

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

One of the questions scholars ask about the gospels is when they were written. It is an important question because the earlier they were compiled, the more the stories and sayings will be historically accurate. It matters that the stories of Jesus really happened because our salvation depends on it.

It is also important because the earlier they are, the more likely it is that the stories in the gospels are rooted in eyewitness accounts. The earliest version of Matthew's gospel was probably a collection of sayings and stories about Jesus dating from around 45 AD. We know disciples in Jesus' day took notes when their teacher was speaking. Matthew's stories therefore are based on accurate eyewitness accounts.

St. Mark's gospel is the second to be recorded. The author is the same person as John Mark—a disciple of Jesus and a companion to both St. Peter and St. Paul on their journeys. In his first epistle St. Peter mentions that Mark is with him in Rome, and the earliest traditions teach that Mark compiled his gospel based on the teaching and preaching of St. Peter. This aligns with the details in Mark's gospel where Peter is a prominent figure and where there are certain details in the story that only Peter would have witnessed and remembered.

We can date the composition of the gospels by the date of the martyrdom of St. Peter and St. Paul in 65 AD. Acts of the Apostles ends with St. Paul still alive in Rome. So, it must have been written before his death in 65. Luke (who wrote Acts) wrote his gospel first. Therefore, Luke's gospel must have been written around 60 AD. If Mark and Matthew were even earlier, we can date them to the 40s and 50s — just fifteen or twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Mark's gospel is the shortest and punchiest of the gospels. Jesus is presented as a man of action and purpose, and this portrait of Jesus would also reflect St. Peter's presence behind the gospel of Mark.

Mark includes some of the same stories as Matthew, so it would seem that Mark knows of Matthew's early collection of sayings and stories. The later edition of Matthew indicates knowledge of Mark's gospel.

If Mark knows of Matthew's early gospel it makes us ask why he does not include anything about the birth of Jesus. It must be that he did not consider these stories to be relevant to his hearers. He is writing to a Gentile audience, and he wants to get straight to the point, and tell them about the ministry and saving work of Jesus.

Your Pastor,
Fr. Longenecker