.

St Luke, himself discovered everything from eyewitnesses which probably included St Mary, Jesus's Mother, herself. At the same time we can see clues that St Luke probably never saw Judah himself. It is Luke's gospel that tells us the most about women in the churches and in Christian communities.

In Luke chapter 5 we read the story of Jesus Healing a Man Let Down through the Roof of a House.

Beginning at chapter 5, verse 18 the Bible says:

¹⁸ Some men took a man who was not able to move his body to Jesus. He was carried on a bed. They looked for a way to take the man into the house where Jesus was. ¹⁹ But they could not find a way to take him in because of so many people. They made a hole in the roof over where Jesus stood. Then they let the bed with the sick man on it down before Jesus. ²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."



If you translate the greek phrase used by St Luke it means that they removed the tiles from the roof to make the hole. Had Luke lived in, or seen, Judah, then St Luke would have known that in the story in which Jesus Heals a Man Let Down through the Roof of a House, they did not have tiled roofs at all, but had flat mud roofs. So it is that the other gospels tell us the same story saying that the people “dug” a hole in the roof. It is a subtle difference but it is clues like this that indicate to us that St Luke's gospel is information he got from witnesses that he has inevitably put into his own words.

There was no dating at the time used in any of the Gospels as they were written. Modern styles of dating simply did not exist. Dating something was done by relating it to a King, Emperor or an event that everyone knew about. It is in Luke's gospel that he is careful to date everything by saying when it was that something happened, or during the reign of which King, or similar techniques. That, of course, is not always saying that we know about the historical event to which St Luke referred, after all we don't date things in that way anymore.

Finally John's gospel is likely to be completely independent of the other Gospels in the Bible. It is also likely that it was written for the area of Galilee. Galilee was both Greek, Roman and Jewish. Whoever wrote John's gospel wrote very accurate Greek text, and simultaneously St John's gospel has the least variety of words in it for everything that is written for us. It is almost as if the writer of St John's gospel was somebody who was a “professional” translator in their daily life.

This fragment of John's gospel is in the library at Manchester University. It is written on both sides showing that it is a copy, and not the original. The fragments is known as P52, the Rylands fragment, and it is dated between 117AD and 138AD, making it the oldest surviving copy of any portion of the New Testament.



The other noticeable thing about John's gospel is that it never really stops being a theology telling us who Jesus Christ was, and is. It is not simply a history.

It is John's gospel that has an introduction and an ending or codicil.

We know from carbon dating that the fragment shown here tells us that John's gospel was written before 120 AD. It is before that date because the Papyrus here is written on both sides like a book, so it is a copy and not the original. Christians invented books for transportable copies which were smaller and easier to carry than a scroll and this papyrus is one of those. So it is independent of the other gospels, it's truth is also consistently proven by archaeological finds and it is as early as the other Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible.

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